

Safety Zone: Pandemic - Serious Threat or Overhype for the Workplace?

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Much press has been dedicated to the possibility of a global disease outbreak or pandemic. Is there a serious threat posed to businesses? If so, what are the implications for the workplace? How should employers prepare for this situation? Because employers have a critical role in providing a safe and healthy working environment for their employees, it is vital to understand key issues regarding this topic.

A Little History

Statistically, every century a pandemic occurs roughly three to four times, sweeping the world with fractured transportation, overwhelmed hospitals, shortages on essential goods and services and business shutdowns. The longest recorded period of time between pandemic episodes has been 42 years. As of 2007, we are entering our 39th year without a pandemic. In the year 1918, the world experienced the most deadly pandemic, with U.S. deaths alone estimated at more than 500,000. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the other two pandemics in that century, (1957-58 and 1968) killed 70,000 and 34,000 respectively.

Though most experts believe we are long overdue for a pandemic, the severity is uncertain. Depending on the strain of flu, a moderate flu outbreak could cause 200,000 deaths in the U.S.; serious outbreaks could result in

substantially higher mortality rates.

To educate employers, OSHA has released an advisory handbook (available online, www.osha.gov/publications/influenza_pandemic.html), which contains information for pandemic preparedness. The material is "intended for planning purposes" and not relevant to a particular strain of influenza. However, it is a beneficial tool to use in assessing risk levels for your workplace, establishing appropriate control measures, and educating yourself on the different strains of influenza.

Strains of Influenza

Avian Flu, or Bird Flu, has received much press due to its potential for high mortality rates among humans. There are both high and low pathogen avian influenza viruses. High pathogen Avian Flu (H5N1) has the greatest capacity to harm humans. However, as of February 2007, the majority of cases spread from person to person were quite rare. Typically, those infected have been in direct contact with infected birds or in direct contact with surfaces contaminated by excretions from contaminated poultry.

Pandemic Influenza is considered a worldwide outbreak of a new strain of virus, which rapidly infects humans and quickly spreads person to person. Unlike *Seasonal Influenza*, (which has vaccines typically prepared in anticipation), a Pandemic Influenza vaccine may not be readily available for as long as six to nine months after the virus has begun to spread. Manufactures of vaccines

are already limited. If a serious pandemic occurs — thus disrupting transportation and provoking absenteeism — it may further inhibit the availability and timely dispensing of vaccines.

Considerations

In the event that a serious pandemic manifests itself, an employer needs to consider the following:

Changes in commerce patterns:

An increase in consumer goods related to infection control, - i.e., tissues, cough and cold remedies, over the counter anti-viral medicines, hand sanitizers, disposable gloves, and staples such as water, food, etc. A decline in other less-necessary items may transpire. Individuals may shop at off times or seek home delivery to avoid contact with others.

Absenteeism: According to some statistics, absenteeism may be as high as 40 percent or more. In addition to employee illness, employees may be caring for sick family members or children home due to school closings, and may be fearful of contracting the virus by going to work.

Transportation Concerns: Shipment of items may be seriously disrupted due to transportation problems. Because an industry typically operates in the "just-in-time" ordering of inventory, shortages may transpire.

Health Care Overload: Not all health care systems and hospitals are set up to handle mass quantities

or "surge capacity". Additionally, even with infection control procedures, there will be absenteeism among health care workers as well. Fewer nurses, doctors and technicians and greater numbers of patients may create a serious health care overload.

Possible Disruption in Utilities: If there is a severe pandemic, can utility, telecommunication and fuel companies operate at a workforce that is decreased by 40-50 percent? Can your facility make provisions in this event to maintain operations?

Even with those considerations, in some ways we are better equipped to handle a pandemic than previous generations. With antibiotics for bacterial infections, I.V. medications, anti-virals and greater disease surveillance, we are in a superior position to fight a pandemic than in earlier years. We also have the means to conduct much of business via the Internet and telecommunications systems. Personal protective equipment, such as gloves, masks, and respirators are readily available to health care and industry. Plus, there are fewer people living in each household in today's society, which means more space for those who are ill, thus less potential for spread of germs to family members and others.

However, unlike previous generations, we are not used to having a reserve store of food or necessary items. The average family today has a supply of food for three days. Contrast that with families in 1918, who might have maintained an adequate quantity of canned, dried or preserved food to last weeks or months. We are less self-sufficient as a society and less familiar with rationing.

Prepare

What can an employer do to prepare for a future pandemic today?

For starters, develop a Disaster Plan. In the event that a pandemic breaks out, a written plan should already be in place. Implementing one during a crisis may be difficult if not impossible. This plan should consider a sick leave policy that does not penalize employees with influenza symptoms. While developing a plan, identify those whose work may put them in contact with the general public. Is there a way to minimize this? For example, can sales be done via phone or Internet, rather than in person? Make yourself aware of local, state and federal pandemic plans. OSHA suggests

relevant data school closings, symptoms of strain, where vaccines might be available in your community, etc.

To prepare for a reduced workforce, cross-train employees for various tasks and jobs. OSHA recommends employers training three or more employees to maintain essential operations and communications in lieu of a severe pandemic. Have written instructions for employees on contact data, company procedures, vendor and customer information and emergency numbers.

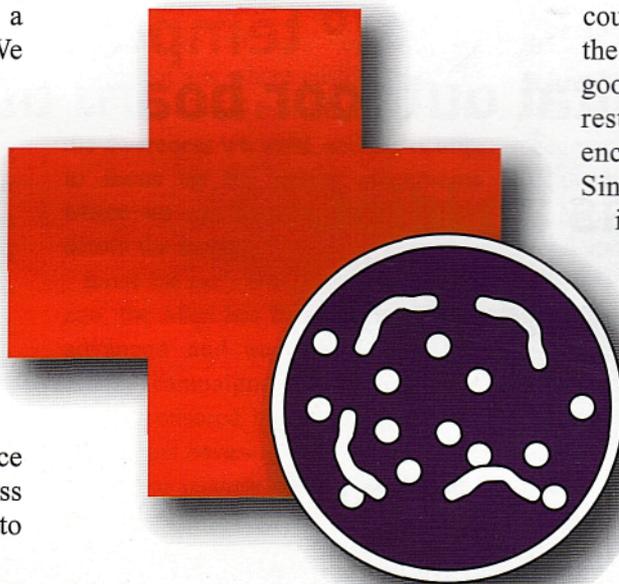
Provide for and accumulate infection control supplies, such as hand sanitizer, soap, tissues, gloves, no-touch trash cans, and cleaning supplies.

Train your employees in infection control methods, such as Bloodborne Pathogens and cough etiquette (coughing into the crook of the arm). Teach good hygiene, and post signs in restrooms and break rooms encouraging hand washing. Since it is believed that influenza is most contagious within six feet, educate your employees regarding maintaining social distancing (staying six feet or more away from others during an outbreak) and limiting physical contact with others.

Discourage sharing of computers, phones, and work surfaces to minimize spread of the virus. Keep these areas clean and sanitary. Use approved cleaners and follow directions.

Encourage employees to maintain their health by eating properly, getting plenty of rest and recognizing early symptoms of influenza (fever, congestion, headache, sore throat, muscle

incorporating these into your disaster plan. Also, make certain that your facility has contact people who are delegated to obtain the most current information on the status of an outbreak. These individuals should be instructed on what local authorities to contact for





aches, or upset stomach).

Work with suppliers to maintain operations and to ensure service in the event that transportation is limited. How long of a lead-time do they need to fill an order? What do your suppliers anticipate as possible problems in the event of a pandemic, and what provisions have they made to maintain service?

Reduce unnecessary social interactions. For example, work places that allow visitors or family to enter the workplace should consider – in advance — limiting or restricting this practice during a pandemic. Incorporate this into your written Disaster Plan if deemed appropriate.

Remember, there is no need for panic or distorted concern. However, history has demonstrated the likely

probability of a new global disease outbreak. Employers have an important role in protecting their employees as well as the nation's economy. Planning, educating and preparing for a pandemic outbreak can be a vital step towards these means.

While we have no control over whether a pandemic occurs, or its severity, we can aid our employees, vendors, customers and society by being prepared. As employers, this can be best achieved beginning today.

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