

Preparing your workplace for a major flu outbreak

A widespread outbreak of the flu or a pandemic can have serious consequences for the workplace. Preparing now for a future pandemic makes good business sense.

If you already have a plan for managing a pandemic, it's a good idea to review those plans in light of current conditions. If you have not given consideration to planning for a pandemic, here are some tips to help you get prepared:

Establish a flu manager. Identify a person in your organization who can take responsibility for health and safety measures and give that person the time and resources to assemble a Pandemic Response Plan, with appropriate resources and committee if required.

Support a hygienic workplace. Even the deadliest of flu viruses are destroyed with soap and water. Washing hands, using tissues, and wiping common surfaces like door handles and telephones is a very effective first line of defense.

Stock up on hygienic supplies, including tissues, medical and hand hygiene products, cleaning supplies (to sanitize workstations) and masks (for infected individuals). These items may be difficult to obtain once a pandemic begins.

Communicate early. Establish a communication plan for employees and business contacts. Provide current influenza information to all employees. Identify and make available information on community resources.

In the event of a pandemic, your employees will look to you for up-to-date information. Good communication with your employees is essential to avoid rumours and misinformation. Here are some steps you can take:

- Pre-build a web page that can go live in the event of a pandemic and include key contacts and a tracking system for employee status.
- Establish a phone tree in the case of internet disruptions.
- Make certain you are especially clear about the importance of staying away from the workplace if they become ill. Preparing to address concerns, such as potential lost wages can be one of the largest deterrents to self-quarantine.

Anticipate significant staff absences. Consider the disruption to your organization if one-third of employees are home sick or caring for their families. Identify key roles that need to be maintained and make certain other people can cover them. Review IT plans to ensure resources are in place to allow some people to work from home if needed.

Consider temporary closures. Can the organization remain operational with "skeletal" staff? What are the pros and cons of closing down the entire operation? If supply lines are cut there may be no other option. Determine the implications of being shut down for a week, a month, or six months.

Protect your staff. The first priority in an outbreak will be managing the health of your employees and limiting the spread of the disease within the organization. Educate staff of signs of illness and ensure that they go home immediately. Determine what your policy is for high risk employees such as expectant mothers



and spouses. Monitor staff who are ill. Track their progress by phone and help them arrange for somebody to provide care. Ensure that quarantine periods as set by your public health system are followed before returning to the workplace.

Secure your data. Back up essential files off site. Provide access to a network of key employees and be clear about what roles they will need to step into should other employees be off the job.

Review employment policies. Know your rights and rights of your employees in an extreme health crisis. Can you require staff to stay away if they are sick? Are there clauses for business closures or emergency situations? Will you provide sick pay for an extended pandemic outbreak? What efforts can you expect from healthy staff who may not be able to report to work when public transit is shut down?

Resources:

http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/swine_200904-eng.php

The Public Health Service Agency of Canada's update page on the swine influenza.

<http://occ.on.ca/>

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce has a pandemic planning tool kit for workplaces.

<http://www.ccohs.ca/pandemic/>

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety has useful information for employers and workers, including information on due diligence.

http://www.wsib.on.ca/wsib/wsibsite.nsf/public/flu_resources

The WSIB in Ontario has information for employers including numerous links to other sites.

http://www.safecanada.ca/pandemic/index_e.asp

The Federal Government's site for preparing for a pandemic.

<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/influenza/pandemic-eng.php>

The Public Health Service Agency of Canada's site on pandemic influenza.

<http://www.voyage.gc.ca/index-eng.asp>

Federal Government updated travel advisory.

<http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/>

The latest from the Centre for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia on the swine flu.

<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html>

The latest from the World Health Organization on the swine flu.