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National Preparedness Month – September 2008:

ECONOMIC EPIDEMIC:

Pandemic Preparedness for Businesses

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

An influenza pandemic is a worldwide outbreak of disease that occurs when a new influenza virus emerges for which there is little or no immunity in the human population. A global influenza pandemic could have a disastrous effect on the world economy. Preparations for pandemic influenza by business and industry are essential to minimize a pandemic's impact. Companies that provide critical infrastructure services (power, food, water, medicine, and telecommunications) have a special responsibility to plan for continued operation in a pandemic, and should plan accordingly. Unlike natural disasters, an influenza pandemic would be widespread, hitting multiple areas of the United States (and other countries) simultaneously. A pandemic will also be an extended event, with multiple waves of outbreaks in the same geographic area; each outbreak could last from 6 to 8 weeks. Waves of outbreaks may occur over a year or more. A workplace is likely to experience absenteeism and interrupted delivery as shipments from outbreak areas may be delayed or cancelled. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, "In the event of an influenza pandemic, employers will play a key role in protecting employees' health and safety as well as in limiting the impact on the economy and society. Proper planning will allow employers in the public and private sectors to better protect their employees and lessen the impact of a pandemic on society and the economy."

OSHA's Pandemic Plan Recommendations

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recommends that businesses develop a disaster plan that includes pandemic preparedness.

Suggestions include:

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- Review federal, state and local health department pandemic influenza plans. Incorporate appropriate actions from these plans into workplace disaster plans.
- Prepare and plan for operations with a reduced workforce.
- Work with your suppliers to ensure that you can continue to operate and provide services.
- Develop a sick-leave policy that does not penalize sick employees, thereby encouraging employees who have influenza-related symptoms (e.g., fever, headache, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle aches, or upset stomach) to stay home so that they do not infect other employees. Recognize that employees with ill family members may need to stay home to care for them.
- Identify possible exposure and health risks to your employees. Are employees potentially in contact with people with influenza, such as in a hospital or clinic? Are your employees expected to have a lot of contact with the general public?
- Minimize exposure to fellow employees or the public. For example, will more of your employees work from home? This may require enhancement of technology and communications equipment.
- Identify business-essential positions and people required to sustain business-necessary functions and operations. Prepare to cross-train or develop ways to function in the absence of these positions. It is recommended that employers train three or more employees to be able to sustain business-necessary functions and operations, and communicate the expectation for available employees to perform these functions if needed during a pandemic.

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- Plan for downsizing services, but also anticipate any scenario that may require a surge in your services.
- Stockpile items such as soap, tissue, hand sanitizer, cleaning supplies and recommended personal protective equipment. When stockpiling items, be aware of each product's shelf life and storage conditions and incorporate product into your stockpile management program.
- Make sure that your disaster plan protects and supports your employees, customers and the general public. Be aware of your employees' concerns about pay, leave, safety and health. Informed employees who feel safe at work are less likely to be absent.
- Develop policies and practices that distance employees from each other, customers and the general public. Consider practices to minimize face-to-face contact between employees such as e-mail, websites and teleconferences. Policies and practices that allow employees to work from home or to stagger their work shifts may be important as absenteeism rises.
- Organize and identify a central team of people or focal point to serve as a communication source so that your employees and customers can have accurate information during the crisis.
- Work with your employees and their union(s) to address leave, pay, transportation, travel, childcare, absence and other human resource issues.
- Provide your employees and customers in your workplace with easy access to infection control supplies, such as soap, hand sanitizers, personal protective equipment (such as gloves or surgical masks), tissues, and office cleaning supplies.

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- Provide training, education and informational material about business-essential job functions and employee health and safety, including proper hygiene practices and the use of any personal protective equipment to be used in the workplace. Be sure that informational material is available in a usable format for individuals with sensory disabilities and/or limited English proficiency. Encourage employees to take care of their health by eating right, getting plenty of rest and getting a seasonal flu vaccination.
- Work with your insurance companies, and state and local health agencies to provide information to employees and customers about medical care in the event of a pandemic.
- Assist employees in managing additional stress factors related to the pandemic. These are likely to include distress related to personal or family illness, life disruption, grief related to loss of family, friends or coworkers, loss of routine support systems, and similar challenges. Assuring timely and accurate communication will also be important throughout the duration of the pandemic in decreasing fear or worry. Employers should provide opportunities for support, counseling, and mental health assessment and referral, should these be necessary. If established, Employee Assistance Programs can offer training and provide resources and other guidance on mental health and resiliency before and during a pandemic.

Homeland Security Resource

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security(DHS), “eighty-five percent of critical infrastructure resources reside in the private sector, which generally lacks individual and system-wide business continuity plans specifically for catastrophic health emergencies such as pandemic influenza.” The DHS is committed to educating the nation’s business owners about preparing for a

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pandemic. The DHS maintains that understanding the overall context of pandemic planning offers business contingency planners a practical framework in which to develop and execute their plans. To this effect, Homeland Security has produced a publication entitled "Pandemic Influenza Preparedness, Response, and Recovery Guide for Critical Infrastructure and Key Resources." This publication addresses questions such as:

- How will a pandemic affect my business and those that depend on me?
- Where will it appear first?
- How will government help to inform and support my business?
- How can my business help to support my business sector, my community and our nation?

This 84-page document is available online and can be accessed and downloaded by visiting

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/pdf/cikrpandemicinfluenzaguide.pdf>

Resources on Pandemics:

The Business Pandemic Influenza Planning Checklist
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/businesschecklist.html>

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have developed a checklist for businesses. It identifies important, specific activities that businesses can do now to prepare for a pandemic. Many of these actions will also help in other emergencies.

About The Authors

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Article inquiries welcome. On request, we can provide feature-length articles tailored to your audience and requirements. **Please contact John Cavanagh at Bridge Multimedia: (212) 213-3740 or jcavanagh@bridgmultimedia.com.**