

Cold and Flu Season - Pandemic Preparedness

Introduction

This cold and flu season has been challenging with the Coronavirus and issues with the flu wreaking havoc in many areas. An organization should always be prepared regardless of whether they are located in an area that has been affected. What is meant by pandemic? Pandemic is the worldwide spread of a new disease. It could be a new strain of the flu or a virus like the Coronavirus. So what does it mean to be prepared?

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations that is concerned with world public health. WHO has designed a checklist for pandemic influenza risk and impact management which was updated in 2018. The WHO checklist, along with the Pandemic Influenza Risk Management Guidance, May 2017, should be reviewed by organizational management when creating a new plan or assessing an existing plan. A good pandemic plan should be in line with the WHO.

Current Statistics

As of February 24, 2020, there were 79,742 cases of the Coronavirus, and a total of 2,628 deaths. The first deaths were recently reported in the United States.

So far, 16,000 people have died and 280,000 people have been hospitalized during the 2019-2020 flu season according to preliminary estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Pandemic Plan

Most pandemic plans focus on getting an organization prepared for an outbreak and how to respond to and recover from a pandemic situation. The guidance on pandemic influenza risk management approach to pandemic planning is based upon the Emergency Risk Management for Health (ERMH). This approach focuses on the prevention and mitigation of health risk to an organization.

ERMH is based on the following principles:

- Comprehensive risk management: A focus on assessment and management of risks of emergencies rather than events

- All-hazards approach: Use, development, and strengthening of elements and systems that are common to the management of risks of emergencies from all sources
- Multisectoral approach: Recognition that all elements of government, business, and societies have capacity relevant to ERMH
- Multidisciplinary approach: Recognition of the roles of many disciplines in health is required to manage the health risks of emergencies through risk assessments, mitigation, prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and capacity strengthening
- Community resilience: Utilization of capacities at community level for risk assessment, reporting, providing basic services, risk communication for disease prevention, and long-term community care and rehabilitation.

The checklist is divided into “essential” and “desirable” planning actions. Knowing who will do what, when, and with what resources, is the biggest aspect of managing a pandemic event. There are six categories of ERMH essential components:

1. Policies and resource management
2. Planning and coordination
3. Information and knowledge management
4. Health infrastructure and logistics
5. Health and related services
6. Community emergency risk management capacities

Not every aspect of the pandemic checklist will be appropriate for all types of organizations. However, which aspects are right for an organization should be understood.

The outlined pandemic phases for a risk assessment include:

- Interpandemic phase (Preparedness): The period between influenza pandemics.
- Alert phase (Response): The phase when influenza caused by a new subtype has been identified in humans.
- Pandemic phase (Recovery): The period of global spread of human influenza caused by a new subtype based on global surveillance.
- Transition phase (Preparedness): As the assessed global risk reduces, de-escalation of global actions may occur, and reduction in response activities or

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movement towards recovery actions by countries may be appropriate, according to their own risk assessment.

The pandemic plan should reflect the organization's size, complexity, and business activity. The potential impact of a pandemic situation on the organization's services should be incorporated into the ongoing business impact analysis (BIA) and risk assessment processes. The development of the pandemic plan, as well as the entire business continuity plan, should not be viewed as the responsibility of the Information Technology department but rather a responsibility of the entire organization.

A well designed pandemic plan should also include testing that considers:

- Roles and responsibilities of management, employees, key suppliers, and customers
- Key pandemic planning assumptions
- Reliance on critical vendors and/or service processors
- Remote access and telecommuting needs

The test results should then be documented and reported to management. Adjustments should be made based upon lessons learned from the tests.

Other Considerations

Organizations should ensure the pandemic plan takes into account any issues with stakeholders, vendors, and other areas. For example, the organization should consider factors that could impact their employees' ability to complete their job duties and responsibilities at the organization including:

- School closings
- Day care closings
- Requirements for in-home schooling while schools are closed
- Children, spouse, elderly parents, and other family illness
- Employee illness
- Willingness to leave the home

In addition, the impact on key vendors should be considered. For example, if a key vendor is located in an area that has been severely impacted, key supplies may not be available from that vendor. Does the organization have a backup to the key vendor? What about one of the organization's vendor's key

vendors? Would the impact on a vendor's key vendor adversely impact their ability to timely deliver products and services? What about the impact on the financial markets? Significant impact on the DOW/NASDAQ could have an adverse impact on an organization's customers, vendors, and the organization. The international economy increases the risk of experiencing a financial impact on an organization regardless of the location of the pandemic situation.

Conclusion

As the pandemic plan is developed and/or updated, take into consideration the processes developed by WHO. Ensure that the plan is adequately developed to address the different type of pandemic situations that could impact your organization. Ensure the pandemic plan also considers employees, customers, vendors, and the financial impact on your organization.



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