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Benefit Services

## **The Swine Flu: What Employers Need to Know to Prepare for a Possible Pandemic**

Not since the SARS outbreak several years ago has the prospect of a pandemic flu seemed as likely as it does now.

The swine flu (Influenza A virus, H1N1) has not reached pandemic status, but it could, and right now we are in a period of great uncertainty. There is no way of predicting what will come of this illness, but no one has a natural immunity to it, which means the potential to spread very widely is great and that is what raises questions about a possible pandemic. Employers need to be prepared.

### **Pandemic preparedness**

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak that is likely to be a prolonged, widespread, and could require temporary changes in many areas of society, such as schools, work, transportation and other public services. An influenza pandemic—which is how swine flu would be classified if it reaches that level—occurs when a new influenza A virus emerges for which there is little or no immunity in the human population. The virus begins to cause serious illness and is spread easily from person-to-person worldwide.

**What is the employer's role?** In the event of pandemic influenza, employers will play a key role in protecting employees' health and safety as well as limiting any negative impacts to the economy and society. Planning for pandemic influenza is critical. Companies that provide critical infrastructure services, such as power and telecommunications, also have a special responsibility to plan for continued operation in a crisis and should plan accordingly. As with any catastrophe, having a contingency plan is essential.

**What can you expect?** Unlike natural disasters or terrorist events, an influenza pandemic would be widespread, affecting multiple areas of the U.S. and other countries at the same time. A pandemic would also be an extended event, with multiple waves of outbreaks in the same geographic area; each outbreak could last from six to eight weeks. Waves of

outbreaks might occur over a year or more. Your workplace could experience:

- Absenteeism —A pandemic could affect as many as 40 percent of the workforce during periods of peak illness. Employees could be absent because they are sick, they must care for sick family members or for children if schools or day care centers are closed, or they are afraid to come to work.
- Change in patterns of commerce —During a pandemic, consumer demand for items related to infection control is likely to increase dramatically, while consumer interest in other goods and methods for obtaining those goods may change and decline.
- Interrupted supply/delivery —Shipments of items from those geographic areas severely affected by a pandemic may be delayed or cancelled altogether.

**Plan, plan and plan some more.** To reduce the impact of a pandemic on your operations, employees, customers and the general public, it is important for all businesses and organizations to begin continuity planning for a pandemic now. Lack of continuity planning can result in a cascade of failures as employers attempt to address challenges of a pandemic with insufficient resources and employees who might not be adequately trained in the jobs they will be asked to perform. Proper planning will allow employers to better protect their employees and prepare for changing patterns of commerce and potential disruptions in supplies or services.

The U.S. government's website for pandemic preparation ([www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov)) provides a checklist for employers to assist in taking the following recommended actions:

1. Plan for the impact of a pandemic on your business;
2. Plan for the impact of a pandemic on your employees and customers;
3. Establish policies to be implemented during a pandemic;
4. Allocate resources to protect your employees and customers during a pandemic;
5. Communicate to and educate your employees; and
6. Coordinate with external organizations and help your community.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce also suggests that employers:

1. Identify your organization's essential functions, which might include accounting, payroll and information technology, and the individuals who perform them; cross-train employees to perform essential functions to ensure resiliency;
2. Plan for interruptions of essential governmental services like sanitation, water, power and transportation or disruptions to the food supply (i.e., your employees might need back-up plans for car pools in case mass transit is interrupted); and

3. Update sick leave and family and medical leave policies and communicate with employees about the importance of staying away from the workplace if they become ill.

In addition, each state has a website designed specifically to provide pandemic flu information. The website for your respective state can be found by adding your state's name to the end of the following Web address:

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/states/xxx>.

**What to tell your employees.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that when a case of swine flu is confirmed in your community or place of employment, home isolation should be encouraged. Similarly, employees who develop an influenza-like illness involving a fever, with either a cough or sore throat, should be strongly encouraged to stay away from the workplace for seven days after the onset of the illness, or at least 24 hours after the symptoms have resolved, whichever is longer.

In the meantime, you can share with your employees various infection control instructions, including frequent hand washing with soap and water. Alcohol-based hand gels (those containing at least 60 percent alcohol) are also effective at killing germs when soap and water are not available.

For now, education and preparation are crucial to ensuring that your business can function during what may be a tough time ahead.

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