

# Businesses should prepare for flu pandemic

BY JEFFREY CLARK, for SBT

**S**outheastern Wisconsin businesses should take seriously the global concern of a potential flu pandemic. Avian influenza A, caused by the H5N1 strain of the Influenza A virus, is particularly worrisome because it can infect a wide range of hosts, including birds and humans, and because of its high mortality rate.

No vaccine is currently available to protect humans against H5N1, although vaccine development is underway at the National Institutes of Health. Public health officials and medical professionals are uncertain about the effectiveness of current medicines against H5N1.

Shortages of therapies are also likely in the event of a major outbreak. Because it is widespread among birds and is capable of mutating, the virus is cause for concern. The federal government acknowledges, however, that an avian flu outbreak is just one threat among a number of similar possible contingencies for which it must plan. U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael Leavitt, the Bush administration's point person on the subject, points out that the plan the government is developing does not solely target the H5N1 virus, but rather addresses flu pandemic readiness as a whole.

Many state governments are adopting their own measures to protect against and manage virus outbreaks. Wisconsin, for example, just announced its preparedness plan for a possible bird flu pandemic. The state revised and updated its current pandemic plan (a leader in influenza preparedness, Wisconsin has had a plan in place since 2001) to address new concerns for its agricultural industry, hospital capacities and state and local abilities to utilize volunteer medical professionals through a registry.

It appears that federal and state government initiatives will not include mandates for businesses to take action. However, the absence of federal or state mandates does not imply that a business should not plan for the possibility of an influenza pandemic, or any type of comparable crisis.

The possibility of an avian flu pandemic poses a number of threats for businesses. For example, widespread absenteeism due to illness will impact employee productivity and, in turn, affect supply chains. Businesses should be prepared to address these consequences and communicate with employees, should a pandemic strike.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services are urging businesses to: stay informed about the potential for an influenza pandemic; to develop or update emergency plans and consider in advance the challenges they could face if an influenza pandemic occurs; to identify essential functions and personnel needed to keep the business operating; and to work with medical advisors on ways to protect employees. In particular, a business should:

- Anticipate how to function with a significant portion of your

workforce absent due to illness or caring for sick family members.

- Communicate with your local public health officials and medical care providers; ask them for information about the signs and symptoms of a specific disease outbreak.
- Implement preventative measures recommended by your public health officials and medical care providers.
- Cross-train your employees to handle essential work functions to cover for employees who are out sick.
- Assess your technology infrastructure to enhance the ability of employees to work from home when they are contagious, limiting the spread of disease in the workplace.
- Re-evaluate your policy on allowing contagious employees to work from home to prevent them from transmitting the disease throughout the workplace.
- Communicate the policy to your employees. If you allow sick employees to work from home in the event of widespread disease, then you should inform employees of this policy to prevent them from showing up at work while ill out of fear of losing wages or being reprimanded.
- Review and consider applying the NFPA 1600, recommended as the business "standard of care," to your crisis management plan, to reduce the risk of potential post-disaster liability exposure.

An integrated risk assessment and business continuity plan can address not only the threat of an influenza pandemic, but other potential crises if the plan is comprehensive.

The same factors present in a public health emergency, such as a decreased workforce and the heightened need to communicate effectively with employees, customers and suppliers, can arise in a fire, natural disaster, power outage or terrorist event. If a business already has a crisis management plan, it should review the plan to assess whether it should modify the plan for public health emergencies such as an influenza pandemic.

For more information from the CDC, visit [www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic), or call the CDC at 800-CDC-INFO (English and Spanish) or 888-232-6348 (TTY)



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