

OSHA Releases Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Guidance for Health Care Employers and Workers

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration of the United States Department of Labor ("OSHA") recently released comprehensive guidance to assist health care facilities to prepare for and respond to an influenza pandemic. The guidance is issued as part of the federal government's National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza.

Pandemic influenza occurs when a new influenza virus emerges for which humans have little to no immunity. In a pandemic, influenza would spread easily from person to person, cause serious illness, and spread across the globe in a very short time. Infectious disease experts have been concerned recently about an increased potential for an influenza pandemic to occur, based on emerging avian influenza strains and historical patterns for past influenza pandemics.

The OSHA guidance to health care workers and employers includes clinical background information on influenza, infection control standards in health care facilities, pandemic influenza preparedness guidance during different pandemic alert periods, and OSHA standards of special importance during a pandemic influenza event. The guidance also includes several helpful internet resources, tools, sample infection control programs, pandemic planning checklists and sample plans to assist health care facilities in preparing a pandemic influenza preparation and response plan, or augmenting an existing plan.

As the first line of defense against a potential influenza pandemic, health care facilities should act now to incorporate a pandemic influenza plan into their existing disaster response plans. Employers that fail to do so run the risk of not only incurring significant economic and personnel losses during a pandemic, but also violating the General Duty Clause of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970. The General Duty Clause states that employers must provide their employees with a workplace free from recognized hazards likely to cause death or serious physical harm. Employers can be cited by OSHA for violating the General Duty Clause if they do not take reasonable steps to abate or address such recognized hazards. An influenza pandemic could be viewed as a recognized hazard to health care facilities and their employees, given the extensive guidance put out by OSHA and other state and federal agencies.

The OSHA guidance can be accessed from the OSHA website. For more

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information or for assistance in planning for an influenza pandemic, please contact Jeffrey Clark, Linda Dawson, Daryll Neuser or another member of our OSHA team or Health Care department.

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