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Businesses Should Plan for a Flu Pandemic

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The world is currently in the middle of an influenza pandemic. After an initial scare in the spring of 2009, the Novel Influenza A H1N1 virus (commonly referred to as the "swine flu") has thankfully turned out to be relatively mild, but this should not lead to complacency. This event has given employers a valuable opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of their pandemic plans and prepare for the next event, which could be more serious.

In just a few months, the "swine flu" spread from an initial total of 19 cases affecting two countries to more than 134,000 cases spread over 100 countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) rapidly moved its alert from Pandemic Phase 3 to a full-blown Pandemic Phase 6 based on the relative easy transmission of this virus between humans.

At least for now, the virus has caused relatively mild disease in most cases and has resulted in a low mortality rate below 0.5%. However, there is no guarantee that this virus will remain so mild or that others more potent will not surface in the future. Every company should take this opportunity to audit the strengths and weaknesses of its pandemic plan. Recently, even companies with very good pandemic plans found that they were unable to activate components of them due to limited availability (in some cases, no availability) of essential supplies such as face masks, hand sanitizers, cleaning agents and anti-viral drugs.

So what should an employer do now to take advantage of lessons learned from the early stages of this pandemic?

Appropriate Travel. Evaluate travel policies for associates both internationally and domestically. Although no specific areas were quarantined by the WHO in the spring of 2009, many employers restricted travel to Mexico or the U.S. because these were outbreak "hot spots." Companies need to have a process in place to determine when, where and how travel is appropriate.

Social Distancing. Be prepared to address the issue of social distancing – avoidance of close contact between individuals. Does a company have the technology to allow individuals to work from home? When should group events such as those that occur in meeting rooms and cafeterias be avoided? What about shaking hands?

Cleanliness. Employers can change cleaning schedules to protect against transmission of the virus particles. This includes use of disinfectants to frequently clean common contact surfaces such as doorknobs, table surfaces, keyboards, telephones and other objects in the workplace.

Vaccination. Seasonal influenza is different from a pandemic influenza, and the vaccines given yearly for seasonal influenza are not effective against quickly emerging pandemic strains. However, vaccination against seasonal influenza is recommended to provide personal protection against human influenza.

A vaccine is being developed for the H1N1 virus. It is currently expected to be available beginning in mid Oct. Initial supplies may be limited and directed primarily to the most at-risk populations until adequate supplies can be produced.

Information is available from the CDC at its Web site, www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/. The **U.S. HealthWorks Medical Group** is available to provide flu vaccines and to assist employers in developing protective pandemic plans. The nearest U.S. HealthWorks center may be found at www.ushealthworks.com.