


Avian Flu Precautions



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 A recent made-for-TV movie has given rise to questions from caring nonprofit leaders about what they should do to prepare for a potential avian flu pandemic. The answer is to step back from the fear the word “pandemic” engenders and look at three critical risk management issues: 1) infectious disease, 2) business continuity, and 3) communications.

Communicable Disease Policy

Avian flu is an infectious or communicable disease. Thus you’re looking at a situation where one infected employee or volunteer could infect a good portion or your entire workforce. Risk management of workplace health includes anticipating, recognizing, evaluating and controlling conditions in the workplace that may cause a worker to become ill.

Look first at how you handle such infectious diseases as the common cold, seasonal flu, pink eye, mumps, chicken pox and tuberculosis. What existing policies do you have that deal with infectious diseases? Does your policy:

1. provide cough/sneeze etiquette?
2. require people with an infectious disease to stay home until the transmission period has passed?
3. require people to go home if they discover they’re sick after arriving at work and stay there until the period of contagion has passed?
4. instruct a supervisor to send people home under specific conditions (i.e., elevated temperature; constant coughing or sneezing, or vomiting)?
5. recommend, if a safe and effective one is available, employees and volunteers get vaccinations? This is very important for healthcare workers or workers caring for young children and people over 65 years old, especially the frail elderly. (Currently there is no vaccine to protect against avian or other forms of pandemic flu.)
6. require a doctor’s note if the person is absent for a specific number of days or due to a contagious disease?
7. allow you to schedule employees in shifts to reduce the change of exposure to the entire workforce?
8. permit vacation leave flexibility for staff to care for children if schools close or family members who fall ill?

If your nonprofit doesn’t address these issues, your first step is to craft policies indicating how to manage all infectious diseases.

SAMPLE

Leave for Exposure to Communicable Disease Policy

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to protect employees and others from exposure to communicable diseases by allowing employees exposed to a communicable disease to take paid administrative leave.

Responsibility

Anyone who discovers evidence of a communicable disease that could seriously endanger the health of others in the workplace should report such findings to management. Management shall notify the local health department.

Note: The most recent list of reportable diseases compiled by the State Health Commission is found in the Administrative Code 10A NCAC 41A.101. This list is constantly updated as new diseases emerge.

Conditions

The conditions under which administrative leave may be taken are:

- Public Health officials quarantine an employee, or
- Public Health officials and the agency authority concur that the employee should be excluded from work.

Leave

If either of the above conditions occurs, the employee may be advised not to report to work for a specified period of time. In these cases, the agency may allow the employee to take paid administrative leave until the specified period of time ends or the employee becomes ill with the communicable disease, whichever comes first.

- If the employee becomes ill and it is determined to be work related, the Workers' Compensation Policy applies.
- If the employee becomes ill as a result of off-the-job exposure, the Sick Leave policy applies.

Verification

It is the employee's responsibility to provide the employer with a written confirmation from a Public Health official of any quarantine period.

Source: <http://hr.unc.edu/>

Business Continuity Plan

An infectious disease that causes a "pandemic" will, by definition, occur over a wide geographic area and affect an exceptionally high proportion of the population. People may not show up to work because they are ill, because they fear becoming ill or because they are taking care of ill family members. A reduction in your available workforce requires business continuity planning. This plan focuses only on the mission-critical tasks, the steps required to fulfill them and who can do the jobs. The plan is put into effect regardless of the crisis that causes it. There are some variables that need to be addressed:

- How do you cross train your staff?
- What do you do if your current location is not usable (fire, flood, earthquake, used as a hospital, etc.)?
- What do you do if the entire community or county is affected?

Look at it more personally. If you have a staff of 10 and the only person who shows up is the bookkeeper, what does that person need to do to deliver mission-critical services? If your answer is nothing; rethink your plan. Is

there another nonprofit that you could team up with in times of crisis? Is there a pool of retirees or workers from other industries that you could call on for help? How many people would you need at minimum to provide services? How would you structure tasks? How would you contact people? Business continuity planning is worth the time and effort. You will learn a lot about your organization that will be useful on days when you are short staffed for any reason.

Communications Policy

“The fear of the disease or being exposed is greater than the statistical odds are,” says Gary Niekerk, manager of corporate responsibility at Intel, in May 2006, *HR Magazine*. The staff is reading and listening to the same news stories as you. They, too, are concerned for their health and the health of their families. Part of the success of your policies is educating employees and volunteers what to expect and how to proceed. Talking up your policies to your staff now will help them keep their minds on their jobs when the crisis hits.

- Consider offering tools and resources to help their families plan for an emergency.
- Give staff honest information about health risks.

Summary

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Trust for America’s Health, American Society for Microbiology and the World Health Association agree that the world is overdue for an influenza pandemic, whether it’s caused by the avian flu virus, H5N1 or another strain. Influenza pandemics come in waves lasting from four to 12 weeks. Experts predict medical shortages, prolonged government service disruptions, a run on essential goods and services, and power outages and brown outs.

Resources

- [Avian Influenza](#)
- [Business Continuity Planning](#), free online course
- [Cover Your Cough](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, printable formats available as a flyer or poster in English, Spanish
- [Guidance for Protecting Workers Against Avian Flu](#), OSHA
- [Interim Recommendations for Infection Control in Health-Care Facilities Caring for Patients with Known or Suspected Avian Influenza](#), CDC
- [Pandemic Flu Planning Checklist for Individuals and Families](#)
- [Stopping the Spread of Disease at Work](#), CDC
- [Vital Signs: Anticipating, Preventing and Surviving a Crisis in a Nonprofit](#), Nonprofit Risk Management Center

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