Preventing Pandemic Influenza Transmission within State Government

Disease Spread

The virus is spread by

- Most common: Contact with large water droplets generated during sneezing and coughing. These droplets only travel three to six feet before falling out of the air.
- Second most common: Touching environmental surfaces (e.g., telephones, door knobs) which have been touched by someone who is ill and transferring the virus to the nose, mouth or eye. (The virus cannot penetrate intact skin.)
- Uncommon: Tiny invisible droplets which float in the air for a lengthy period of time can be inhaled. These can be filtered out by a respirator (e.g., N95 mask).

The virus may be spread by a person who does not feel ill. Typical symptoms of influenza are fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, sore throat, cough, and runny nose.

Assessing the Risk of Persons in the Agency

- Very high risk – Laboratory workers handling influenza cultures
- High risk - Employees performing autopsies or employees caring for patients in a health care facility (e.g., minimum care facility, clinic). Likewise an employee who is caring for someone at home with influenza may fit into this category.
- Moderate risk – Persons with frequent contact with general public
- Low risk – Office employees not fitting one of the above categories

Reducing Risk

The extent to which actions are taken to reduce risk may be calibrated to the severity of the pandemic. Specific recommendations could be changed as a result of new epidemiological evidence from the specific pandemic agent.

- Employees who are sick should not be at work. State workforce guidelines call for a person who is sick to take sick leave, annual leave or leave without pay. Adults should return to work no sooner than seven days after resolution of fever.
- Provide redundant information sources and educate employees about sources of information related to workplace policies, assignments and safety.
- Avoid holding meetings in person. To the extent possible, communication should be conducted using distance technology.
- Persons who can fulfill their duties by telecommuting should be encouraged to do so. This must be approved by their supervisor.
- Place hand sanitizers and tissues in conspicuous locations.
- Employees who are working in close proximity to others (e.g., within six feet) should be encouraged to wear a mask or cloth over their nose and mouth. A mask substantially reduces the risk of accidentally spreading the virus and may decrease the risk of inhaling the virus.
- Educate employees to not touch their face without first washing their hands or using an alcohol hand rub. Frequent hand washing should be advised whether a person intends to touch their face or not.
- Employees should be educated to avoid touching common environmental surfaces whenever possible, and to wash their hands immediately after doing so.

- Give employees permission to communicate with each other about risk. Encouraged communication should including use of a mask, covering each sneezing and cough (placing the arm of a long sleeve shirt over the nose and mouth is effective), cautioning a person who is about to touch their face, insisting on all persons with whom they work closely to have a mask or cloth covering their nose and mouth, and reminding others of hand washing or alcohol hand rub use.
- Increase the working distance between employees and the general public they serve. Install barriers where possible (e.g., plexiglass) to reduce the risk of droplet transmission.
- Recognize that not only influenza, but also stress and grief arising from the pandemic can disable employees. Alert employees to watch out for each other and provide an opportunity for them to communicate concerns about the emotional health of colleagues to someone who can help (e.g., employee assistance or a supervisor).
- Provide personal protective equipment to employees with job tasks that place them at moderate or higher exposure risk and request that they use it. For those with moderate risk only, use of a surgical mask is sufficient. Those at high or very high risk should use a respirator (e.g., N95 mask) which has been fit tested for them[1] and for which they have been educated to use correctly. Educate the employee about usage and about any conservation/re-use policies that are in place.
- Reduce business services where possible, and move employees into job functions which fulfill the high priority functions of the agency. Furloughing staff[2] who do not have an assigned task of high priority or who cannot telecommute can be justified for a pandemic of moderate or high severity.

[1] Fit testing may prove to be a problem. Even if all persons for whom an N95 respirator is indicated are fit tested, the specific types of available N95 respirators available to which they have been fit tested may not be available.

[2] This assumes that furloughing staff is more likely to keep them well. At a minimum it should decrease the worker density for those who remain on the job.