

PREPARING YOUR BUSINESS PANDEMIC FLU AND OTHER EMERGENCIES

During an influenza pandemic of moderate severity or greater, worker absenteeism may be very high. Workers may not be at work for several reasons:

- They are ill – Between 30% and 40% of the population may become ill; furthermore, the illness caused by pandemic typically has a prolonged recovery period which in some individuals may extend for weeks.
- They have ill family members – Those employees responsible for the health of family members may have no choice but to take off work if someone in the household is sick.
- Their children aren't in day care or school – To decrease the number of people exposed to the virus, the North Dakota Department of Health is likely to mandate the closure of schools and day cares during a moderate or severe pandemic.

Maintaining business productivity is likely to depend on how successfully you can prevent your employees from becoming ill. If employees can be prevented from becoming ill until a protective influenza vaccine can be manufactured and distributed, many of your employees may not become ill or may have much milder forms of the infection.

Strategies for keeping your employees healthy are:

- Excluding any ill employee from work – Although the short term benefit of keeping an ill employee at work may seem attractive, if he or she brings influenza into the workplace where it can spread to other employees, you are likely to substantially increase absenteeism in the long run.
 - Screen employees for fever and symptoms of illness (e.g., cough, muscle aches, sore throat, headache). Exclude those with symptoms of illness. Be sure that those doing the screening have clear authority to send workers home.
 - Have policies about accepting worker call in with illness without requiring health care provider documentation which will be largely unavailable.
 - Send workers who develop symptoms while at work home immediately and ensure supervisors have the authority to screen any employee at any time for illness.
 - Develop policies that don't penalize workers for being off work due to illness. Some of your employees will not be able to afford to be off work and may try to hide symptoms of illness. Income maintenance during illness may be more cost effective than spreading the disease in the workplace.
 - Keep employees off work until they are no longer contagious. Usually this is about a week, but public health officials will provide instructions during the pandemic about how long employees should be off work based on the specific characteristics of the pandemic.
- Keep employees separate from each other
 - Avoid all in-person gatherings of employees (meetings, congregations for lunch, etc.). Even a person who seems well may be spread influenza, so keep everyone apart.
 - Allow working from home when that is feasible.
- Install barriers between employees and the public when possible. Plexiglass barriers at face height can help stop infectious particles from a sneeze or cough.
- Clean environmental surfaces frequently. Influenza can live for some hours on door knobs, phones and other common surfaces.
- Educate employees about how to stay well including staying more than six feet away from all other persons, frequent handwashing, cough and sneeze etiquette (i.e., cough or sneeze into one's sleeve at the elbow), and avoid touching the eyes or other mucous membranes (wet body surfaces such as inside the mouth or inside the nose.).
- Consider use of face masks. Face masks may help a person to avoid exposure, but they almost certainly help prevent the person wearing the mask from spreading the virus to others.

What an employee should do if ill

During a moderate or severe pandemic, the health care system will be overwhelmed and not able to evaluate every patient. Most patients with influenza will not need to seek health care and should not do so. Antiviral drugs may decrease the severity of illness and the North Dakota Department of Health will be providing information to the public about how they can obtain antivirals if they are ill with influenza. The department document *Caring for Sick*

People at Home will provide your employees and their families with information they need to care for those with influenza in their household.

Business closure

Certain types of business activity may be markedly reduced due to people avoiding the infection. It will be North Dakota Department of Health policy to try to reduce all non-critical public interaction. In addition, it is possible that the North Dakota Department of Health will require closure of some businesses. Because of the economic cost, this will be done if other less drastic measures are failing to control disease transmission.

Volunteerism

In a moderate or severe pandemic, your community will need help, but little of that help will come from outside the community. Communities that care for their own will do well; those that do not will do poorly. Consider how your business and your employees can help your community make it through a pandemic with as little suffering and loss of life as possible.