

Social Distancing During an Influenza Pandemic ***Impact on Communities and Businesses***

Deadly epidemics were a part of life before the vaccine and antibiotic eras, but today relatively few people in our communities have experienced them. The deadliest epidemic in recorded history was a worldwide epidemic (a pandemic) caused by influenza in 1918. The 20th century experienced two other pandemics, in 1957 and 1968. If history continues to repeat itself, three or four influenza pandemics could occur in the next 100 years. No one can predict exactly when another will occur or how severe it will be.

How Influenza Spreads

The spread of influenza requires person-to-person contact within six feet (the travel range of droplets from a cough or sneeze) or transfer of the virus from contaminated surfaces (e.g., door handles, phones) to mucous membranes (e.g., rubbing the eyes).

Social Distancing

Until an effective vaccine can be produced (four to six months after the epidemic begins), policies which help increase the distance between people are the most effective tools available for limiting the spread of the disease. These policies are known as social distancing. The State Health Officer in the North Dakota Department of Health has broad authority to take actions to limit the spread of infectious diseases. During a pandemic of moderate or greater severity, the North Dakota Department of Health expects to mandate certain actions in order to control the spread of disease, likely including the cancellation of public events and the closure of schools and daycares, and possibly including the closure of businesses and other community organizations. Compliance with social distancing policies and recommended personal behaviors to reduce risk of illness not only will save lives, but also will decrease the likelihood that more severe restrictions will be needed.

Impact

Any social distancing action will have consequences besides decreasing disease spread, including suppression of the economy and productivity, reduction in workforce strength and an increase in stress. However, failure to slow the spread of disease also will result in suppression of the economy and productivity, reduction in workforce strength and an increase in stress, in addition to the increased suffering and death caused by the disease.

Minimum Necessary Restrictions

Restrictions would be implemented in steps to create minimum disruption of community life while slowing the spread of disease. The steps are as follows:

- First, cancellation of public events (e.g., concerts, sporting events) and closures of schools and daycares.

- If needed, the next step would be the selective closure of non-essential businesses beginning with areas where people gather (e.g., shopping malls) and non-critical retail stores. If necessary, other non-critical businesses may be closed as well. Some businesses would never be ordered to close. In fact, communities may seek to ensure that critical businesses such as groceries stay open.
- If needed, the next step would be the closure of social and religious institutions.

Sufficient Length

A severe pandemic may require that some mandatory social distancing policies be in place for 12 weeks or longer. History shows that removing these policies too early can cause the disease to start spreading more rapidly again.

Business Actions to Minimize Impact

Usually children are the most common carriers of influenza into the home, but with the closure of schools, workplaces may become the most common site of disease spread. Businesses which do not have robust policies and procedures to prevent disease transmission can expect to have substantially higher rates of illness and absenteeism. Businesses are encouraged to adopt specific practices which decrease the likelihood of disease transmission at the workplace including:

- Restricting travel to areas with pandemic influenza.
- Implementing policies that do not penalize workers who stay home when sick.
- Screening and excluding workers as they come to work with signs or symptoms of influenza.
- Allowing employees to work from home whenever possible.
- Maintaining as much distance between employees as possible for those who must be in the workplace.
- Providing and requiring use of personal protective equipment for any employee who is not considered low exposure risk according to OSHA guidelines.
- Placing barriers between employees and the public (e.g., Plexiglass shields).
- Educating employees to cover coughs and sneezes, to wash their hands and to avoid touching their face.
- Enhancing communication pathways (e.g., websites, email, documents, posters) which educate employees about pandemic influenza, risk behaviors, access to care (including mental health care), change in business practices and reporting expectations and benefits while sick.

Keeping Sick Employees Home

Employees who try to work while sick can cost a business by infecting others. Employers should consider changes to policy during a pandemic which encourage sick employees to stay home.

- Screening and mandatory exclusion from work – Screening employees for influenza symptoms (e.g., fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, cough) and taking employees' temperatures when they report to work can identify those who need to go home. Employees who have symptoms or a fever (temperature of 100 ° F or higher) should be sent home. This should include managers and senior staff.
- Paid sick leave - Employees who don't have paid sick leave have little choice but to show up and work sick. Some will try to hide illness in order to be able to work. Providing incentives for sick employees to stay home during a pandemic may end up costing less than having workers show up for work sick.

- No provider note needed – During a moderate or severe pandemic, the health-care system will be overwhelmed and only the sickest people should seek medical care. Requiring an employee to get a doctor’s note, even if it is possible to see a provider, will only expose others who do not have influenza and should not be required. For those who do need to be seen by a health care provider, information will be provided during the pandemic on available clinics for people with influenza.

Additional information about business planning for pandemic preparedness can be found at: <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/index.html> and for community planning at: <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/community/index.html>