

It's Not Flu As Usual

WHAT FAITH-BASED AND COMMUNITY
ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT PANDEMIC FLU



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A LETHAL PANDEMIC FLU COULD DEVASTATE OUR COMMUNITIES

“Pandemics happen globally but must be managed at the state and local level.... Preparation works and it can save lives.”

-- U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt 1-12-06

Every winter, the U.S. suffers a seasonal flu that kills approximately 36,000 Americans and hospitalizes more than 200,000. Terrible as that is, health experts are now warning about a far more lethal kind of flu -- a pandemic flu that could kill over half a million Americans, hospitalize more than two million, cost our economy a staggering \$70-\$160 billion in lost productivity and direct medical expenses, and impact virtually every community.

Public health authorities are particularly concerned about the H5N1 avian "bird flu" virus that could mutate into a new strain of flu against which humans would have no immunity. The World Health Organization has warned that such a bird flu pandemic could infect **25-30 percent of the world's population**

If a severe pandemic were to hit the U.S., life as we know it could be seriously disrupted.

Businesses and schools might have to shut down. Travel could be restricted. Essential government services -- including sanitation, water, power, and social services -- could be interrupted. The food supply could be affected. And public gatherings, including worship services, might have to be canceled.

If the U.S. is to meet this threat, every segment of our society must be informed and prepared. Faith-based and community organizations have an especially important role to play. As we saw in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many people turn to religious and community organizations for assistance and comfort in the event of a health emergency. Your organization may also be called upon to work directly with government agencies and health officials to protect the public if a pandemic flu strikes.

But just at the time when your services will be in great demand, your ability to provide assistance may be limited because many of your employees or volunteers may be unable to work. They may be sick themselves, or taking care of sick family members, or perhaps afraid of catching the flu from others. Public health officials project a cumulative absenteeism rate of 25-30 percent over three to four months during a pandemic flu outbreak. This could disrupt or even shut down your operations.

TO HELP YOU MEET THE CHALLENGE, THIS BROCHURE OFFERS GUIDANCE ON HOW FAITH-BASED AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS CAN:

- Prepare for a pandemic flu in order to maintain a continuity of operations and services.
- Work with health officials to minimize organizational disruption.
- Encourage congregations, those you serve, and your volunteers and staff to take common-sense precautions to prevent the spread of flu.

Key Differences Between Annual Flu And Pandemic Flu

ANNUAL FLU	PANDEMIC FLU
Occurs every year during the winter months.	Occurs three to four times a century and can take place in any season. May come in “waves” of flu activity that could be separated by months.
Affects 5-20 percent of the U.S. population.	Experts predict an infection rate of 25-50 percent of the population, depending on the severity of the virus strain.
Globally, kills 500,000-1 million people each year, 36,000-40,000 in the U.S.	The worst pandemic of the last century -- the “Spanish Flu” of 1918 -- killed 500,000 in the U.S. and 50 million worldwide.
Most people recover within a week or two.	Usually associated with a higher severity of illness and, consequently, a higher risk of death.
Deaths generally confined to “at risk” groups, such as the elderly (over 65 years of age); the young (children aged 6-23 months); those with existing medical conditions like lung diseases, diabetes, cancer, kidney, or heart problems; and people with compromised immune systems.	All age groups may be at risk for infection, not just “at risk” groups. Otherwise fit adults could be at relatively greater risk, based on patterns of previous epidemics. For example, adults under age 35 (a key segment of the U.S. workforce) were disproportionately affected during the 1918 pandemic.
Vaccination is effective because the virus strain in circulation each winter can be fairly reliably predicted.	A vaccine against pandemic flu may not be available at the start of a pandemic. New strains of viruses must be accurately identified, and producing an effective vaccine could take six months.
Antiviral drugs are generally available for those most at risk of serious illnesses.	Antiviral drugs may be in limited supply, and their effectiveness will only be known definitively once the pandemic is underway.



The role of government

If pandemic flu strikes, government will be responsible for issuing information and warnings to the public, and for working with the media to disseminate advice on how to avoid becoming ill. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov), the federal government’s consolidated pandemic influenza Web site (www.pandemicflu.gov), and the World Health Organization (www.who.org) are good sources of information about pandemic flu.

Your state and local public health departments are also excellent resources. You should know who to contact in your local health department to report flu cases and learn who within the local health department will be issuing official guidance should a pandemic strike. If you do not have a relationship with your local health department, your county or city government Web site should have a link or you can find the information in the government pages of your local phone book.



WHAT YOU CAN DO: A CHECKLIST TO HELP YOU PREPARE AND RESPOND

TFAH has summarized a checklist developed by the federal government that describes the action steps you can now to prepare for a pandemic flu. Keep in mind that many strategies take time to implement.

- ✓ Determine the possible impact of a pandemic on your organization's regular activities and services. Taking into account high rates of absenteeism or mandatory closings, consider circumstances that may require you to increase, decrease, or shift the services your organization delivers.
- ✓ Identify your organization's essential functions and the individuals who perform them. Cross-train staff and volunteers in other jobs so that if someone is ill, others are able to carry on the work.
- ✓ Plan accordingly for interruptions of essential governmental services like sanitation, water, power, and transportation, or disruptions to the food supply. For example, employees and volunteers might develop back-up plans for car pools in case mass transit is interrupted.
- ✓ Update sick leave and family and medical leave policies so that staffers will not be penalized for personal illness or for caring for sick family members during a pandemic. Volunteers and employees should remain home until they are well.
- ✓ Determine whether your volunteers and staff have "cross over skills" like nursing or mental health counseling that could be used during a health crisis, and make that information known to local health authorities. Your local health department may already be compiling rosters of individuals in the community that can be called on to help during a health emergency.
- ✓ Evaluate your organization's activities and services that involve close person-to-person contact, including child care, elder care, and religious rites, especially those that involve hand-holding or sharing food or drink from common dishes or glasses. Establish policies to modify these activities to prevent the spread of pandemic flu and communicate them to your staff, volunteers and people you serve.
- ✓ Determine the supplies needed to promote respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette, like tissues and alcohol-based hand sanitizer products, and develop a plan for how to obtain them.
- ✓ Share information about your pandemic preparedness and response with volunteers, staff, congregants, and the people you serve. You may consider activating phone chains, distributing flyers and sending mass emails to get your message out. During times of anxiety, people turn to those they trust, so clear and frequent communication is essential.
- ✓ Ensure that what you communicate about pandemic preparedness is appropriate for the cultures, languages, and reading levels of those you serve. Identify those with special needs and be sure to include their needs in your preparedness and response planning.



Common Sense Precautions to Prevent the Spread of Flu

All flu, including pandemic flu, is caused by viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. It is generally spread from person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

An effective vaccination against the pandemic flu – when it is available – will be the best way to prevent the disease.

To fight the annual flu, members of high-risk groups should get a flu shot. Even those who are not in the high-risk categories should get a flu shot if enough vaccine is available, especially healthcare workers.

The following simple, common-sense precautions can also help. Recommended by the CDC, they should be communicated to your employees, volunteers, and those you serve.

- **Avoid close contact with people who are sick.** If you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick, too.
- **Stay home when you're sick or have flu symptoms.** Get plenty of rest and check with your doctor.
- **Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.** If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve, not your hands. It may prevent those around you from getting sick.
- **Clean your hands.** Washing your hands often will help protect you and others against germs. When soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based disposable hand rubs or gel sanitizers.
- **Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.** Germs are often spread to your system when you touch something that is contaminated with germs and then touch your eyes, nose or mouth.
- **Practice other good health habits.** Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious foods. Avoid smoking, which may increase the risk of serious consequences if you do contract the flu.

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