

Pandemic Events Are a Poor Fit in Traditional Disaster Planning

Many organizations have planned for disasters, some with an impressive array of activities including practice drills, tabletop exercises, and extensive implementation plans. While all of these activities are essential to minimizing the impact and costs of natural disasters for terrorist activities, they will prove inadequate for pandemic events such as an outbreak of a new strain of influenza.



Experts say a pandemic will feel more like a war or a severe economic crisis than an earthquake, hurricane, or act of terrorism. As a result, a pandemic threat requires a unique approach to planning and a different set of skills and preparation than traditional disaster preparedness activities.

“Organizations that depend upon existing, on-the-shelf disaster plans will pay a heavy price during a pandemic event,” said Bob Blitzer, an ICF International vice president in emergency management. “Within a few days, the organization will realize that it is unprepared to respond to the needs of its employees, its customers, and its community.”

U.S. federal officials who have been planning for potential pandemic events have made it very clear that this is a unique threat, unlike any natural or man-made disaster.

“The pandemic threat is different...the significant mobility of human populations means that every corner of the globe and every element of society are likely to be touched. This widespread effect has ramifications not only for the health and well being of populations, but for the national and economic security of the nations, and the functioning of society. Once this fundamental premise is recognized, the scope and scale of the measures necessary to prepare for a pandemic become apparent.”¹

It also is apparent to the experts involved in planning for a pandemic event that relying solely on the health and medical communities to respond to this kind of a crisis is unrealistic and potentially dangerous. Officials point out that the vast majority of the actions that will be taken will occur from nontraditional sources.

Federal support will be substantially less than in the case of traditional disasters, and because of the scope of the problem, traditional “mutual assistance” agreements with neighboring communities and states will be virtually useless.

“They all think the cavalry is going to arrive and do all the ‘heavy lifting,’” said Anita Tallarico, an ICF senior vice president describing state and local agencies and the business community. “However, government officials emphasize that local communities must prepare to be able to help themselves for at least three days.”

The President’s Implementation Plan clearly states that the primary burden of responding will fall on nongovernmental institutions. “More than 85 percent of critical infrastructure is owned and operated by the private sector. Therefore, sustaining the operations of critical infrastructure under conditions of pandemic influenza will depend largely on each organization’s development and implementation of plans for business continuity while facing staffing shortages and the need to protect the health of its workforce.”²

¹ *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza: Implementation Plan*, May 2006, p. 18.

² *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza: Implementation Plan*, May 2006, p. 13.

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This will require a major “shift in thinking” for businesses that are not accustomed to taking care of health needs for employees while simultaneously trying to sustain business operations with limited staff and absence of other normal support services for an extended period of time.

“When we go in and work with a client on a training exercise and help with planning,” said Blitzer—who formerly headed up the Weapons of Mass Destruction response operations at the Federal Bureau of Investigation—“the



client quickly realizes that its traditional way of thinking about disaster planning is completely inadequate. Once stakeholders realize how quickly a pandemic outbreak occurs, and the fact that it is inevitable that another one will occur in our lifetime, their thinking changes.”

Here are just a few of the assumptions federal officials make as they plan for a pandemic event. These assumptions also must be incorporated into planning efforts in the private sector and by state and local agencies.

- Susceptibility will be universal.
- Civil disturbances and breakdowns in the public order may occur.
- Typically, illness rates will be highest among school-aged children (about 40 percent) and decline with age.

Among working adults, an average of 20 percent will become ill during a community outbreak. Actual illness rates by age, however, will depend on the characteristics of the new virus and may vary from these rates.

- Risk groups for severe and fatal infection cannot be predicted with certainty, but are likely to include infants, the elderly, pregnant women, and persons with chronic or immunosuppressive medical conditions.
- In a severe pandemic, absenteeism rates of 40 percent or higher may result from individual illness, the need to care for ill family members, and fear of infection.
- Typically, the risk of transmission (viral shedding) will be greatest during the first two days of illness. Children will play a major role in spreading the disease.
- On average, infected persons will transmit infection to approximately two other people.
- Isolation and quarantine measures are likely, as are mandatory restrictions on domestic and international travel.
- Epidemics will last six to eight weeks in affected communities.
- Multiple waves of illness are likely to occur, with each wave lasting two to three months.

For more information on how you can help your organization meet the federal guidelines for preparing an effective pandemic event implementation plan, contact info@icfi.com or 1.703.934.3603, or visit icfi.com/pandemic.