

IF A PANDEMIC STRIKES ...

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With the advent of the H1N1 flu, businesses are preparing for the worst, and hospitals are not exempt from this preparation. While other employers will practice “social distancing,” or keeping away from other people’s germs, hospitals will be treating the worst H1N1 cases, exposing employees to the virus. Hospitals must have a continuity plan in place so that the facility can operate as normal. Pandemics can create staff shortages due to absences of sick employees and employees taking time off to care for sick family members. Suppliers may be short staffed too, and deliveries of products may be interrupted.

While many hospitals already have protocols in place for when a disaster or pandemic strikes, many healthcare entities are simply not ready. Creating a continuity plan takes time and effort. Fisher Phillips offers a free, downloadable comprehensive checklist on its website under the article, *A Flu Update: Proactive Employer Preparations in Advance of a Potential Pandemic*. But for those health care organizations that are trying to prepare effectively in the short term or, do not have the resources to create a comprehensive continuity plan at this time, here is where you should start:

1. Check national and local government policies to see the impact they have on business operations and emergency plans. A good place to start is the [CDC website](#).
2. Create a “contacts list” for government emergency response entities at local, regional, and national levels.
3. Consider how you will staff your business if there are many employee absences due to a pandemic. For example, besides employees with the flu, a school closure due to the flu may require multiple employees to stay home to care for family

members. Think of alternative staffing arrangements should you have 20-40% of your staff home from work. You may consider creating a policy that you can roll out in the event a pandemic occurs addressing work shortages and how vacancies will be filled.

4. Review your leave policy and consider whether you should draft a separate policy providing non-punitive sick leave should a pandemic occur. You'll want to encourage persons who develop symptoms to stay at home or leave work upon feeling sick, but employees may choose to stay at work if they do not have leave available, or are saving leave to use with sick children or other responsibilities.

Also, leave under the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) does not typically apply to cases of the flu. Would employees have enough sick leave to stay home for seven days under your organization's policy? Don't wait until the crisis occurs to create an alternate sick policy; have one that you can roll out if needed.

5. Train supervisors and managers on how to handle employees who seem sick. Other employees may go on a witch hunt if they believe a person is sick at work, especially with the media hype surrounding the H1N1 flu. Hand out information from the CDC website on flu symptoms and what employees should do if they are sick as a gentle reminder for employees to stay home when sick.

6. Look at alternatives available to the company to assist in prevention. For example, placing hand sanitizers around the building in easy access places. Also, consider requiring employees to wear personal protective equipment, such as a face masks or gloves, should an outbreak occur within your organization, and make sure you have enough equipment on hand.

The preparation above is not enough to handle a true pandemic; it takes careful planning to prepare for staffing shortages and supply shortages or interruptions. Hopefully, these steps will help every organization begin the process.