

## **Businesses Should Prepare for a Flu Pandemic**

A flu pandemic is a major possibility in the future, according to the experts in communicable diseases. Businesses should update their continuity/emergency preparedness plans to include the high absentee rates associated with a flu pandemic.

### ***—Background—***

Unlike seasonal flu that we face every year, pandemics are rare. Flu pandemics typically occur every 20 to 30 years. The last one in the United States occurred in 1968-69, and 34,000 people nationwide died as a result of it. Because they are rare, people have had little exposure. Therefore, they have built up little or no pre-existing immunity. Healthy people would be at risk for serious complications (they face little risk of complications from seasonal flu) and vaccines would not immediately be available.

From a business perspective, employers would have to cope with very high absentee rates. More people will be out of work because they are sick, caring for someone who is sick, or staying home to prevent spreading the disease. By some estimates, absenteeism could reach 30 percent during the peak of an outbreak.

### ***—Preparing for a Pandemic—***

If they have not done so already, employers should add the flu pandemic to the list of emergencies for which to plan.

In building a plan, first identify your company's essential functions and the employee or employees who are responsible for them. Then start training other workers to perform them should those employees be out for extended periods of time. Businesses should strive to build redundancies necessary to ensure that essential functions can be done even if absenteeism hits 30 percent.

Businesses also should take steps to prevent the spread of germs by providing a healthy work environment. Ensure you have good air circulation. Get your air ducts cleaned on a regular basis. Make alcohol-based hand sanitizer available. Educate employees on how to prevent the spread of germs at work.

**—For More Information—**

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) offers a free guide to help businesses plan for a flu pandemic. Its *Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic* provides general guidance for all types of workplaces; describes the differences between seasonal, avian and pandemic influenza; and presents information on the nature of a potential pandemic -- how the virus is likely to spread and how exposure is likely to occur. Please visit: [www.osha.gov/](http://www.osha.gov/).

Up-to-date information is also available through [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov), the federal government's Web site for information regarding pandemic flu.

If you need additional information, please contact Christine Stearns at 609-393-7707, ext. 260 or via e-mail at [cstearns@njbja.org](mailto:cstearns@njbja.org).

*February 15, 2007*  
*Updated : October 30, 2008*

This information should not be construed as constituting specific legal advice. It is intended to provide general information about this subject and general compliance strategies. For specific legal advice, NJBIA strongly recommends members consult with their attorney.