Your Disaster Contingency Plans

Reviewing Your Disaster Contingency Plans *What would your business do if there was an outbreak of the flu?*

In response to the possibility of public health risks, such as the outbreak of swine flu (H1N1 virus), a number of U.S. government agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, have created the website, www.flu.gov.

The site provides one-stop access to U.S. government information about pandemic influenza and avian influenza for the general public, health and emergency preparedness professionals, policy makers, government and business leaders, and local communities.

Recommendations for business owners and employers include a review and update of disaster contingency plans to ensure that business operations and employees would be protected in the event of a pandemic.

If such an outbreak should occur, the health of your employees would be critical to continued operations.

If business operations require close contact with other employees and the public, there are a number of protective measures that can be implemented to prevent the spread of infectious disease in the workplace.

Business Continuity

First, employers are advised to prepare for the possibility that large numbers of workers could become ill or have to remain at home due to possible exposure to a pandemic illness. Therefore, it is important to establish in advance a business continuity contingency plan that enables the organization to continue to function even if a significant number of employees are unable to come to work.

Flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting or modified scheduling, can reduce the number of workers who must be at the workplace at one time, or in one specific location. Employers may also implement a cross-training program so that employees will have the ability to step in and fulfill responsibilities that are critical to the business, as needed.

To facilitate automation and remote communication, information technology systems may be enhanced or upgraded, as needed. Business owners are also advised to consider their inventory. If the business usually operates on a “just in time” inventory model, accumulating some reserves may help prepare for possible disruptions in distributions and deliveries.

Minimizing Contact

Second, employers are encouraged to develop contingency practices to minimize face-to-face

contact between employees in the event of a pandemic. Such practices may include minimizing group meetings and increasing the use of teleconferencing and email. Depending on the type of business, other measures may include distributing and promoting the use of hand sanitizers, tissues, and disinfectants.

When pandemic risk is acute, advise employees to minimize physical contact and proximity with coworkers and clients. In some cases, workers may be required to wear protective equipment. To further minimize contact, barriers, such as transparent plastic or glass walls or windows, may be installed.

Communication is Key

Third, employers and business owners are advised to clearly communicate their leave policies should a pandemic situation arise. Employees who may have been exposed must be encouraged to stay at home, without fear of reprisal, to minimize the spread of a potentially dangerous virus.

Any employee who has flu-like symptoms should see a physician or health care provider immediately for testing. An employer can legally require an employee who may be infected with a pandemic illness to stay at home, or require a medical note or medical examination before returning to work. However, employers are advised to be fair when imposing mandatory testing and leave policies to avoid discrimination. Protecting the privacy rights of individual employees is another important consideration.

Finally, employers are advised to communicate to employees any immediate changes to workplace policies, such as hygiene-related procedures or sick leave entitlement, as well as any emergency measures that might be implemented in the event of increased risk.

While there may be no imminent threat of a pandemic in the U.S., being prepared for a potential public health risk is the best policy to protect your employees and maintain business operations should a crisis occur.

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Let’s Have a Conversation

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