Personnel Practices: Pandemic Flu Policies

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Pandemic Flu Policies

Many federal agencies and state health departments have created plans to address a pandemic flu outbreak.¹ Human resources departments are now in the process of determining how a pandemic will affect the workforce and how to handle such a crisis if it comes to pass. At the end of this overview article are links to HR policies. New policies will be added as they become available.

Why Now?

In the past century there have been three major flu pandemics. The most deadly occurred in 1918 when an estimated 20 to 50 million people died. In 1957 an estimated 2 million people died and in 1968, the Hong Kong flu killed approximately one million people. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimate that a pandemic today would kill between 2 and 7.4 million people worldwide.²

The avian flu, H5N1 strain, has infected 261 people and killed 157, as of December 27, 2006 according to the World Health Organization (WHO) web site.³ These infections have been primarily in Asian countries and are believed to be caused by infected poultry. There have been no confirmed cases of human to human transmission.

Experts are concerned about this strain’s ability to mutate and become transmittable between humans. Because it would be a new virus, humans would have no immunity to it and that is how a pandemic is created.

The U.S. Government’s web site states that there are four characteristics/challenges of a pandemic:⁴

1. **Rapid Worldwide Spread**
2. **Health Care Systems Overloaded**
3. **Medical Supplies Inadequate**
4. **Economic and Social Disruption**

The WHO states that even when most travel was by ship, the earlier pandemics spread across the globe within 6 to 9 months.⁵ With air travel common and frequent, we can expect a pandemic today to travel much faster and to reach all corners of the world within 3 months. In addition, the WHO cautions that there will be wide disruption of social and business activity.

The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia has a tool that will help estimate the impact of a pandemic flu on a state or locality. The software, FluAid 2.0 provides for the number of deaths, hospitalizations, and outpatient visit; but it cannot predict how the flu will move through the population. [http://www.cdc.gov/flu/tools/fluaid/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/tools/fluaid/index.htm). Using this software, a state or local government can estimate the impact on its population and its workforce. King County, Washington estimates that between 25-30% of its workforce
will be affected. Fairfax County, Virginia estimates between 25-50% of its workforce will be affected in a worst-case scenario.

A thorough plan for a flu pandemic will be a useful tool when a pandemic does strike, and everyone agrees that one will come sooner or later. Such a policy can also be a part of a larger disaster management plan that can be used in the event of a terrorist attack or a natural disaster.

King County, Washington is in the forefront of local government planning and there are several sources including the Office of Personnel Management’s pandemic flu web site and Fairfax County, Virginia. Other organizations, such as Hennepin County, Minnesota are in the process of creating their plan.

**Getting started**

Your strategy is likely to depend on the size of your workforce. If you are a small town with few employees, then it might make sense to categorize your employees, essential, non-essential, and first responder, and then figure out how duties will be filled if individuals are out sick or caring for sick relatives. Options include talking with neighboring jurisdictions to determine if any personnel can be shared in the event of an emergency.

Larger organizations with more employees will need a different approach. Some agencies have appointed a few individuals to review polices and decide how best to tailor them to a crisis situation. Organizations with employee representatives and unions will want to be sure to include them in the planning because schedules, overtime, and compensatory time may need to be negotiated.

Fairfax County, the largest county in the Virginia, created a chart that compares the current HR policies to those that would be in effect in the case of a pandemic flu. This approach, which lists policies such as hours of work, flex time, reporting hours, attendance, etc. is useful because it shows what the current policy is and how it would change, or not in the event of a pandemic. vi

For example, under flex time, the current policy calls for core work hours between 9a.m. and 3p.m. with department heads given flexibility to meet operational needs. In the Pandemic Flu column, the county notes that no change is need here because there is adequate flexibility in the event of a pandemic. However in the column, re-hiring retirees, it states that the current policy requires the approval of the county executive. In the pandemic flu column, it states that the requirement would be waived for hiring of periods of 120 days or less.
How to begin

Things to Consider Before you Write the Policy

1. **What will trigger the pandemic flu plan**, will it be when a Mayor or county executive declares a state of emergency or will there be some other trigger such as a national state of emergency?

2. **Union and employee representatives** – How will you work with employees, employee groups and unions? Will they help write the policy, provide feedback on a completed document? Do you need to sit down to negotiate things like, overtime, alternate work schedules and telecommuting?

3. **Who will draft the plan** – Will it be by committee or will one or two employees be assigned to draft a policy.

4. **Communication** – How will you communicate with employees in the event of pandemic flu, do you have current email addresses, do your employees regularly access email from home? If not, do you have up to date telephone numbers and a system for reaching employees to notify them if the office is closed or if they are needed to report to a different location or work a different shift?

5. **Continuity of Operations.** Are there current lists of essential and non-essential personnel that can be incorporated into this policy? Are there lines of succession that are deep enough to provide continuity if two, three or more supervisors, or managers are out sick?

6. **Technology** – Can employees access work email and materials from home? Is it necessary? Are there teleconferencing capabilities?

7. **Contingent workforce** – If a significant number of employees are out sick, or caring for sick relatives –or healthy children if the schools are closed, does HR or the departments have the authority to hire temporary workers, or to hire back retirees?

8. **Pay** – Can employees still get their paychecks if they are home sick? If payroll is performed in house, is there sufficient staff to ensure that checks are still processed? If this function is outsourced, have you talked to the vendor to find out if they have a pandemic flu policy in place? King County, Washington designated payroll and HR personnel as essential personnel.

9. **Policies for pay.** How will your sick leave, vacation leave, and personal leave policies be applied in the event of a pandemic? If workers exhaust their leave will they be on leave without pay? If healthy workers take time off to care for healthy children in the event of a school closure, will they be entitled to use sick and/or vacation pay? How long can an employee be on leave without pay status before being terminated? What if the office is closed? Is there a leave donation bank? How will it be used in the event of a pandemic?

10. **Expect the unexpected.** The policy created by King County, Washington includes many provisions relating to employees who may be out on leave because of the need to care for healthy children if schools and daycares are closed. The policy suggests that all employees develop contingency plans for child care in the event of closings.
King County, Washington’s Pre-Planning Checklist:

**Determine Critical Functions and Personnel**

- Predetermine personnel who perform first responder functions
- Predetermine personnel who perform essential functions
- Predetermine personnel who perform non-essential functions
- Identify functions that may be suspended while personnel are assigned to more critical roles
- Identify secondary personnel who have the skills and abilities to perform other functions
- Identify other personnel, such as retired employees, former employees, temporary workers, and contract workers, who may be available to perform essential functions
- Identify potential volunteers who have the skills to perform needed departmental functions

**Succession Planning**

- Predetermine the payroll function as an essential function and have at least 3 employees cross-trained for the payroll function
- Predetermine the human resources management function as an essential function and have at least 3 employees cross-trained for the human resources management function
- Establish and identify a 7 to 10 employee management line of succession plan which lists predetermined alternates for key leadership positions in each department, division or work unit
- Predetermine the individuals who will have the delegated authority to make decisions and communicate that succession plan to division and work unit personnel
- Provide for alternate lines of succession
- Provide for access to information and needed items to those in the line of succession (*i.e.* computer passwords, office keys, file cabinet keys, etc.)
- Forward document succession plans to the department director
Review Business Hours, Work Schedules and Mode of Service Delivery

- Review business hours and work schedules to determine if they can be modified in a manner that best promotes social distancing, business continuity or other pandemic response goals during an emergency.

- Identify essential functions that may be accomplished via telecommuting and whether the function needs access to all systems and applications or only email and/or voice communications.

- Identify technical planning methods such as the World-Wide-Web, Virtual Private Network, Go to My PC, Instant Messenger and teleconferencing to be implemented prior to a Pandemic Influenza emergency.

- Pre-complete forms, such as the Position Eligibility Worksheet and Temp Track, for the expected need to hire STT, TLTs and CWs.

Develop a Communications Plan

- Communicate with employees about the threat of a Pandemic Influenza emergency, and describe the steps they are taking to prepare for it such as:
  - Potential changes to personnel policies located in this manual
  - Changes in business culture which may include social distancing, increase in telecommuting, or suspension of non-essential functions
  - The importance of staying home if employees are ill or have influenza symptoms

- Distribute practical information on maintaining a healthy work environment.

- Update employee emergency contact information.

- Identify key internal and external stakeholders and the methods that will be used to communicate with them.

- Communicate to labor unions and employees that certain provisions of their respective collective bargaining agreement may be suspended such as:
  - Use of employees outside of the bargaining unit to perform the work
  - Previously approved vacation, compensatory time, leave of absences may be rescinded with minimal notice
  - Employees may be required to report for work with minimal notice
  - Employees’ work schedules and/or hours of work may change with minimal notice
  - Employees may be required to telecommute with minimal notice
  - Employees may be assigned overtime with minimal notice
• Employees may be assigned special duty with minimal notice
• Employees may be assigned to other work units with minimal notice

Checklist from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM)
http://www.opm.gov/pandemic/agency5a-agency.pdf

OPM-V-A-1

What Should an Agency Do To Prepare For a Pandemic Health Crisis?

This Pandemic Planning Guide is designed to assist agencies as they prepare for and respond to a pandemic health crisis. The guide is general in nature. For detailed human resources information, see www.opm.gov/pandemic. For the latest information on contingency planning for a pandemic influenza, see www.pandemicflu.gov. Readers should also review their agency policies, practices, and guidance prior to taking action.

Has the agency…

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<th>Completed</th>
<th>In Progress</th>
<th>Not Started</th>
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1. Developed its pandemic influenza plan in accordance with the President’s National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan and identified potential human capital issues?

2. Determined the potential impact of a pandemic on the agency’s workforce and made appropriate modifications in its Continuity of Operations plan?

3. Developed human capital related “what if” scenarios and conducted practice drills?

4. Developed a communications plan for agency managers, employees, and contractors that includes, at a minimum:

   1. An internal Website with pandemic related information
   2. Instructions for determining status of agency operations
   3. Distribution of critical agency information
5. Identified specific hiring needs (e.g., critical positions, geographic locations) and determined which hiring flexibilities the agency may need to utilize that:

- Do not require OPM approval
- Require OPM approval

For those requiring OPM approval, have agency officials started to develop documentation and/or compile information that can be used to immediately request approval should an outbreak occur?

5. Reviewed and familiarized agency hiring officials with Governmentwide and agency specific hiring authorities?

6. Prepared for requesting “buyout” repayment and dual compensation (for returning retired annuitants) waivers, if needed?

7. Consulted and bargained (as appropriate) with exclusive representatives of bargaining unit employees over human resources issues that may affect employees or collective bargaining agreements. Such issues may include:

- Telework during a pandemic health crisis
- Assignment of work during a pandemic health crisis
8. Reviewed the agency’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to ensure it is ready to respond to employee needs during a pandemic health crisis?

9. Reviewed and revised, as necessary, agency policy and/or guidance on leave, alternative work schedules (flexible and compressed work schedules), and evacuation payments?

10. Ensured agency telework policy and guidance align with OPM telework guidance, including the protection of sensitive information?

11. Ensured agency managers and supervisors are familiar with various leave options for seeking medical attention, the procedures and obligations for requesting and approving leave, and the limited circumstances under which an employee may be directed to take leave?

12. Ensured agency managers and supervisors are knowledgeable of and use CDC guidance on travel restrictions, quarantines, and dealing with sick employees?

13. Ensured agency telecommunications infrastructure is capable of handling telework or work-at-home arrangements and securing sensitive information?

14. Provided training for employees who will have to deal with specific pandemic health crisis related issues?

15. Encouraged employees to develop a family emergency preparation plan?

16. Ensured lines of communication with Federal Executive Boards (FEB) are established, where appropriate?
17. Met with procurement staff and major contractors to discuss the effect of pandemic-related human capital issues on the contract workforce?

18. Communicated to all employees:
   • Measures the agency has taken or has planned to deal with a pandemic health crisis, including steps to prevent or minimize workplace exposure to contagious disease?
   • Optional alternative work arrangements available in the case of a pandemic health crisis?

19. Ensured accountability through an independent review of its pandemic influenza plan and preparedness?

Additional Resources

The U.S. Government has created a web site specifically to share information about a pandemic flu. [http://www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov).

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has posted their HR policies on a web site developed specifically to address a pandemic. [http://www.opm.gov/pandemic/](http://www.opm.gov/pandemic/)

The World Health Organization has information and resources especially related to global planning efforts. [http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/)

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control has facts and information available for planners. [http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/)

Sample Policies

King County, Washington - [http://www.ipma-hr.org/pdf/FluKingCounty.pdf](http://www.ipma-hr.org/pdf/FluKingCounty.pdf)

City of St. Paul, Minnesota - [http://www.ipma-hr.org/pdf/FluStPaul.pdf](http://www.ipma-hr.org/pdf/FluStPaul.pdf)

Fairfax County, Virginia - [http://www.ipma-hr.org/pdf/FluFairfax.pdf](http://www.ipma-hr.org/pdf/FluFairfax.pdf)

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\(^\text{iii}\) Ibid.

vi This policy is attached below.