

Pandemic Influenza: *Are we prepared?*

Are we ready for a pandemic?

A major influenza pandemic could have a devastating impact on society. Roughly a third of the population may be sick, and another 10 percent could be reluctant to come to work.

In Minnesota alone, as many as 172,000 people may need hospital-level care, and as many as 30,000 people could die. It will be a major challenge to provide for basics like food, water, electricity and routine health care.

You're never really "done" preparing for an event like that. You can always do more. But Minnesota's public health community has been working very hard to prepare us for a possible pandemic, and a lot has already been done.

What is government doing to prepare for a pandemic?

The government's response to pandemic influenza takes in more than public health. It represents a broadly based, multi-agency approach to a problem with broad implications for society.

In November 2005, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released a comprehensive plan for responding to a possible pandemic. In that same month, Governor Tim Pawlenty launched a coordinated effort to get Minnesota ready for a possible pandemic, and in April 2006 the state released draft versions of its own pandemic flu plans. In May 2006, the White House released a new implementation plan for the federal pandemic flu response strategy.

Our state's pandemic planning involves a number of state and local government agencies, working in partnership with each other and with the private sector, to do a number of different jobs:

- The **Department of Public Safety** will be responsible for organizing and coordinating our overall response to a pandemic.
- The **Department of Agriculture** and the **Board of Animal Health** will be responsible for protecting our poultry flocks from the threat of "bird flu."

- The **Department of Natural Resources** will play an important role in detecting the presence of the bird flu virus in wild birds and waterfowl – the most likely way that bird flu will make its way to Minnesota.
- The **Minnesota Department of Health** – along with local health agencies and health care providers, all across the state – will work to minimize the impact of a pandemic on human health.

What's being done to protect public health?

Over the last three years, Minnesota's public health community has been building up its capacity to respond to a flu pandemic – or some other type of public health emergency – in a number of ways:

- We have greatly enhanced the ability of our state public health laboratory to handle – and test for – potentially dangerous chemical and biological agents.
- Working with the health care community, state and local public health agencies have strengthened our system for detecting and tracking infectious disease outbreaks.
- Local public health agencies have been conducting an extensive series of drills and exercises designed to test our emergency response readiness.
- Public health agencies have been developing a system for the rapid distribution of medications and vaccines to the public during an emergency.
- Public health has been working with our state's hospitals, on a regional basis, to plan for the care of large numbers of sick people. Plans are being made to provide alternatives to regular hospital care, at a time when hospitals would otherwise be overwhelmed.
- State and local public health agencies are recruiting, training and organizing a corps of health care and public health volunteers, who can provide care and other services during an emergency.
- Strategies are being developed for limiting or slowing the spread of influenza during a pandemic. Infection control procedures are



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being developed for isolating patients and protecting health care workers in hospitals and other health care settings.

- Strategies are also being developed for limiting the spread of illness out in the community – quarantine of people who aren't sick, but may be infectious; closure of schools and businesses; restrictions on travel and public gatherings; and “snow days,” when people will be asked to stay home from work or school for a week or two.
- Plans are also being made to care for the large number of people who could die during a pandemic – as many as 30,000 in Minnesota alone, in a severe pandemic.

What else do we need to do to be ready?

Everybody has a role to play in getting ready for a pandemic.

That includes government agencies at the local, state and federal level. But it also includes the law enforcement and emergency response communities; the hospital and health care communities; the business sector; voluntary agencies and organizations; the academic community and the schools. And it also includes individual citizens and their families.

Businesses – including hospitals and health care providers – need to be ready for a world where as many as 40 percent of their employees may be unwilling or unable to work. Employers need to develop strategies that will limit social contact between employees – including strategies for letting people work at home, whenever possible.

Individuals and families need to develop their own personal emergency plans. They need to start putting together an emergency kit, with enough food, water and supplies to last up to two weeks.

A lot of work has already been done to prepare for a pandemic – but there's still a lot to do. We're better prepared today than we were yesterday – and we'll be better prepared tomorrow than we are today.