

**PLANNING
FOR THE
UNEXPECTED:**

Maintaining Key Operations During a Pandemic

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Between the first and second world wars, French military commanders were determined to prevent German troops from ever again occupying their homeland. So they built what they considered to be the ultimate defense: The Maginot Line, which stretched across the country's eastern border, comprised of fortified concrete walls, caches for weapons and supplies, lookout posts, and manned forts. It was designed to force an invading German army to attack from the north through Belgium, where they would face the bulk of France's fighting forces.

Unfortunately for the French people, the lion's share of Hitler's troops attacked through the supposedly impassable forests of Ardennes, where they met only modest resistance. France's weakness in the latest anti-tank and anti-aircraft tactics, and its inability to shift troops to an unexpected location, quickly led to disaster. German troops spilled through the border and reached the English Channel in only eleven days. >>

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The Maginot Line did not fail because the French neglected to prepare for disaster or because they were unwilling to invest in safety efforts. The line failed because the French did not update their plan as challenges evolved and because the plan was not flexible enough to allow them to change course quickly when some of their basic assumptions proved false.

The lesson for municipal officials is that disaster planning is not a once-and-done activity, but a work in progress that must be regularly reviewed and amended as conditions change.

Responding to a crisis is a defining moment for local governments. When disaster strikes, it raises the stakes, and your constituents need you more than ever. Municipal services become critical because they help preserve law and order, protect citizens, and save lives.

While there are a variety of disasters your community might encounter, a flu pandemic is a good example of the potentially devastating impact a crisis can exert on municipal operations. Working through how a pandemic would affect your staff and resources will help you identify the types of hurdles your organization is likely to find most challenging. It will also begin the process of prioritizing functions from the most critical (e.g., fire, police, 911) to those that can be curtailed until the crisis abates (e.g., cultural events, library hours).

Disasters place a premium on flexibility, since you don't know exactly what you'll be coping with or exactly how problems will manifest themselves. The bottom line is that if you don't have a continuity or pandemic plan in place yet, it's high time to develop one.

In 2007, the world appeared to be on the brink of an Avian Flu pandemic. Unlike seasonal flu, which primarily causes fatalities only in the elderly and other high-risk patients, the Avian Flu settled in deep lung tissue, leading to pneumonia and lung failure even in teens and young adults. Fortunately, it did not reach global proportions, and lessons learned in combating it helped to prepare us for future pandemics.

As bad as September 11 or Hurricane Katrina were, their impact was somewhat localized, allowing neighboring communities and distant allies to provide assistance. In a pandemic, local resources everywhere could be strained as the disease engulfs the entire globe. Communities may have to manage the disease primarily on their own.

The H1N1 virus first emerged in the United States and Mexico in April 2009. Many experts think the excellent preparation and prompt action of public health agencies greatly contributed to the relatively mild impact of the H1N1 flu thus far in 2009. But public health officials are cautious because, as the Northern Hemisphere heads into its traditional flu season, this time there will be two flu viruses to deal with, and the one thing that has remained predictable about the H1N1 virus is that it is unpredictable.

From health departments to waste management services to law enforcement, public agencies need to coordinate efforts quickly around pandemics. Governments must also work closely with regulated industries providing essential services such as power, gas and telecommunications. All of these organizations make up the intricate engine that powers a modern community, and when one organization ceases to operate, it increases the strain on the others.

It is essential that organizations have coordinated, comprehensive plans in place that allow them to continue to deliver basic services

20th Century Flu Pandemics

NAME	DATE	STRAIN	FATALITIES
Spanish Flu	1918-1919	H1N1	50 million
Asian Flu	1957-1958	H2N2	2 million
Hong Kong Flu	1968-1969	H3N2	1 million
H1N1 ("Swine") Flu	2009	H1N1	1,800-plus as of August 2009

Hurricane Katrina is a case study in what happens when governments—local, state and federal—are not prepared for a disaster. Emergency rooms could not begin to deal with the number of patients they received. Months after the storm, parts of the Gulf Coast were still experiencing looting and lawlessness, and some areas still did not have electricity. Sadly, people are still living in Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers four years later.

Pandemics: An Overview

Pandemics typically occur every ten to fifty years. Before H1N1, the most recent pandemic was the Hong Kong Flu, which killed more than a million people in the 1960s. The worst pandemic on record occurred in 1918, when the Spanish Flu infected a billion people and killed 50 million people worldwide—causing more deaths than all the wars of the previous century. Some older adults still remember the Asian Flu of 1957, which killed two million people.

even during a pandemic. For government, this challenge is heightened because its agencies are the ones sought out for support during challenging times.

Municipalities have access to multiple planning tools through the federal government, including FluAid from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Outside consulting companies can also provide assistance with pandemic and other preparedness planning. Plans should be customized and focused on the type of services an organization provides. An outside consultant, combining business expertise with clinical knowledge, can be a significant help in developing an effective and agile plan that coordinates and integrates services across a community.

Six Planning Principles

No matter if your organization is a public school system or a global technology company, there are six key principles to keep in mind when developing a plan for a pandemic or other disaster:

1. Expect a reduced workforce.

Absenteeism is the largest single issue employers face during a pandemic. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, a pandemic may come and go in waves, each typically lasting six to eight weeks. During these periods, anywhere from a third to half of workers may be absent because they are sick or caring for sick family members or friends.

A pandemic or other crisis presents challenges similar to a workers' strike. In each scenario, organizations must find a way to marshal enough manpower to get the job done. It takes tremendous forethought to figure out how to continue operating with only half the usual workforce. This will only be more challenging at times when municipal staffing is already reduced due to the recession.

Agencies should determine

What is FluAid?

FluAid software, created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is designed to assist state and local planners in preparing for an influenza pandemic by providing estimates of the potential impact specific to their locality. FluAid (www.cdc.gov/flu/tools/fluaid) provides a range of estimates of the impact in terms of deaths, hospitalizations and outpatient visits due to pandemic influenza. The software, however, cannot describe when or how people will become ill, or how a pandemic may spread.

the minimum number of people needed on each shift and be ready to call on temporary workers if needed. Because there is no way to determine exactly who an illness will strike or when, all essential employees must have a backup who is trained to fill in. The leadership team is no more immune to the pandemic than the rank-and-file, so a backup plan for management positions is needed, too. Making employees aware when a pandemic policy has been implemented will help in the transition to a reduced workforce.

2. Develop a crisis response team and plan.

Each organization must identify those responsible for implementing the crisis response. The crisis response team must be ready and able to communicate and partner with federal, state and local agencies and additional government resources.

The team must adhere to a plan. This plan can be a formal document or a bulleted list of priority tasks. Either way, it serves as a guide for the team. Since fewer staff will be available at a time when demands are higher, the plan must identify the core functions needed to provide service during a crisis.

City or town hall is responsible for establishing communication with vendors, employees, customers/constituents and other stakeholders. The plan should cover how to communicate with each of these groups, including backup commu-

nication plans in case of a disruption of the normal means of communication.

3. Keep everyone informed.

For a government agency, communicating is priority one. Because of the interdependence of the municipal structure, the risks increase exponentially when there is a lack of communication.

One of the biggest challenges in any crisis is keeping everyone informed. A lack of reliable information can breed rumors, fear and even panic and civil unrest. Safety is a municipality's primary concern, and communication can reduce safety risks that could result from misinformation.

In the Internet age, people have become accustomed to having information at their fingertips. But if half of an organization's staff is out sick, is someone capable (and authorized) to post the latest news updates on the municipal Web site? If not, are there enough staff to man phones that are ringing off the hook with calls from anxious citizens? Disaster planners predict that a pandemic could cause an overload of the Internet. If the Internet is paralyzed, how will local government communicate with the public and with employees?

A top priority must be to figure out the best way to keep stakeholders updated, even when things are at their worst. Phone trees, city and town halls, and canvassing may now be considered tactics of the past, but they should still be

Are You Prepared?

If you believe your organization is ready to handle a disaster, ask yourself the following questions:

- 📞 If large numbers of employees are unable to work, where will you turn for manpower?
- 📞 How will you communicate with the public?
- 📞 Do you have sufficient bandwidth to deal with a crisis?
- 📞 Do you have the technology and plans in place for employees to work from home if necessary?
- 📞 Will your vendors and suppliers continue to operate during a crisis?

kept in mind when planning for the unknown.

And don't forget employees, who are essential to helping each municipality weather the storm. They're only as good as the information and support that is provided to them. If they are only given half the facts, they cannot do their jobs fully.

All employees must be informed of what will be expected of them during a pandemic or other disaster. The most important thing to communicate to employees is their role in the scenario. Are they leaders? Are they taskmasters? Are they expected to be on call, or take on increased responsibilities? They'll need to know these answers.

In a pandemic scenario, keeping in touch with other public officials and agencies is crucial in staying up to date on developments and receiving important information. It can also improve morale; employee concerns will ease if they know they are receiving the latest information.

4. Count on disruptions and distractions.

In a pandemic or other crisis, already short-staffed organizations may face disruptions in materials, supplies and outsourced services. Employees, meanwhile, are likely

to be distracted by the unfolding crisis situation and how it's affecting them and their own families.

Vendors and suppliers should be encouraged to put continuity plans in place, too. Depending on how much a municipality relies on its suppliers, its plan may only be as strong as theirs. Consider planning to work with additional suppliers, and make sure inventory is adjusted to account for temporary slowdowns of supplies and other resources.

During a pandemic, workplaces need to be prepared to manage changes in working relationships and the emotional toll of widespread fear and anxiety. Employees will be understandably distracted and upset. Working while others are with their families can also be difficult, often leading to a decrease in work quality and productivity. The crisis team should include a trained counselor who can be deployed in times of need to identify, triage and alert management to those who are not able to handle the stress.

5. Focus on prevention.

During a pandemic, consider limiting access to public transportation, schools, large shopping venues, and major public events. Consider allowing employees to telecommute if they can perform their

duties remotely. Ask if a large meeting can become a conference call or video teleconference instead. The cost of electronic communications has dropped considerably, which may provide new options that limit opportunities to spread illness.

6. Update human resources policies.

Since employers should strongly encourage sick employees to stay home, it's important to make sure that human resources policies support this position.

Special personnel situations that arise around crises and for which employers should be prepared include:

- Illness striking while an employee is at work
- Dealing with employees who report that they are ill
- Deciding when ill staff members should be allowed to return to work
- Confirming policies regarding employees who miss work to care for sick family members
- Handling concerns of employees who are afraid to report to work

Consider policies to keep non-essential employees at home, and consider how such absences will affect compensation. Is cross training available for those who may be called to take leadership roles during times of crisis?

Proper Planning

Those who fail to plan, plan to fail. While harsh, this proverb rings true in crisis situations. A health crisis, terror attack or natural disaster can ruin lives and cripple a community for years. While even the best continuity plans can't anticipate every problem, appropriate planning and preparation can significantly increase an organization's effectiveness and ability to withstand stress during a crisis. With proper planning, your municipality can be ready when it's needed most. 🌟