

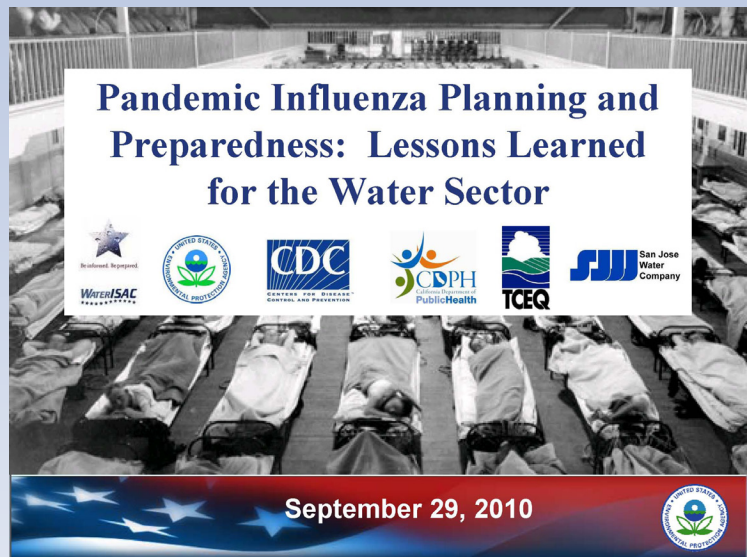
Pandemic Influenza Planning and Preparedness Webinar



Transferring Lessons Learned into Best Practices

BACKGROUND

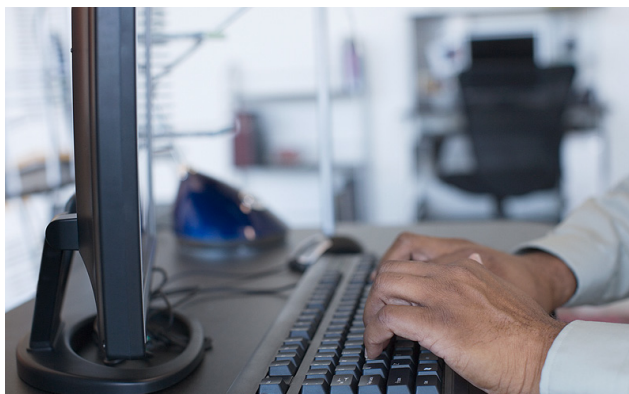
While the 2009 H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic was not as severe as some experts predicted, valuable lessons learned during the planning and response phases are applicable when preparing for the next pandemic. In an effort to advance the water sector's pandemic preparedness capability, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), in collaboration with the Water Information Sharing and Analysis Center (WaterISAC), held a Pandemic Influenza (pandemic flu) Planning and Preparedness Webinar featuring presentations on the lessons organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), California Department of Public Health (CDPH), and the San Jose Water Company learned from the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. The combination of these water sector partners provided webinar participants with information from the federal, state, health, and utility perspectives.



The webinar was specifically designed to advance the understanding for water/wastewater utilities and primacy agencies of both the threat of a pandemic and the role they play in safeguarding their utility and employees. Organizations now have an opportunity to improve their response plans and management during future outbreaks.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

The 5 key lessons learned from the webinar are summarized below (not in priority order):



Educate yourself on influenza: Pandemic influenza refers to a global outbreak of a new strain of the influenza virus with the capacity to infect humans, causing serious illness/death and spreading easily from person-to-person. A variety of documentation and planning resources are available at the federal, state, and local levels of government (See Resources below). Authorities such as EPA and CDC provide guidance material that can be used to develop plans tailored to an individual utility's needs.

Take steps to protect the health of workers: The 2009 H1N1 outbreak impacted the population between the ages of 18-49 years old the most, a key block of the U.S. workforce. Steps should be taken to address the threat of absenteeism by reducing the potential transmission of the virus and minimizing the illness among employees. Utilities may elect to adopt practices which bear no expense, such as

It is very important to have some of your responses tailored towards protecting all of your workforce or the part of your workforce that may be of a particular high risk. –CDC

social distancing, while others may choose to invest in surgical masks and antiviral drugs. All employees should be encouraged to get a flu vaccination every year to lower the chances of a pandemic.

Assess your interdependencies with key stakeholders: Interdependencies with essential vendors and suppliers should be identified and addressed in planning efforts. Open communication and coordination should exist with these parties to ensure the critical services they provide may continue. Utilities may wish to establish vendor and supplier availability during emergencies in their contracts.

Identify and prioritize essential operations: In the case of a severe pandemic, absenteeism rates are estimated to be as high as 40%. The loss of personnel at this scale can potentially cripple any organization if steps are not taken to address the threat. One of the most important tasks for an organization is assessing and prioritizing its critical functions and processes to determine the minimum staffing levels required to sustain operations. The findings from this exercise should be used to develop staffing strategies that involve cross-training personnel or, in the case of one webinar presenter, engaging retirees to fill positions in critical functions.

Plan for the unexpected. Influenza's effects on your staff can be unpredictable. –CDPH

Integrate pandemic planning into existing business continuity and emergency response plans:

There are distinct differences between pandemic planning and traditional business continuity planning. Business continuity plans are developed to address various natural or man-made disasters that may vary in severity. These incidents are typically limited in scope, only affecting a specific facility or area. Unlike natural disasters or a terrorist act, a pandemic is more complex because of the difference in duration and scale. In addition, most business continuity plans do not address the threat of high staffing shortages. Pandemic planning should be integrated and aligned with existing business continuity and emergency response plans to ensure an effective pandemic response.

As a critical component of the U.S. critical infrastructure, the water sector must continue to be vigilant and prepare for future pandemic outbreaks. While the 2009 H1N1 had a limited impact on the public/private sector, water and wastewater systems should use the lessons learned from the incident as an opportunity to update their response protocols and procedures.

RESOURCES

WaterISAC:

<https://portal.waterisac.org/web/>
(WaterISAC Pro Subscription Required)

HHS: www.flu.gov

CDC: <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>

OSHA: http://www.osha.gov/Publications/influenza_pandemic.html

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

EPA has included a Pandemic Influenza scenario on the Tabletop Exercise Tool to aid utilities in enhancing their pandemic preparedness.

To learn more, please contact Nushat Thomas of EPA (thomas.nushat@epa.gov).

Additional information is also available at: <http://cfpub.epa.gov/safewater/watersecurity/pandemicflu.cfm>