

Denton County Health Department
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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***Denton County Health Department Works to Help Prepare Local Businesses for
Pandemic Influenza***

In recent months, the Denton County Health Department, along with our community partners, have been preparing plans for pandemic influenza. Reports about Avian Influenza have increased the discussion about a possible pandemic.

In the event of pandemic influenza, businesses will play a key role in protecting employees' health and safety as well as limiting the negative impact to the economy and society. Planning for pandemic influenza is critical. Plans for the economic implications of increased absenteeism and reduced consumer participation must be developed now in preparation for possible pandemic influenza. This becomes even more important because a pandemic influenza threat would be long term, spanning several months to a year.

Companies that provide critical infrastructure services, such as power and telecommunications, have a special responsibility to plan for continued operation in a crisis and should plan accordingly. This includes the economic strains of surrounding business closings and increased absenteeism among employees.

Pandemics are much different than typical disasters and some special planning needs to be considered. When a pandemic occurs, the impact will likely be widespread, possibly even world-wide, leaving very little outside assistance. Many business continuity plans (BCP's) assume that part of their organization will be unaffected and can take up the workload, but that may not be a possibility. A pandemic could require activities to limit contact, such as restriction of movement, isolation, quarantine, and public gathering closures. A pandemic would not be a short event followed by immediate recovery efforts; which many BCP's assume. Unlike many emergencies, we could have advanced notice as the pandemic moves closer to the United States. Unlike natural disasters, in a pandemic any disruption to business operations will likely be from human resource limitations.

The Department of Health and Human Services suggests that businesses should plan for 50% staff absences for periods of about two weeks at the height of a severe pandemic wave, and lower levels of staff absences for a few weeks on either side of the peak. Overall, a pandemic wave may last about 8 weeks. There will likely be additional waves of illness of varying severity over time. Not only will your company experience staff shortages, but it is important to keep in mind that other support companies, such as supplies companies and sub-contractors, may also be experiencing similar shortages, which may interrupt normal operations.

Continuity planning for a pandemic should include: identification of essential business activities (and the core people and skills to keep them running), and ensure that there are back-up alternatives in place; mitigation of business/economic disruptions, including

possible shortages of supplies; and minimization of illness in workers and customers. After identifying the essential service people, pandemic planning should consider how to minimize illness among staff and visitors. Some strategies include: restricting workplace entry of people with symptoms; practicing good personal hygiene and workplace cleaning habits, especially hand washing; increasing social distancing; managing staff that become ill at work; and managing staff that travel.

Social distancing may become one of the most beneficial ways to reduce the spread of infection should an actual outbreak occur. Avoid meeting face to face by using telephone, video conferencing, and the internet to conduct business, even with people in the same building. If face to face meetings are necessary, choose a large room and allow for four feet between each person or hold the meeting in open air. During the meeting, avoid shaking hands or hugging. You should also avoid any unnecessary travel and cancel or postpone non-essential gatherings. If possible, arrange for employees to work from home or work variable hours to avoid crowding in the workplace. Practice “ghost” shift changes, whenever possible, with the shift going off duty leaving the workplace before the new shift enters. Avoid public transport by walking, riding a bike, driving a car or go early or late to avoid rush hour crowding on public transportation. Bring lunch and eat at the desk or away from others. Introducing staggered lunchtimes can also assist to reduce the number of people in the lunch or break room.

As with any catastrophe, having a contingency plan is essential. With assistance from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Denton County Health Department has compiled information to assist you and your organization to create business continuity plans for pandemic influenza. Creation of these plans will also assist you in creating plans for other emergency situation. If you would like more information to develop a pandemic influenza business continuity plan, please contact Betsy Haggard with the Denton County Health Department at 940-349-2922 or betsy.haggard@dentoncounty.com. Additional information, including business checklists, may also be accessed at www.pandemicflu.gov and www.cdc.gov/business.