



Public Service Commission of West Virginia



Pandemic Preparedness Planning

Checklist for Utilities and Other Businesses Prepared 03/16/2020

Pandemics occur in cycles, approximately every 40 - 50 years. The 1918 influenza virus (Spanish Flu) was the deadliest in recent history, infecting 30 percent of the world's population and killing up to 40 million individuals, particularly young people. In just the first five weeks of that outbreak in West Virginia, there were 2,300 cases reported and 200 deaths. Smaller pandemics have occurred in 1957, 1968 and 2009.

COVID-19 or Coronavirus

The World Health Organization (WHO) has just declared a pandemic due to COVID-19 or Novel Coronavirus. COVID-19 is a new virus that has not been previously identified. The first infections were linked to a live animal market in Wuhan City, China. The virus can be spread easily from person-to-person. Symptoms for patients with COVID-19 have included mild to severe respiratory illness, fever, dry cough and shortness of breath. There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19 or antiviral medications proven to be effective against it. The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to the virus.

For more complete up to date information on COVID-19 please go to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) website: www.cdc.gov/

Developing a Pandemic Continuity of Operations Plan

It would be a mistake for a business to take its Continuity of Operations Plan or work stoppage plan, make a few minor adjustments and consider it to be a plan that could effectively direct operations in the event of a pandemic outbreak. Some of the differences between the two types of plans include:

- A pandemic is a global event; a local crisis worldwide. It can occur in every state and every city and every town at the same time. Consequently, shippers and suppliers from other locations are much more likely to be affected by a pandemic than other disruptions to a business;
- A pandemic will result in employee absences that are longer and much more random than worker strikes, facility closures, weather incidents or other kinds of disruptions.

Planning for a pandemic needs to be aimed at sustainable approaches. Pandemic preparedness should be built upon strong, well established core emergency response systems, including emergency management entities and local health departments.

When developing a Continuity of Operations Plan for your business there are many useful planning tools available:

- *Pandemic Influenza: Preparedness, Response and Recovery Guide for Critical Infrastructure and Key Resources*, by the US Department of Homeland Security: <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/cikrpandemicinfluenzaguide.pdf>
- *Business Pandemic Influenza Planning Checklist*, by The Centers for Disease Control: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/pdf/businesschecklist.pdf>
- *Influenza Pandemic Planning, Preparation, and Response Reference Guide*, by the North American Electric Reliability Council: <https://www.npcc.org/RAPA/relGovReg/Documents/Influenza%20Pandemic%20Reference%20Guide.pdf>

When developing a Continuity of Operations Plan for your business, there are some basic steps to follow.

1) Assemble a Pandemic Preparedness Planning Team

The first step in developing a plan is to determine who should be on the planning team. Involve a broad cross-section of people from throughout your organization, making sure to include those with expertise vital to daily business functions. This will likely include people with technical skills as well as managers and executives.

Include someone with communications expertise to develop a communication plan for customers and staff as well as someone with some medical expertise to evaluate information on the virus and make adjustments in your plan.

Identify a planning coordinator who will pull together all the resources necessary to develop the plan and keep the group on task.

2) Conduct an Assessment of Your Operations

Carefully review how your company functions, both internally and externally, to determine which staff, materials, procedures and equipment are essential to keep the business operating and continue serving your customers.

- Review your business process flow chart if one exists. If one does not exist, prepare one.
- All utilities should have an up-to-date Standard Operation Procedures Manual on site and easily accessible.
- Prioritize the functions of your company:
 - What are the essential functions of your business? Consider functions including pumping and treating, line breaks, new service hook ups, line expansion, routine maintenance, valve exercising, routine line replacement, billing, internal audits, service disconnects for non-payment, etc.
 - What are the core skills required to meet these functions?
 - Which operations could be suspended or scaled back and which would need to be performed in the event of a massive worker shortage.
 - Who are the individuals required to keep the essential functions running?
 - Are there sufficient backups for these people and skills during a large scale personnel outage?
 - Which individuals are not necessary to keep essential functions running?
 - Could non-essential personnel be trained and reallocated to backup essential positions during a pandemic?
- Identify operations essential to survival and recovery.

3) Ensure Your Inventory

- Know your facility's chemical requirements: the amount stored on site and estimated daily usage for each chemical your facility uses. Know how long you could continue to operate without receiving any shipments. Those businesses depending on "just-in-time" inventory systems should look at developing an on site surplus of critical supplies.
- Identify and document existing and potential suppliers of regularly purchased chemicals, parts, fuel and supplies.
- Have written records identifying your suppliers, shippers, resources and other businesses with which you regularly interact.
- Establish relationships with more than one company to use in the event your primary contractor cannot meet your needs. A disaster that shuts down a key supplier can be devastating to your business.
- Create a contact list for critical business contractors and others you could use in an emergency. Keep copies of this list with other important documents on file, in your emergency supply kit, as an appendix to your Standard Operating Procedures Manual and at an off-site location.

- Make sure all your suppliers have Continuity of Operations Plans in place.
- Identify alternate storage facilities in case it is necessary to stockpile chemicals.
- Identify others in the community (*e.g.*: swimming pools if you operate a water utility) that may have surplus of commonly used chemicals that could be shared in an emergency.

4) Prevention - Keeping Your Workplace and Employees Healthy

Overall Wellness in the Workplace

COVID-19 has proven to be more severe for older adults and people who have serious chronic medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes and lung disease. Encouraging employees to maintain as healthy a lifestyle as possible and to practice healthy hygiene habits may lessen the spread of the disease and the severity of the impact on those employees who fall ill.

Encouraging a healthy lifestyle can be done in many ways:

- Wash your hands often, frequently and correctly. You should wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after using the bathroom, blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing and before eating. Dry your hands using a disposable paper towel or air dryer and use a paper towel to turn off the faucet and open the bathroom door.
- Encourage employees to get annual physicals and keep all appropriate and recommended vaccinations up to date, particularly Tetanus and Hepatitis B. For the current recommended adult immunization schedule please go to: <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/>
- Encourage employees and their families to get annual flu shots.
- Eat a healthy balanced diet and get an adequate amount of sleep and regular exercise.
- Practice social distancing.

Limiting the Spread of Disease within a Company

Although there are no guarantees, there are many inexpensive or cost-free measures a business and its employees can take to lessen the spread of viruses, including COVID-19, while at work. Some of these measures include:

- Frequent and thorough hand-washing.
- Don't touch your face.
- Encourage employees to stay home when sick.

- Follow proper coughing etiquette:
 - Don't cough or sneeze near others;
 - Cough or sneeze into your elbow, not your hand.
- Dispose used tissues into trash cans.
- Avoid sharing drinks, food or silverware.
- Frequently disinfect common surfaces, including copy machines, supply cabinets, kitchen areas, elevator buttons, bathrooms, doors and stair railings.
- Discourage the sharing of workstations, phones, keyboards, pens, pencils, staplers, staple pullers, etc.
- Generously provide hand sanitizer, anti-bacterial cleansers, wipes, tissues and trash cans.
- Utilize conference calls instead of face-to-face meetings.
- Discourage the practice of shaking hands.

During a pandemic, more restrictive practices may be employed in order to prevent the spread of the disease. These practices could include:

- Limit face-to-face contact with customers.
- Impose a minimum distance between employees of six feet (or whatever the disease protocol dictates) whenever possible so an employee who has unknowingly been infected and is shedding the virus is less likely to infect his/her coworkers.
- Segregate essential staff into separate offices or locations.
- Consider developing an emergency support plan for your non-infected essential employees. Include provisions for shelter, cots, food, food preparation equipment and supplies, drinking water, clothes or laundry facilities, laundry supplies and personal hygiene items.
- Recognize employees will respond to and accommodate their families' needs. Employees who may be at significant risk of exposure to the virus in their job may not want to travel back and forth to family. The same provisions noted in the bullet above may help enable their continued work through the event.
- As always, employees should use standard personal protection measures, including use of disposable gloves and appropriate hand-washing when contacting any waste products (*e.g.*: trash with tissues, materials contaminated with human body fluids, sewage, etc.).

- Track where your employees are traveling. Know if they have been in a high exposure area. Know when they were potentially exposed, how long the incubation period is and what the early symptoms are.
- Consider remote dispersal of crews or dispatching work crews from their homes rather than from company offices.
- Implement a system control and data acquisition method that would allow for remote meter reading and instrument monitoring without putting your employees in the midst of potentially infected customers.
- Restrict public access to company plants and offices, including temporarily suspending bill paying and customer service assistance in the office. Bills would be paid online, over the phone or by mail.

5) Prepare for Employee Absences

A moderately severe COVID-19 outbreak could leave businesses trying to operate without a significant portion of their workforce for up to several weeks for a variety of reasons:

- Suspected illness or potential exposure to virus;
- Recovery from actual illness;
- Caring for an ill family member;
- Lack of childcare (schools could be closed during a severe outbreak);
- “Worried well,” those individuals who are not sick but fear becoming exposed to the disease;
- Fulfilling other voluntary roles in the community; and,
- Travel restrictions could be imposed that would make getting to work difficult for some employees.

Obviously, this creates serious staffing problems. Some creativity may need to be explored in bridging these gaps.

- Make sure your Standard Operation Procedures Manual is up to date and easily accessible so an operator not familiar with your facility could potentially come in and run your facility in the event of a total staff outage.
- Prioritize work: essential emergency repairs vs. scheduled upgrade work, system expansion or discontinuation of service for billing issues.

- Identify critical on site personnel.
- Develop plans to assure staffing for critical functions, including cross training, telecommuting or remote dispersal of personnel.
- Cross train personnel in non-essential functions to serve as backup for personnel in critical functions. Train and prepare ancillary workforce (*i.e.*: contractors, employees in other job titles/descriptions, retirees) to perform critical functions. Whenever possible, cross train three-deep for critical functions.
- Keep an up-to-date skills inventory of which employees, retirees, contract workers, etc. are trained to perform which job functions so this information is readily available to utilize in filling staffing shortages.
- Have a complete and up-to-date list of contact names and phone numbers for staff, board members, suppliers, vendors, contract employees, consultants and others who would have information useful to those attempting to staff the facility in an emergency. This list should be in an easily accessible location and as an appendix to the utility's Standard Operating Procedures Manual.
- Explore the possibility of developing a Utility Mutual Aid Consortium with similar utilities in your area. Water utilities may want to get in touch with the West Virginia Rural Water Association for assistance developing a consortium in your area. They can be reached at 304-201-1689.
- Identify additional resources your company will require in order to maintain service to your customers in the event of a pandemic (*e.g.*: additional CDL drivers).
- Explore the use of alternate work systems for some positions (*i.e.*: telecommuting, flexible work hours or remote reporting). Arrange for the necessary hardware, software and IT security measures to allow employees to telecommute and/or remote report.
- Consider provisions for emergency payroll, expedited financial decision-making and accounting systems.
- Establish procedures for succession of management. If possible, include at least one person who is not at the company headquarters.
- Businesses should have flexibility in their employee rules so vacations may be cancelled if needed during a pandemic.
- Establish policies relating to employees using sick leave to care for family members and "well worried."
- Have all parts, chemicals, tools, supplies, etc. clearly labeled and accessible.
- Make provisions to get employees to work in the event of a fuel shortage or travel restrictions.

6) Adjust Company Policies to Accommodate the Strains of a Pandemic

Businesses may want to review and/or adjust a variety of company policies during an influenza pandemic.

- Whether or not you will be flexible with customers on late payments for service. Take online or phone payments.
- Policies relating to acceptable lengths of sick leave. Businesses won't want to lose good employees because they have depleted their leave, nor will they want them coming back to work if they are still sick. If providing employees extended paid sick leave is not possible, consider developing policies to accommodate unpaid leaves of absence.
- Establish policies for the prompt exclusion of employees who exhibit symptoms, are suspected to be ill or have been exposed to the virus.
- Establish policies for restricting travel to affected geographic areas (consider both domestic and international sites) and guidance for employees returning from affected areas (refer to CDC travel recommendations).
- Understand how the Federal Family Medical Leave Act affects your business.
- Determine how you will deal with employees who are "worried well."
- Establish triggers to activate modified policies.

Please make the Public Service Commission aware of any operational changes you make so we can answer questions from your customers.

7) Communicate and Coordinate with Others

In the event of a COVID-19 outbreak good communication will be the key to distributing important and necessary information, ensuring systems continue to run properly and to control hysteria. Preparations need to be made now so channels of communication are open and operational during an outbreak.

Businesses should identify good, reliable, current sources of information so that they may stay up to date on information relating to the pandemic. Some recommended internet links include:

www.cdc.gov

<https://www.who.int/>

Communicate with Your Employees

Talk with your employees about the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and the steps your company is taking to prepare for it. Establish an emergency communications plan and revise it periodically. The plan should include key contacts (with backups); a chain of communication (including suppliers and customers); and the process for communicating pandemic status and action to employees, vendors, suppliers and customers inside and outside the worksite in a consistent and timely way.

- Develop and disseminate programs and materials covering pandemic fundamentals (*e.g.*: signs and symptoms of the disease, modes of transmission), personal and family protection and response strategies. Be sure to date anything you send out so people know they are reading the most up-to-date information.
- Anticipate employee fear and anxiety, rumors and misinformation and plan communications accordingly.
- Provide information to your employees about pandemic preparedness and response planning.
- Develop platforms (*e.g.*: hotlines, dedicated websites) for communicating pandemic status and actions to employees in a consistent and timely way.

Communicate with Your Customers

When a pandemic occurs you will need to get information to your customers in an efficient and timely manner – preferably without spending a lot of money. Some of the information your customers will need will include:

- Is access to your plant or customer center restricted?
- How should they pay their bills?
- Can the disease spread through water? (While some diseases can be spread through untreated water, COVID-19 has not been detected in drinking water.)
- Is the utility imposing a boil water order, and if so, why?

There are a variety of ways a business can get information out. Some ways you might consider include:

- The company website
- Company blog, social media accounts

- Email and text alerts
- Newspapers
- TV/radio public service announcements

Advise your customers now where to go for information if a pandemic hits. Understand how your customers' needs may change in the event of a pandemic (*i.e.*: would buildings in your district be converted into medical facilities and require more water than usual).

Coordinate with Your Community

Businesses also need to discuss, compare and coordinate pandemic preparedness plans with other businesses and governmental entities in their community.

- Meet with other businesses in your building or industrial complex.
- Talk with first responders, emergency managers, community organizations and utility providers.
- Plan with your suppliers, shippers and others with whom you regularly do business.
- Share your plans and encourage other businesses to set in motion their own continuity planning. If possible, offer to help others develop their plans.
- Understand how your Continuity of Operations Plan affects your neighbors and colleagues and how theirs affect you.
- Become involved in local emergency planning activities. Talk with the local health department and the local emergency planning committee to determine plans for your community.
- Develop a relationship with your local health department. Review your continuity of operations plans with them. Discuss the importance of maintaining utility service to your customers.
- Share your pandemic contingency plans with insurers, health plans and major health care providers. Become educated about their capabilities and plans.

8) Test Your Plan

Testing your plan is critical to ensure it will do what you need it to do.

One method of testing your plan would be to put all your employees' names in a hat. Randomly draw 30 percent of the names out. Have those employees sit in your board room for a full day.

One third of your “quarantined” employees may be contacted occasionally by phone, but no one can leave the board room. They cannot access their files, walk into the control room, etc. Where does your system shut down?

9) Review Your Emergency Plans Regularly

Just as your business changes over time, so do your preparedness needs. When you hire new employees or when there are changes in how your company functions, you should update your plans and inform your people. Don’t let your plan gather dust on a shelf.

The very nature of a pandemic is that it is a new strain of virus. Once identified, scientists will begin to understand how it has mutated, how it is spread, how it is killed, etc. This information needs to be incorporated into plans so we can better protect ourselves, our employees and our families.