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Association of Public Safety Communications Officials (APCO) International

Homeland Security and Pandemic Preparedness

An influenza (flu) pandemic is a widespread outbreak of disease that occurs when a new flu virus appears that people have not been exposed to before. Pandemic flu spreads easily from person to person and can cause serious illness because people do not have immunity to the new virus. The U.S. Department of Health warns, "A pandemic may come and go in waves, each of which can last for months at a time. Everyday life could be disrupted due to people in communities across the country becoming ill at the same time. These disruptions could include everything from school and business closings to interruption of basic services, such as public transportation and health care. An especially severe influenza pandemic could lead to high levels of illness, death, social disruption, and economic loss."

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) suggests that, if proper preparations are not made, a medium-level pandemic in the United States could cause 90,000 to 210,000 deaths, hundreds of thousands of hospitalizations and affect the economy by \$70 to \$167 billion dollars. Secretary Michael O. Leavitt of the Department of Health and Human Services has said, "Let me be very clear. It is only a matter of time before we discover H5N1 in birds in America...It does not mean that a pandemic is at our doorstep. It should, however, motivate us to pick up the pace, to renew pandemic preparations on every front at every level".

Every public safety communications center or discipline-specific dispatch point manager must assess the level of risk to the survivability and sustainability to basic operability and interoperability presented by this and all hazards. As you plan, it is important to think about the challenges that you might face, particularly if a pandemic is severe. A pandemic would touch every aspect of society, and so every aspect of society must begin to prepare. These disruptions to everyday life may be widespread.

It may be difficult or impossible to work. Schools may be closed for extended periods of time. Transportation services may be disrupted. Just as we work daily

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with other local officials in making preparations for natural and man-made disasters, we must include a pandemic plan in those preparations.

Your center's Continuity Of Operations Plan (COOP) should provide the basis of such efforts. However, the potential impact of a pandemic will test even the best plans.

It's not just a matter of whether adequate facilities and equipment will be available but, more importantly, whether you will have the staff to maintain the level of service expected and required of public safety communications. The numbers provided by the CDC of a medium-level pandemic certainly indicated there is a very good chance your center will be impacted. Local governments will shoulder much of the burden and must prepare for shortages of key personnel such as dispatchers.

What if your facility is contaminated and must be evacuated? What if your technical support staff (in-house or contracted) are unavailable? What if transportation routes are closed? More importantly, what if your staffing levels are drastically reduced by 50% or more?

There are a number of resources available to help assist us in planning and subsequently making the necessary preparations. First, review your emergency plans and ensure a pandemic plan is included. Prepare for redundancy within your own locality or insure redundancy capacity with a neighboring jurisdiction. Just as business changes over time, so do your preparedness needs. Coordinate with others.¹

Prepare for restoration of critical operations. Is your facility safe or is it contaminated? Establish a list prioritizing those critical operations, staff and procedures needed to recover from a disaster. Keep in mind, a disaster doesn't have to destroy property to impact the communications center. A pandemic flu in which staff and/or their families are affected could impact the operation for several days or, in some cases, weeks. Because of the potential of long-term denial of service to the public, PSAPs need to plan for relocation to an alternate facility.

Redundancy in communications and in providing for back-up 9-1-1 and emergency communications facilities are paramount as there are many things, natural and man-made which can affect our ability to continue operating as "normal." When the general public thinks of an emergency or disaster, they normally think of natural disasters or terrorist activities.

COOP planning allows for the continuation of the essential functions of government departments or agencies during an incident or emergency that may

¹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, READYBusiness, www.ready.gov

disrupt typical, normal operations.² These essential services support the target capabilities that have been identified in a collaborative effort between public safety and service stakeholders with the Department of Homeland Security, Preparedness Directorate. When COOP planners discuss emergencies, disasters, or adverse events, they can mean any incident that could result in the inability of a governmental entity or agency to provide essential services to its constituents, taxpayers, citizens, businesses, and visitors.

Each PSAP must first and foremost be prepared and informed of prevention activities in its local area. Here are just a few planning considerations from a CALEA (Commission on Accreditation on Law Enforcement Agencies)-certified center that has invested in the proper planning processes:

What can we do to be prepared?

- Develop a plan to maintain the continuity of services.
- Recognize the necessity of providing the target capabilities as appropriate to the specific agency.
- Ensure personnel receive training/information on Pandemic Flu, including symptoms, protective measures for work and outside work.
- Ensure succession planning for all positions (technical to payroll).
- Ensure healthcare records are up to date and your center's contact information is accurate.
- Assess need for medical supplies and provide/encourage use of anti-bacterial products (approved for this flu strain).
- Identify funding resources for food.
- Additional water supplies should be added to disaster supplies; Storage must be coordinated.
- Encourage employees to prepare by thinking about bringing sleeping supplies, medicine, food and other needs from home and store in lockers in the event they are sequestered.
- Identify alternatives to traditional work practices and make necessary arrangements to implement those alternatives.

Working from home may need to be considered

- Begin planning with technical staff.
- Conduct survey of key employees for PC with high-speed data capabilities and using Windows XP, needed for the VPN Client.
- Assess what software applications need to be provided to key employees for use at home.
- Configure networking for work at home employees.

² Continuity of Operations Planning: Survival for Government, Continuity Central, www.continuitycentral.com

Practical Guidelines to Staying Healthy

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Put used tissues in a wastebasket.
- Cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve if you don't have a tissue.
- Clean your hands after coughing or sneezing. Use soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Stay home if you are sick; Plan for illness within your family.
- Practice good health habits.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Exercise on a regular basis.
- Get plenty of rest.

Get Informed³

Identify sources you can count on for reliable information. If a pandemic occurs, having accurate and reliable information will be critical.

- Reliable, accurate, and time information is available at www.pandemicflu.gov
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Hotline at: 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636). This line is available in English and Spanish, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. TTY: 1-888-232-6348. Questions can be e-mailed to inquiry@cdc.gov.
- Look for information on your local and state government Web sites. Links are available to each state department of public health at www.pandemicflu.gov.
- Talk to your local health care providers and public health officials. How will their plans affect EMS calls and transport decisions?
- Continue to check the APCO Homeland Security and Preparedness Committee Web site for information, including suggested practices to be tailored to your center.

³ Pandemic Influenza Planning, A Guide for Individuals and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, January 2006