

Preparing for a Pandemic Human Resources FAQs

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The General questions numbered 1 through 6 were prepared with assistance from the Arizona Department of Health Services.

GENERAL

1. Why do I keep hearing about “flu” and “a bad influenza season”?

Answer: There has been increased concern about the high number of influenza cases reported this year. The number of cases and severity of influenza can vary from season to season, depending on the types of flu circulating. This year our influenza season started early and we have experienced a significant increase in reporting over the past few weeks.

An influenza pandemic is a global outbreak of disease from a new influenza; a virus that is unlike past influenza viruses. Because people have not been infected with a similar virus in the past, most or all people will not have any natural immunity (protection) to a new pandemic virus.

2. What is the difference between seasonal flu, swine flu, bird flu and an influenza pandemic?

Answer:

Seasonal (or common) flu is a respiratory illness that can be transmitted person to person. The virus that causes flu changes a little every year. In some years, seasonal flu is much worse than in others. Most people have some immunity to seasonal flu and a vaccine is available. An annual vaccine is the best way to protect yourself and those around you from a severe flu illness. Young children and the elderly are most at risk of complications from flu, though anyone can be affected. While we normally have outbreaks of flu every winter, the exact timing of flu outbreaks can change from year to year.

Swine flu is a naturally occurring respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza that causes regular outbreaks in pigs. Swine flu can be directly transmitted from pigs to people and people to pigs. Human infection with flu viruses from pigs are most likely to occur when people are in close proximity to infected pigs, such as in pig barns and livestock exhibits at fairs. Human-to-human transmission of swine flu can also occur.

Avian (or bird) flu (also referred to as the H5N1 flu strain) is caused by influenza viruses that occur naturally among wild birds. The virus is deadly to domestic fowl and can be transmitted from birds to humans. There is no human immunity to this virus and no vaccine is available. However, the Avian flu virus cannot easily be transmitted from person to person.

Influenza pandemic occurs when there is a worldwide outbreak of severe flu caused by a virus that is new to humans. Influenza pandemics occur when a new or markedly changed virus develops. Because some flu viruses develop and are very different from any virus seen before, there is no natural immunity (defenses) in the human population, and the disease can spread easily from person to person. In an influenza pandemic, many people could get sick at the same time, and many could die.

3. What is the State of Arizona doing to prepare for a possible influenza pandemic?

Answer: In Arizona, the Governor's Office, the Arizona Department of Health Services, the Arizona Department of Agriculture, and the Arizona Department of Game & Fish have all been involved in influenza pandemic preparedness. The Arizona Department of Health Services (DHS) has prepared an Influenza Pandemic Response Plan, which can be viewed on DHS's web site: www.azdhs.gov/pandemicflu. The Arizona Department of Health Services monitors influenza cases to determine the current flu activity and to identify new types of virus. These reports are also used to identify an increase in the severity of influenza infections and to identify whether a pandemic is occurring. In addition, DHS has plans to distribute influenza vaccine across the state during a pandemic to help reduce the number of cases.

4. How will I know if an influenza pandemic is occurring in Arizona?

Answer: Arizona routinely experiences an increase in influenza activity during the winter months. During the peak of influenza activity, especially during a "bad season", people may experience longer waiting periods for care and may have difficulty finding vaccination sites. Even a routine flu season can challenge the healthcare system. The World Health Organization (WHO) will declare a pandemic when a high percentage of people around the world have influenza.

5. Where can employees learn more about influenza and the potential for an influenza pandemic?

Answer: Additional, more specific information, including recommendations for individual and family preparedness, can be obtained from the following web sites:

- Federal government – www.pandemicflu.gov
- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) – www.cdc.gov/flu
- CDC Hotline – 1.800.CDC.INFO (1.800.232.4636). TTY: 1.888.232.6348. This line is available in English and Spanish, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Questions can be emailed to cdcinfo@cdc.gov
- The World Health Organization (WHO) – www.who.int/en/
- Arizona Department of Health Services – www.azdhs.gov/flu

6. How can I better prepare for influenza illness during the pandemic?

Answer: You are encouraged to educate yourself regarding the potential risks of influenza and how to prepare for a pandemic – now! Preparation should include planning for potential illnesses and the need for leave should you or your family members become ill.

- Talk to your supervisor about working at a remote site.
- Train other employees to cover duties when employees become ill.

- Arrange emergency notification systems.
- Have supplies on hand in case you can't leave home.

LEAVE

1. What type of leave is available to me in case of an influenza pandemic under the current State Personnel System Rules?

Answer: There are no statutes or policies establishing special types of leave in case of an influenza pandemic. All currently available forms of leave may be considered in the event of an influenza pandemic. For further information review the State Personnel System Rules covering the following types of leave:

- Sick Leave
- Family Sick Leave (40 hours to care for spouse, dependent child, or parent)
- Annual Leave
- Compensatory Leave
- Leave Without Pay

Note: Depending on the circumstances, leave taken due to the flu may qualify as part of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Leave. Please review the appropriate State Personnel System Rule for further information regarding each leave category or contact your agency Human Resources office for further information.

2. If I'm not sick, but I do not want to come to work for fear of becoming ill, are agencies required to authorize annual or compensatory leave?

Answer:

- Agencies are under no obligation to accommodate such fears and are not required to approve annual leave, compensatory leave or leave without pay. However, no one can predict the severity of an influenza pandemic. Depending on the circumstances, agency management may want to discuss the situation with you. Alternative work schedules and telecommuting are options that may become appropriate to review and consider if a pandemic occurs. In addition, obtaining clear, accurate information regarding the situation is critical. Check the websites listed in question number 5, General (above), for information to reduce your likelihood of becoming ill.

3. What if I use public transportation to travel to and from work and due to an influenza pandemic, the public transit system shuts down and I am unable to get to work. Will I get paid for the day(s) I'm unable to get to work?

Answer:

- If public transportation is unavailable, employees should make alternate transportation arrangements whenever possible.
- Also, agencies may authorize employees to work from home, if employees' positions allow them to accomplish work from home.
- If there were a widespread shutdown of public transportation, agency directors may have the option of authorizing **administrative leave** with pay for emergency situations such as malfunction of publicly-owned or controlled equipment.

4. If I am out of the office on some type of paid leave or I am able to work but other employees are granted administrative leave due to an emergency situation, will I be granted paid administrative leave too?

Answer: No.

5. If I do not have enough leave to cover influenza pandemic-related absences, how can I afford to remain home until completely well before returning to work?

Answer:

- You are encouraged to educate yourself regarding the potential risks of an influenza pandemic and how to prepare - now!
- You should stay home when you are sick or have flu symptoms.

6. If an employee comes to work ill, can he/she be ordered to leave the work premises?

Answer: Yes.

7. What if I am unable to report to work, but cannot reach my supervisor?

Answer:

- If you are unable to contact your supervisor because you are incapacitated, request a family member or friend to contact your supervisor. If this is not possible, contact your supervisor as soon as possible.
- If you cannot reach your supervisor, contact your second line supervisor or call the main phone number for your office.
- If phone service in the area has been affected, try to find an alternative method of contact.

WORK SCHEDULES/ALTERNATIVE WORKSITES

1. Should agencies identify employees who can work from home or other remote locations now?

Answer:

- Yes. Decide now if employees can telecommute and prepare a telecommuting agreement, which may be used if needed. For more information on telecommuting, visit www.teleworkarizona.com. Not all positions are suited for telecommuting so this website provides information to assist supervisors in making the decision.
- Decide if employees will use laptops or their own computers and determine if they have Internet capability.
- Determine if your servers can handle everyone being online.
- Decide when you will start to give employees remote access.
- Figure out how you will protect your agency's information.

2. How will scheduling employees in shifts help in the case of an influenza pandemic?

Answer: More shifts with fewer employees mean less exposure to the illness.

3. What if a large percentage of employees become ill, what is the maximum number of overtime hours employees can be required to work?

Answer:

- There is no limit to the number of hours per week an employer can require its employees to work (except for persons under the age of 18)
- FLSA non-exempt employees are required to be compensated for overtime in the form of pay or compensatory leave for hours worked in excess of 40 per work week.
- FLSA exempt employees do not receive any overtime or compensatory leave. (Some exceptions apply for employees engaged in law enforcement and firefighting activities).
- Contact your agency Human Resources office if you have questions about overtime.

4. Can you please explain social distancing as it relates to an influenza pandemic situation? What exactly is social distancing and how will it help during an influenza pandemic situation?

Answer: Social distancing means restricting physical contact such as handshakes, hugs, etc. It also involves limiting use of closed meeting rooms and large meetings. Employees should be educated to maintain a reasonable distance from each other as far as possible (6 feet is recommended). Social distancing will limit the amount of close contact between individuals which will reduce the potential of spreading the influenza even further.

WELLNESS

1. If an influenza pandemic materializes, what can I do to reduce my risks?

Answer: The Arizona Department of Health Services advises:

- Stay informed through regularly updated information about seasonal flu, bird flu and pandemic flu. You may wish to check the following websites:
 - [Arizona Department of Health Services](#)
 - [World Health Organization](#)
 - [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)
 - Information on the vaccine development process: [National Institutes of Health](#)
- Stop germs from spreading.
 - Cover your mouth and nose with tissue when coughing and sneezing or cough into your arm or sleeve.
 - Wash your hands often. Hand sanitizers are also effective.
 - Stay home when you are sick.

HEALTH INSURANCE AND OTHER BENEFITS

1. Will my health plan cover medical expenses associated with an influenza pandemic?

Answer: Yes, the health plan will pay for costs associated with an influenza pandemic, as long as you and your dependents are covered on the plan.

2. If I am ill and I apply and am approved for short term disability benefits, will short term disability benefits be reinstated if I become reinfected?

Answer: Yes, if you are reinfected within 30 days. If you are reinfected **after** 30 days from the day you returned to work from the first infection, you will need to reapply for benefits.

3. How can I have two to three months of my on-going maintenance medications available in case I need to stay home during an influenza pandemic?

Answer: A convenient and less expensive mail-order service is available for members who require medications for ongoing health conditions or who are going to be in an area with no participating retail pharmacy for an extended period of time. It is suggested you set this up prior to an influenza pandemic. You can find the guidelines and instructions to do so on the Benefit Options web site www.benefitoptions.az.gov or by calling your agency benefits representative.

4. Will the health plan cover anti-viral medications if my physician prescribes them?

Answer: Yes. Anti-virals will lessen symptoms if started early in the course of the disease. In special circumstances, they can also be prescribed by your healthcare provider to prevent you from becoming infected with influenza if you are exposed to someone who is sick. Prophylaxis is not appropriate for everyone, so please seek advice from your healthcare provider.

EMPLOYEE SERVICES

1. Should an influenza pandemic strike Arizona, what assistance will be available to help me cope with its impact emotionally and financially?

Answer: The State of Arizona provides resources to help employees and eligible dependents cope through its Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP provides free, confidential, short-term counseling to help identify concerns. When needed, the EAP may refer you to an outside program that can assist you and/or your dependents. Click [here](#) for more information about the Employee Assistance Program.

2. What financial resources are available to employees facing financial hardship during an influenza pandemic?

Answer:

- Employees may apply to Employees Helping Employees (EHE) for financial assistance. Employees generously contribute to EHE, an employee-run foundation that helps employees when they need short-term financial assistance. Additional information can be obtained at <http://www.azehe.org>.
- Employees may also find community based resources through the Work/Life web site at <http://www.hr.state.az.us/worklife> and then click on Resources and then Community Resources. There are a number of emergency community based resources listed.

COMMUNICATION

1. Will there be a primary source of information for employees and health plan members (i.e., hotline, web site)?

Answer: Development of hotlines, employee blogs, web sites, etc. may be utilized in the case of a pandemic. More information will be shared as necessary.

2. When should employees begin educating themselves and their families regarding the potential of an influenza pandemic?

Answer: Employees are encouraged to educate themselves and their families regarding the potential risks of an influenza pandemic and how to prepare - now! Preparation should include planning for potential illnesses and the need for leave.