PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS & RESPONSE:
Critical Elements for Business Planning

Preparing for and responding to infectious disease outbreaks is a shared responsibility involving government (local, state, and federal) and the private sector. In the event of an infectious disease outbreak, human-to-human transmission of the virus across multiple countries and different continents may happen.

Though many businesses have extensive contingency plans in response to threats from diverse natural and manmade disasters, pandemic planning must address the extreme health and mental health impact assumptions and containment strategies projected for a severe pandemic.

A pandemic will likely reduce dramatically the number of available workers in all sectors, and significantly disrupt

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the movement of people and goods, which will threaten essential services and operations within and across our nation as well as around the world. The ability to implement effective pandemic preparedness plans, continuously monitor all business activities, and effect rapid adjustments based upon observed and anticipated impacts will be the hallmark of the business that copes most effectively during a pandemic.

The following points related to an organization's human continuity are often forgotten and must be incorporated into workplace pandemic planning to sustain employee health, mental health, and productivity.

Planning and Preparedness

1. Distress behaviors and resilience, not just illness, are critical targets for workplace planning and response efforts. Heath risk emotions and behaviors to be mitigated include worry, fear, insomnia, difficulty concentrating, avoiding certain situations at work, and increased use of alcohol or tobacco. These do not constitute disease but nonetheless disrupt and diminish social and occupational functioning.

2. All workers/workforces are not the same. Small businesses often do not have internal or employee health assistance vendor resources for psychosocial support that larger workplaces may have. Smaller companies do not necessarily have access to professional security, occupational health, or employee assistance programs.

3. Sustained support over the "trajectory" of a pandemic will require considerable resources and a shifting of emphasis over time. The effects of a pandemic outbreak are not the same as a single-event disaster and requires planning for a prolonged or extended impact.

4. Business-community integration and pooling of resources must be explored. Businesses must identify who will comprise their human response teams to conduct critical incident needs assessment (CINAT) during a pandemic and facilitate adaptive response.

Response

1. Employee health protective behaviors such as movement restriction or "home quarantine" must be encouraged to reduce disease spread, but these behaviors will impact productivity.

2. Family care and support are critical to business/human capital continuity. Employees who feel reassured about the well-being of their family are more likely to come to work and, when present, function productively

3. Leadership endorsement of and participation in preparedness, prevention, and grief management are necessary for success. Grief will be a significant component of the overall emotional cost of a pandemic. Acknowledging grief within the workplace and making time for employees to address this through various rituals and activities strengthens organizations.

4. Knowledge of and delivery of Psychological First Aid (PFA), an evidence-informed intervention favored over debriefing in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, must be considered in workplace pandemic planning and response. PFA involves enhancing feelings of safety, calming, social connectedness, self- and organizational-efficacy, and hope/optimism.

5. Continuation of worker productivity is not only important to national infrastructure/security, but an important contributor to the sustained mental health of our population.