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Public Health stresses workplace preparedness in aftermath of H1N1 outbreak

Southwest Health District has three words of advice for businesses both large and small: Get ready. Now.

“Although the outbreak of novel influenza virus H1N1 seems to be subsiding nationally, the disease still has the potential to surge, resulting in a shut-down of daily business in the United States mirroring the one that gripped Mexico,” said Southwest Health District Health Director Dr. Jacqueline Grant. “We’ve warned that a full-blown pandemic could disrupt how our society functions. What happened in Mexico gave us a glimpse of what could happen here.”

Area businesses and industry should use the H1N1 outbreak as a prompt to review and tweak contingency plans, or develop such a plan if they don’t already have one in place, she said.

“Consider H1N1 a wakeup call. We encourage the private sector to get to work now on the actions they should be taking to prepare for, respond to and recover from a localized outbreak, as well as a broader pandemic,” Grant said.

Eighty-five percent of the country’s critical infrastructure resources reside in the private sector, which generally lacks individual and system-wide business continuity plans specifically for catastrophic health emergencies such as pandemic influenza, said Southwest Health District Emergency Preparedness Director Julie Miller. But public health emergencies aren’t the only reason businesses need long-term contingency plans, she pointed out.

“Right now we are at the start of hurricane season. Look at the impact Hurricane Katrina had on New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Businesses were at a standstill for weeks or months. Deliveries couldn’t be made because of impassable roads, and workers were displaced or dealing with situations preventing them from going to work, so even businesses that weren’t damaged experienced significant problems,” Miller said.

“Here in our District, we’ve seen similar situations arise during the recent flooding,” she continued.

Baker	Calhoun	Colquitt	Decatur	Dougherty	Early	Grady
Lee	Miller	Mitchell	Seminole	Terrell	Thomas	Worth

“Those of us who were here during the Floods of 1994 and 1998 remember how those natural disasters caused long-term difficulties for affected businesses in our communities.”

A continuity of operation plan can give companies the means to survive despite prolonged closures, furloughs, high employee absenteeism, reduced worker availability, supply chain interruptions, disrupted municipal utilities and services and other setbacks, said Southwest Health District Emergency Preparedness Specialist Travis Donnelly.

Businesses can begin by identifying their essential functions and people, and go from there, Donnelly said.

“How will your business continue to provide critical goods and services if the majority of your workforce is unavailable? What will you do if necessary resources aren’t available at your worksite – and the supply and delivery chain has broken down? Can you protect your employees from catching the virus when they are on the job? These are the sorts of questions that the private sector needs to consider now, instead of trying to make decisions during an actual crisis,” he said.

Pandemic planning educational materials, resources and training is available through Southwest Public Health District, said Grant. “We can assist families, governmental bodies, schools, churches and volunteer organizations as well as private sector business. You won’t have to reinvent the wheel. There are templates and programs that can be tailored to your needs.”

For now, Southwest Georgia continues to be free of the H1N1 virus that has sickened thousands and claimed lives in the United States and across the globe. “We have been fortunate,” Grant said. “But we shouldn’t take our good fortune for granted. The Pandemic of 1918 started off with a mild wave in the spring, just like H1N1 started. But when regular flu season returned in the fall of 1918, the Spanish Flu roared back in a more virulent form that killed people by the thousands.”

Nobody knows at this time what H1N1 will do. “But we do know what it can do. This is the first time in recorded history that humans have had the opportunity to protect ourselves from pandemic influenza,” she said. “We owe it to ourselves to take advantage of that opportunity.”

Checklists, templates and other pandemic flu preparedness material can be accessed free online at www.southwestgeorgiapublichealth.org; www.pandemicflu.gov; and www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/; or by calling your county health department.

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