

Pandemic – Planning for Continuity

Fears of an influenza pandemic have been sparked by the emergence of the avian flu in Asia and its spread to parts of Europe and Africa. While it is still mostly an animal disease, health experts fear the virus could mutate into a form more dangerous to humans. If that happens, millions could die, and some are wondering how we would deal with a devastating death toll and its domino effect on the Canadian economy and delivery of services.

In the last century, there were three influenza pandemics. The most devastating was the Spanish Flu in 1918-19, which killed an estimated 50 million people - a death toll higher than that in the First World War.

A pandemic today could rival those numbers, given the globalization of the world and ease of travel. It might not be enough to rely on vaccines. Anti-viral drugs may not be available at the start of the influenza, or in limited supply, and their effectiveness will be unknown until they are administered.

Unlike natural/physical disasters, a pandemic would cause no damage to the infrastructure and building inventory. Rather, the impact on an organization will be staff absenteeism.

The Impact on Essential Services

Experts predict that 15 per cent to 35 per cent of employees may be off work due to illness. These estimates do not include the healthy employees who will be away from work because they are caring for ill family members.

Others will stay home for fear of being exposed to the virus in the workplace, or on public transit.

There will also be quarantines, community containment measures, school closings or voluntary roles to fill in the community. Suppliers, contractors and neighbouring municipalities will face the same human resource challenges. It won't be business as usual.

Staff shortages will impact the delivery of municipal services. Yet, there are municipal services that must be delivered because of their impact on the health and safety of the public, because of regulatory obligations, or due to contractual commitments. There will also be the expectation from the public that municipal services continue.

The delivery of essential services will also be impacted by supply chain disruptions and changes in demand for services. Supplies that are purchased from foreign manufacturers will not be available in the same quantities, especially if borders are closed. The manufacture and delivery of Canadian supplies, which travel long distances by rail, truck or air would also be affected by employee absenteeism.

The demand for services will change. Certain services will surge in increased activity (emergency response, clean water, communication systems) while others will dramatically decrease (recreational activities) or may have to be terminated. A termination in the provision of certain services may be mandated by a need to use facilities for non-traditional purposes. Healthcare facilities will be overcrowded and will require additional space. If supplies are stockpiled, additional storage space will be required. Arenas may need to serve as temporary mortuaries.

As with any risk that threatens the delivery of essential services, continuity planning is imperative.