



# **MAINTAINING AGENCY OPERATIONS**

**PREPARING FOR PANDEMIC INFLUENZA**

# PREPARING FOR PANDEMIC INFLUENZA— SIMPLE STEPS TO PROTECT EMPLOYEES AND SUSTAIN OPERATIONS

## UNIQUE CHALLENGES, UNMATCHED IMPACT

In the 21st century, security and safety have become urgent priorities and matters of daily concern for individuals and organizations across the public and private sectors. Events such as Hurricane Katrina and the September 11th attacks led many government agencies to create detailed continuity of operations (COOP) and disaster recovery (DR) plans, but few have developed specific, adequate strategies to address what many experts consider an even greater and more imminent threat: pandemic influenza.

Common, seasonal influenza already accounts for some 36,000 deaths and more than 200,000 hospitalizations per year in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> and up to 500,000 deaths worldwide.<sup>2</sup> The Department of Health and Human Services estimates that even a moderate outbreak of the more deadly avian flu could affect 30% of the U.S. population, and a severe pandemic could result in 1.9 million deaths.<sup>3</sup> With employee absenteeism (due primarily to personal or family illness and precautions against contagion) predicted to reach 40%<sup>4</sup>, a pandemic could wreak havoc on critical operations in the absence of effective COOP planning.

Unlike natural disasters and terrorist attacks, a pandemic does not consist of a relatively brief, geographically isolated catastrophic event followed by an intense immediate response and sustained recovery and rebuilding efforts. Rather, a pandemic is likely to occur nearly simultaneously across an extremely wide area, include several waves of peak intensity that can endure for months, and remain an acute threat for more than a year.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, while severe weather and acts of terrorism can cause extensive damage to communications infrastructure, a pandemic would leave wireless and landline networks largely intact while creating personnel issues that could prove far more devastating and lasting.

*“I want to impress upon all private and public employers the importance of protecting their most valuable asset ... their employees. Again, proper planning and preparation now can save lives in the future. Proper planning now will better protect employees and lessen the impact of a pandemic on their operations, workforce, and the economy.”*

– Edwin G. Foulke Jr., Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health, February 6, 2007

1. White House Homeland Security Council, National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza, November 2005
2. National Governors Association—Preparing for a Pandemic Influenza: A Primer for Governors and Senior State Officials, June 2006
3. Ibid.
4. OSHA, Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic, February 6, 2007
5. Ibid.

## PLANNING, PRACTICE, AND PREVENTION

Federal and State recommendations regarding COOP during a pandemic strongly emphasize prevention and containment, because vaccines and anti-viral medications needed may not be widely available for many months after the start of a pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Employees who remain capable of performing some or all of their job duties may be unable or unwilling to report to work, whether due to a need to care for ill family members, provide childcare in the event of school closings, or simple reluctance to increase their risk of exposure. “Social distancing,” or minimizing unnecessary personal contact, is a common and frequently effective strategy for limiting the spread of disease, but it can also increase disruptions to essential services—unless employees have the technology and training to work from an alternate site such as a telework center or home office.

Employees such as law enforcement personnel and first responders already commonly perform their duties outside of a traditional office, but to prepare for a pandemic, most agencies will need to extend the enterprise architecture even further, allowing staff at all levels to work anywhere, anytime, with the same resources available at headquarters. Fully enabling remote workers, however, can be tricky given regulatory requirements and the need for security protections to safeguard sensitive information. Ensuring that employees can effectively use the technology required to sustain operations during a pandemic can also be a challenge, which is why government guidelines strongly encourage agencies to regularly practice pandemic response procedures and provide employees with opportunities to work remotely under normal conditions.

While preparations to support a remote workforce are not required for most government agencies, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other organizations have recommended that such

efforts play a key role in pandemic COOP planning. In general terms, agencies should endeavor to:

- Plan to sustain critical operations despite high absenteeism and a possible surge in demand for services
- Establish policies to reduce the spread and severity of illness as much as possible
- Clearly communicate plans and expectations to employees
- Test COOP strategies frequently and thoroughly
- Establish a routine telework program to provide employees with essential experience before an emergency

*“...many government functions that must be carried out in emergencies can be accomplished using telework. This option appears particularly appropriate in the case of pandemic influenza...”*

– David M. Walker, Comptroller General of the United States, testifying before the House Committee on Government Reform, May 11, 2006

Many agencies at all levels have yet to act on these recommendations, and still fewer have established adequate, documented, and tested pandemic COOP plans. In fact, in recent testimony before the House Committee on Government Reform, the U.S. Comptroller General reported that:

- Of 23 major Federal agencies surveyed, nine planned to have some essential team members telework during a COOP event.
- Only one agency documented that it had notified team members of this plan.
- No agencies demonstrated the technological capacity for telework during an emergency.
- Only three agencies documented testing team members’ ability to telework during an emergency.<sup>7</sup>

6. National Governors Association—Preparing for a Pandemic Influenza: A Primer for Governors and Senior State Officials, June 2006

7. David M. Walker, Comptroller General of the United States, testimony before the House Committee on Government Reform, May 11, 2006

## TECHNOLOGY AND TRAINING

Because effective pandemic response depends largely on preparation and practice, private companies can play a useful role by providing and optimizing technology and training employees in its use, especially if the technology differs from that used in everyday operations. As agencies strive to implement the key recommendations developed by FEMA, advanced telecommunications technology and collaboration with a trusted solution provider can prove invaluable. It's important to understand the overall benefits of telecommunications technology in pandemic scenarios, but a brief look

*“The key to successful use of telework in the event of a pandemic health crisis is an effective routine telework program. As many employees as possible should have telework capability... Individuals expected to telework in an emergency situation should, with some frequency, telework under non-emergency circumstances as well.”*

– Office of Personnel Management, A Guide to Telework in the Federal Government, August 3, 2006

at specific applications may also prove helpful for agencies developing or refining COOP plans. While the solutions described below are all unique to Sprint Nextel, they serve to illustrate the range of products and services available from competitive providers today, all of which should be carefully evaluated in the context of an agency's specific needs.

### Wireless Data Connectivity— Security and Speed

High-speed wireless data services provide an excellent starting point for agencies seeking to incorporate scalable remote facility and teleworker strategies into their COOP plans. With these services, employees can establish fast, secure wireless connections to private networks or the public Internet from nearly any location on the provider's network via next-generation equipment such as Evolution Data Optimized (EV-DO) aircards for

laptops and sophisticated mobile smart devices. This means that even when physically isolated and distributed across a wide area, employees can communicate and collaborate to sustain critical operations.

Security and reliability should be primary considerations in evaluating mobile broadband services, especially in today's environment of strict regulatory requirements, increased public scrutiny, and numerous potential threats to privacy and safety. Agencies should look for proven protections such as wireless WAN services that can provide secure connections between the carrier's network and an agency's VPN. Value-added services that can provide additional peace of mind are also worth careful consideration. For example, Sprint offers services that allow administrators to remotely monitor and control devices, safeguard data with sophisticated encryption standards (AES, 3DES), and establish mobile firewall and anti-virus protections.

Often considered a convenience, connection speed can actually be critically important. Greater bandwidth not only increases efficiency for end users, but it can also enable applications vital for teleworkers during a pandemic, including virtual work groups, real-time information and application sharing, and reliable video conferencing. EV-DO Rev. A (600 kbps - 1400 kbps download, 250 kbps - 500 kbps upload), a wireless data standard that Sprint and other companies are rapidly rolling out to much of the country in 2007, is significantly faster than Rev. 0, which is currently widely available. Sprint expects to upgrade its entire EV-DO network to Rev. A by the end of 2007.

In some cases, rather than maintain complete isolation, teams of employees may need to share alternate work sites such as telework centers. A portable router solution can extend mobile broadband access across an entire group via wifi connectivity, enabling users to share seamless,

secure access to critical network resources. Additional features available with specific services, such as over-the-air (OTA) configuration and updating, can also provide useful benefits for both administrators and team members.

## Voice and Specialized Applications

In addition to high-speed data services, agencies should also consider the need for advanced mobile voice capabilities, such as on-the-fly audio conferencing, and applications designed to support a remote workforce. Many telecommunications providers have established relationships with third-party equipment and application vendors and can offer agencies a diverse selection of highly specialized solutions. Assuming a given provider can deliver the full functionality and level of support an agency requires, working with a single, trusted partner as much as possible can be very effective. Doing so can eliminate some of the costs and complications of contracting with multiple suppliers, streamline billing and support issues, and ensure compatibility of critical solution components.

Like many carriers, Sprint offers an array of specialized solutions well-suited to the challenges agencies may face during a pandemic. GPS-enabled devices can allow managers to track team members' location and status in real-time and oversee numerous people scattered across a wide geographic area. GPS also makes it possible for individual users to receive turn-by-turn audio or visual directions, which can be helpful when relocating to a new remote location, attempting to reunite with colleagues, or avoiding quarantine areas. Emergency notification services can instantly provide warnings or instructions to entire groups of employees based on manager-defined criteria, including current physical location. In some cases, agencies can even provide remote workers with complete, seamless access to desktop phone and computer capabilities, all but eliminating the impact of physical location on work performance.

## HOW TO MAINTAIN OPERATIONS DURING A PANDEMIC

### I. Develop a Disaster Plan

Develop a disaster plan that includes pandemic preparedness ... and review it and conduct drills regularly.

- Minimize exposure to fellow employees or the public. For example, will more of your employees work from home? This may require enhancement of technology and communications equipment.
- Develop policies and practices that distance employees from each other, customers and the general public. Consider practices to minimize face-to-face contact between employees such as e-mail, websites and teleconferences.
- Plan for downsizing services but also anticipate any scenario which may require a surge in your services.

—OSHA, Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic, February 6, 2007

## GUIDELINES FOR ALTERNATIVE WORKPLACE ARRANGEMENTS (AWA)

Telework should be part of all agency emergency planning. Management must be committed to implementing remote work arrangements as broadly as possible to take full advantage of the potential of telework for this purpose and ensure that:

- Equipment, technology, and technical support have been tested
- Employees are comfortable with technology and communications methods
- Managers are comfortable managing a distributed workgroup

In addition, agencies and management should consider investing in and using:

- Teleconferencing, videoconferencing, and other technologies that enable multi-channel communication
- Paperless systems

—Office of Personnel Management, A Guide to Telework in the Federal Government, August 3, 2006

## Consultation, Evaluation and Preparation

A trusted private-sector partner can provide specialized expertise and an outsider's perspective that can prove extremely useful when agencies are developing, implementing, and testing pandemic COOP plans. Sprint and several other carriers maintain dedicated teams focused on helping government clients evaluate their communications capabilities and needs, choose and implement appropriate solutions, and prepare employees to use those solutions effectively.

*“Exercises should be planned and performed to assess current capabilities and explore effective options for incident response. Initiating even the most basic exercises now will save lives during a future incident.”*

– National Governors Association, Preparing for a Pandemic Influenza: A Primer for Governors and Senior State Officials, June 2006

An ideal partner will adopt a proactive approach to COOP planning, focusing on the most effective ways to manage risk, minimize downtime, and prepare for both worst-case scenarios and business as usual. Whenever possible, agencies should insist on deploying services as part of everyday operations to help employees develop high comfort and skill levels. For COOP planning in particular, groups such as the Sprint Emergency Response Team (ERT) can even assist with training staff on new equipment or applications and can provide equipment and personnel to conduct full, realistic emergency response exercises.

## CONCLUSION

In many ways, pandemic influenza represents a more pressing and dangerous threat to life and property than the natural disasters and terrorist attacks that have become such an omnipresent public safety concern. While a pandemic will almost certainly involve unique and significant challenges for government agencies at all levels, preparing for continuity of operations can be fairly straightforward. By enabling, encouraging, and training employees to work from remote locations, agencies can potentially both support COOP and help prevent the spread and severity of an influenza outbreak. To enhance the effectiveness of COOP plans, agencies should partner with private sector vendors to supply technology and support services, familiarize employees with these solutions through regular use, and engage in realistic practice sessions to simulate pandemic scenarios.

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## PLANNING FOR A PANDEMIC

### Pandemic Planning Guide Checklists

#### Has the agency...

- Developed its pandemic influenza plan in accordance with the President's National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan and identified potential human capital issues?
- Developed human capital related "what if" scenarios and conducted practice drills?
- Ensured agency telework policy and guidance align with OPM telework guidance, including the protection of sensitive information?
- Ensured agency telecommunications infrastructure is capable of handling telework or work-at-home arrangements and securing sensitive information?
- Provided training for employees who will have to deal with specific pandemic health crisis related issues?

#### Have you, as a manager or supervisor...

- Worked human capital implications of a pandemic health crisis into your COOP plan?
- Identified alternative methods for continuing critical office functions during a pandemic health crisis and discussed them with your employees?

#### This would include:

- Alternative work arrangements, such as telework, working from alternative sites, and flexible or compressed work schedules
- Communication plans and procedures
- Teleconferencing and/or videoconferencing arrangements

—U.S. Office of Personnel Management—Pandemic Planning Guides, August 3, 2006

To prepare for a pandemic, governors and state officials must consider not only how to manage the outbreak itself, but also how to maintain critical operations during the outbreak...

- The effects of a pandemic flu will be broad, deep, and simultaneous, and states must focus resources to ensure continuation of essential services.
- Medical response capability in a pandemic will be limited, strained, and potentially depleted during a pandemic, and other measures will be needed to control the spread of the disease.
- Government must work closely with the private sector to ensure critical operations and services are maintained.
- A pandemic will force many key decisions to be made in a dynamic environment of shifting events, and partnerships must be built now and tested to ensure appropriate and rapid action.

... States, the federal government, and the private sector will need to test and evaluate pandemic flu plans through periodic exercises that expose gaps and build relationships among and across all levels of government and institutions.

—National Governors Association—Preparing for a Pandemic Influenza: A Primer for Governors and Senior State Officials, June 2006

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—Interim Pre-pandemic Planning Guidance: Community Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Mitigation in the United States  
[http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/community/community\\_mitigation.pdf](http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/community/community_mitigation.pdf)

Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and CDC—State and Local Pandemic Influenza Planning Checklist  
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/states/statelocalchecklist.html>

HHS—Pandemic Flu Site  
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/>

Federal Agency Telework Guidelines  
<http://www.opm.gov/telework/agencies.asp>

Federal Communications Commission (FCC)—Public Safety & Homeland Security Bureau  
<http://www.fcc.gov/pshs/Welcome.html>

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—Preparedness and Training  
<http://www.fema.gov/government/prepare.shtm>

Federal Interagency Telework Site  
<http://www.telework.gov>

FEMA—Pandemic Influenza COOP Annex Template Instructions  
[http://www.fema.gov/pdf/government/coop/influenza\\_coop\\_annex.pdf](http://www.fema.gov/pdf/government/coop/influenza_coop_annex.pdf)

General Services Administration (GSA)—Federal Management Regulation; Guidelines for Alternative Workplace Arrangements  
[http://www.gsa.gov/gsa/cm\\_attachments/GSA\\_DOCUMENT/AWABulletin-b3-2006\\_R25U8\\_0Z5RDZ-i34K-pR.pdf](http://www.gsa.gov/gsa/cm_attachments/GSA_DOCUMENT/AWABulletin-b3-2006_R25U8_0Z5RDZ-i34K-pR.pdf)

National Governors Association (NGA)—Preparing for a Pandemic Influenza: A Primer for Governors and Senior State Officials  
<http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0607PANDEMICPRIMER.PDF>

Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA)—Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic  
[http://www.osha.gov/Publications/influenza\\_pandemic.html](http://www.osha.gov/Publications/influenza_pandemic.html)

The President's National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/homeland/pandemic-influenza.html>

U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM)—Information on Pandemic Influenza  
<http://www.opm.gov/pandemic/index.asp>