



## ***Pandemic Influenza Q & A for County Officials***

### **1. What is influenza pandemic?**

A: An influenza pandemic is a global outbreak of disease that occurs when a new influenza virus appears or “emerges” in the human population, causes serious illness, and then spreads easily from person to person worldwide. Past pandemics have led to high levels of illness, death, social disruption, and economic loss at the international, national and even local levels.

### **2. How is an influenza pandemic different from a normal influenza outbreak?**

A: Seasonal outbreaks of influenza are caused by subtypes of influenza viruses that are already in existence among people, whereas pandemic outbreaks are caused by new subtypes or by subtypes that have never circulated among people or that have not circulated among people for a long time. Also, pandemics do not necessarily occur during what is considered the “normal” influenza season.

### **3. When will the next influenza pandemic occur?**

A: It is impossible to predict when the next pandemic will occur, but many scientists believe it is only a matter of time. The last pandemic was the 1968-69 Hong Kong flu, which caused about 34,000 deaths in the United States.

### **4. How can an influenza pandemic be avoided?**

A: It is nearly impossible to avoid another influenza pandemic. Instead, plans must be developed ahead of time to be as prepared as possible when a pandemic begins.

### **5. What steps should I take as an elected official?**

A: As a leader in your community, it is important that you play a major role in preparedness efforts. You should first confirm that the county health department is developing plans to handle a possible influenza pandemic at the local level. You should also take a lead role in facilitating discussions between potential partners, such as your local health department and emergency management officials.

### **6. Won't the state or federal public health agencies provide assistance during a pandemic?**

A: By definition, an influenza pandemic would affect the entire world. Therefore, resources to assist any single community or region would be very limited, if available at all. That's why it is imperative for plans to be made to deal with such a public health emergency with little or no outside assistance beyond basic guidance.

**7. What factors need to be considered when making a county plan?**

A: An influenza pandemic would have a significant effect on a county government's ability to continue providing certain services. A large percentage of staff could be away from work for a period of time, either because they are ill or because of requests by public health officials for people to stay home to help limit the spread of the disease. Therefore, preparedness at the local level should include plans to continue providing essential services, develop a roster or personnel needed to continue those services, and estimate equipment and supply needs to maintain those services.

**8. What other issues should be considered?**

A: Policies should be developed to address work responsibilities for ill essential employees and contractors. A file should also be developed and maintained of all relevant legal requirements and alternatives for operating essential services. The availability of alternate facilities should also be identified and confirmed.

**9. Could quarantine/isolation orders be issued in my county during an influenza pandemic?**

A: The severity of the pandemic would determine if any such orders would need to be issued. However, the State Health Commissioner does have the authority to take such action if it is deemed to be necessary. Local Health Officers also have similar authority at the local level. Possible scenarios should be discussed with your Local Health Officer.

**10. How can people in my county protect themselves?**

A: The same steps that individuals can take to protect themselves from seasonal outbreaks of influenza will also be critical during a pandemic. Those steps include frequent and thorough hand washing and various "respiratory hygiene" practices such as covering your mouth when you sneeze or cough. It will also be important for people to stay home from work or school while ill and to seek medical advice and care. Your leadership in promoting these simple steps can play a big role in helping to limit the spread of the disease in the event of a pandemic.