

# Pandemic

*Preparing for a*

BY RICHARD DITTBENNER

THE OUTBREAK OF THE TYPE A (H1N1) SWINE FLU EARLIER THIS YEAR WAS A WAKE-UP CALL TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERS IN THE U.S. AND CANADA OF THE POTENTIAL DANGERS OF AN INFLUENZA PANDEMIC.

Global health authorities are making progress in combating future influenza outbreaks, but we are not invincible. The most recent large-scale outbreak of an H5N1 avian virus strain a decade ago had a 65 percent fatality rate. The World Health Organization indicates that a global influenza pandemic, most likely avian in origin, is likely — if not inevitable.

A pandemic influenza outbreak can strike in up to three waves over several years, causing significant and prolonged disruption to every facet of society. Many people, particularly those at high risk due to existing health conditions, would die before a vaccine could be developed and distributed. In the case of such an outbreak, the governments of the United States, Canada, and Mexico project approximately 400,000 deaths in North America, with 207,000 of those fatalities occurring within the United States. Global health authorities are planning for a pandemic on the scale of the 1918 influenza outbreak in the U.S., during which more than 500,000 people died. The 1918 pandemic spread throughout North America and to Europe via U.S. troops on ships sailing to fight in World War I. It eventually claimed 20 million lives worldwide over a three-year period. But today, people could carry an equally virulent influenza virus around the globe by air in a matter of hours or days, as was the case with the recent Type A (H1N1) swine flu, which despite its currently low morbidity rates has been rated a phase 6 pandemic by the WHO due to its rapid spread — the first such global pandemic since 1968.

## Worst-Case Scenarios for Colleges

The failure to anticipate the arrival of a pandemic influenza outbreak would almost certainly cause confusion at college, as planning for the continuity of operations and individual planning for students, staff, and family members occur simultaneously. Even a mild outbreak would challenge a college's ability to provide for the health and safety of its employees, students, and communities.

The Hurricane Katrina catastrophe serves as a painful reminder that increased fatalities often are the result of unplanned efforts in the face of life-threatening events. In the aftermath of a pandemic influenza outbreak at a college, scrutiny of the actions of members of boards of trustees — both collectively and individually — is likely to be intense, especially if there are credible allegations that the board's actions or inaction contributed to the deaths of students or staff members. Any death may be balanced against an examination of whether the college did all in its power to act in a way that was most protective of the student or staff member. Questions that could bedevil the board could include scenarios like these:

- Did the college require a healthy employee to come to work on campus where another employee was exhibiting symptoms of the flu, allowing the infected employee to transmit the virus to the healthy one (who was in a high-risk category). Could the employee have worked remotely from home? What is the college's liability?
- What is the liability of the board when a faculty member required a student who was "not feeling well" to come to class after the first pandemic wave instead of allowing the student to shift to a distance-learning mode? If the student was among the first in the community in the second wave of infections, and that student infected other classmates, what is the college's liability for the harm caused?

In both examples, careful and thoughtful pandemic influenza outbreak planning by the college will go a long way in minimizing public scandal and liability for actions and omissions that, in retrospect, could have been avoidable.

# mic

## Questions Trustees Should Ask Now

Trustees should prepare for the potential of future outbreaks by asking questions now. Among the questions to consider:

- Does your college have a tightly integrated operations and continuity plan that addresses all aspects of business and payroll operations, including multiple materials and supply vendor back-up, as well as cross-training of all staff in anticipation of widespread absenteeism due to employee or family illness?
- Does your college's plan for academic continuation include maximization of social distancing for all instructional and student service functions, including back-up substitute adjuncts and online instruction for all classes?
- Is your college's pandemic influenza outbreak planning closely integrated with local health and safety planning?

• Depending on the severity of the outbreak, is your residential college prepared to allow students to remain in campus housing for several months?

• Is your college prepared to operate its emergency operations structure with continuous updates communicated to the community, students, and staff?

By asking the right questions, a board can guide its college to making the best decisions in the interests of its students, staff, and institution.

---

*Richard Dittbenner, J.D., is the director of public information and governmental relations for the San Diego Community College District and a crisis management consultant. He can be contacted at [rdittben@sdccd.edu](mailto:rdittben@sdccd.edu).*

## Measures to limit the spread of the flu

