Business Continuity Management for Infectious Disease Threat

Protecting your organization against the threat of infectious disease

Organizations, public and private, strive to create catastrophe-resilient environments. It is an underlying premise in business continuity planning to assume a worst-case event. Infectious disease has the potential of creating a worst-case event by limiting access to essential employees both internal and external of the organization where materials, equipment, service, supplies and customers can be impacted. Ever evolving types and outbreaks of Infectious Disease threats (e.g., Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV), West Nile, Ebola, Zika) require organizations to continually evaluate the impact these new threats may have to their existing business and their business continuity plan response.

As it has in the past with other outbreaks, the government may accelerate its response by:

- focusing on the exchange of information with the public regarding steps that they can take to protect themselves,
- ensuring people are properly educated about the risks of this virus,
- making sure we are taking necessary measures to do everything possible to fight the disease,
- fast-tracking research efforts to make available better diagnostic tests, to develop vaccines and therapeutics,
- asking that individuals who traveled to any of the affected countries undergo diagnostic tests upon their return home, and/or, issue travel warnings for affected countries as there is no vaccine to prevent or medicine to treat the outbreak.

Government planning efforts recognize that responding to the threat of infectious diseases cannot be viewed as a purely governmental responsibility and prior guiding principles still apply:

- the government will use all instruments of national power to address the threat,
- states and communities should have and exercise credible preparedness plans to respond to an outbreak within their jurisdictions,
- the public and private sectors should play an integral role in preparedness, and should be part of the national response,
- individual citizens should be prepared for, and be educated about individual responsibility to limit the spread of infection if they or their family members become ill, and/or
- global partnerships will be leveraged to address the threat.

As part of the public and private sector, organizations with a Business Continuity Management program (BCM) should document efforts to address this ongoing and escalating threat. For those organizations that have not yet developed a BCM program, the following provides initial recommendations and planning activities to prepare your organization:

Evaluating the Business Impact

For each location of your organization, identify critical functions and staff, determining activities that must continue to support the business. Which critical staff functions can be performed from home, shifted to an alternate location and provided with sufficient training? Identify any non-essential functions that can be suspended during the duration of the threat. This will determine the type of response needed to keep critical staff in the workplace.

We're here to empower results:

Contact an Aon Business Continuity Management expert for more information on how we can help optimize your risk program and create a more resilient organization.

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For those identified as essential business functions, and critical staff, backup strategies should be planned and alternate arrangements identified. Critical staff should be aware of their status and the company's plan to manage their ongoing work. Once the business needs have been determined, planning activities can commence.

Supply Chain and Logistics

- Consider reprioritization of your product line to respond to market impacts associated with the threat, increase safety stock levels and stockpile essential supplies / resources as needed,
- Prequalify alternative domestic / international suppliers and outsourced vendors in case primary suppliers cannot support.

Technology

- Support resource requirements of alternative work strategy for critical functions, investigate possible additional options for technology services,
- Expand teleconferencing capabilities within corporate facilities as well as remote locations as an alternative to travel,
- Initiate and be prepared to support a virtual Emergency Operations Center,
- Ensure phone system has capability to transfer high numbers of calls to employees (e.g., call centers) in different locations.

Policies and Procedures

- Develop policy and procedures that will make it safer for employees to come to work. An employer has a responsibility for the health and safety of employees and visitors to a place of business,
- Develop ways to limit contact with the public, and/or customers and vendors through changes in receiving practices, barriers or distance. This is especially true for retail, restaurant, hospitality, and other industries with direct contact with customers,
- Implement travel restrictions, especially to more affected areas and travel restriction to specific countries.

Education and Awareness

- Employers will need to develop accurate information about the threat and the company's response efforts and then deliver this to employees on a timely basis (this will be needed to counteract any media hype, mass panic and expected public overreaction).
- Companies should be prepared to provide employees with factual information on the illness and related symptoms, as well as details of the company's plan. Employees should be educated on the symptoms, and encouraged to avoid coming in to work sick,
- Promote good hygiene practices in accordance with local and federal health agencies,
- Develop policy and procedures for identifying and contacting people who may begin to exhibit symptoms at work.

Surveillance and Communications

- Ensure the crisis management team is aggregating information related to the threat, prepared to make decisions, and communicate accordingly as situations escalate,
- Determine trusted sources of information for worldwide and local health information related to infectious diseases,
- Create a mechanism to foster open communications between vendors, suppliers and key customers regarding impacts on their operations,
- Develop procedures to aggregate information for review, assessment and interpretation for decision making.

These practical recommendations and planning activities provide a few of the essential activities your organization should consider for preparation and response. Mature plans may take a longer period to refine through ongoing rigorous training, resiliency planning, exercises and enhancements.