

# Pandemic planning in the workplace

## A guide for Queensland's funeral industry

The Human Swine Influenza outbreak in 2009 confirmed to the world that the threat of a human pandemic influenza is real.

During an influenza pandemic, funeral industry services will likely be in greater demand.

Have you thought about how your business would cope? Funeral homes could expect to handle about six months work within a three month period.

How could your business function if half of your staff did not turn up to work for a week during that period?

What if this trend continued for an entire year?

What if this trend affected not only your business, but all of your suppliers and contractors as well?

An influenza pandemic is likely to test the capacity and skills of Queensland's funeral industry.

While nobody can predict when an influenza pandemic could occur, planning ahead could help your business prepare

“ The threat is real, businesses should prepare now... ”

Dr Jeannette Young, Chief Health Officer, Queensland Health

to maintain essential services, help protect your staff and contribute to national recovery. This guide has been developed to help you consider what impact an influenza pandemic may have on your business and to provide access to information to help you plan ahead. Information about infection control and post mortem care can be found in the Interim Infection Control Guidelines in Healthcare and Community Settings (*refer to Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*).

### What is an influenza pandemic?

An influenza pandemic is a worldwide outbreak of disease that can occur when a new strain of influenza, to which people are not immune, emerges and spreads. It could spread through droplets (coughs and/or sneezes), by touching contaminated surfaces and through particles in the air in crowded spaces. During the 20th Century, there were three influenza pandemics, which caused millions of deaths, large scale social disruption and worldwide economic downturns. Experts agree that the current strains of bird flu and swine flu have the potential to trigger another human influenza pandemic.

### What would an influenza pandemic mean for my business?

An influenza pandemic would affect most businesses and industries, communities and governments. However, while some industries may be able to close for a period or reduce their services, funeral industry services will likely be in greater demand. It will be important that the funeral industry is able to continue offering services that maintain dignity and respect for all deceased. Guides to assist businesses in other sectors are also being provided.

Unlike many other risks, an influenza pandemic could occur over a prolonged period. Its effects could be catastrophic, causing geographically widespread death and illness (nationally and internationally) and temporary changes in many areas of society. It is likely that people would be under extreme stress and financial hardship, given the possibility of a broader economic downturn.

“ During an influenza pandemic, it is essential that the funeral industry plans to keep business going, as it provides critical community services. ”

In response to an influenza pandemic, governments may take actions such as suspending public transport, closing schools and childcare centres, recommending people minimise physical contact and stay a metre or more apart. This will have a major impact on business operations. While an influenza pandemic would have no direct effect on physical infrastructure and assets, it would have a wide range of impacts on all businesses, including disruptions to business operations, increased staff absenteeism and changed workplace dynamics.

## Internal impacts

- Increased absenteeism due to illness, quarantine, closure of schools/childcare, fear and anxiety and caring commitments
- Changed workplace dynamics e.g. changed work roles and interactions
- Internal cash flows



How an influenza pandemic could impact my business



## External impacts

- Large scale social disruption
- Increased/decreased demand for goods or services
- Delays in supply of goods and services
- Government responses to pandemic
- Contractual arrangements
- Reduced availability of sub-contractors
- Legislation and regulation

## How should I prepare my business for an influenza pandemic?



### 1. Before a pandemic: PLAN

- ✓ Understand and monitor the risk
- ✓ Plan to maintain essential services and meet increased demand
- ✓ Plan to protect your staff
- ✓ Plan to communicate with staff, customers and suppliers

#### Understand and monitor the risk

To plan for any disaster, you need to understand the risk and the potential impact on your business.

To read more about the potential risk and impacts on your industry, use the information available in the *Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*.

“ While the exact characteristics of an influenza pandemic virus cannot be predicted, health experts suggest a pandemic is likely to last for 7–10 months with outbreaks occurring in waves. ”

#### Plan to maintain essential services and meet increased demand

Planning will influence how your business will manage during an influenza pandemic and will influence how quickly your business can get back to normal operations after such an event.

- ◇ Consider developing an influenza pandemic plan or including pandemic influenza in your existing mass fatality or business continuity plan.
- ◇ Identify the triggers that would activate the plan.
- ◇ Consider scheduling regular reviews of the plan to make sure it is always up-to-date and relevant.

This section provides some good risk planning practices (*refer to Business continuity planning considerations: Fact sheet 4*). You might consider how to share your planning ideas with others in your industry – perhaps through your industry associations.

- ◇ **Business operations** - given demand for funeral services might surge and even double during a pandemic, businesses should review operations and the services on offer to meet increased demand. Are there time-consuming aspects of your business that could be modified during a pandemic? For example, could you provide simpler ceremonies, encourage people to consider cremation and burial options (including location) and defer celebration of life ceremonies? Could you extend business hours? What about more effective transport options such as pooling resources with similar industries? Businesses should work with staff to brainstorm efficiencies that could be made in these special circumstances.
- ◇ **Staff** - given 30–50 per cent of your staff could be absent at the peak of a pandemic, which positions and skills are needed to maintain critical services? Businesses should plan for staff absences by considering volunteers, retired staff and sharing staff with similar organisations. Businesses should also consider succession planning and training, and options for office-based staff to work from home if possible.
- ◇ **Financial planning** - according to the Australian Government Treasury, a pandemic could have a significant impact on the economy. Suppliers may be unwilling to provide goods or services without early up-front payment, and prices may increase. Financial institutions may limit credit availability. Customers might seek deferred payment options. Businesses should consider their cash reserves, lines of credit and insurance policies.

“ Between 30–50 per cent of the population may not attend work at the peak of a pandemic. ”

- ◇ **Key contractors and suppliers** - what other services and businesses do you rely on? Are you able to check whether they are planning for an influenza pandemic? What would happen if your suppliers could not provide products? Are there alternative suppliers? Is it possible to stockpile critical resources or share resources with similar businesses? Could you offer alternative goods and services when normal stock runs out? Consider your contractual requirements and service level agreements and whether these might need to be changed before a pandemic.
- ◇ **Government response** - how would government action in response to a pandemic affect your business (e.g. border control, home quarantine and/or social distancing)?

### Plan to protect your staff

Staff are at risk of infection when handling infectious bodies. Funeral businesses should refer to Australian Government infection control guidelines for the industry for more information. To protect staff in the workplace, businesses should plan to:

- ◇ provide information on how to minimise the spread of the virus, including advice for staff to stay home if sick and advice specific to your industry on infection control when undertaking certain procedures while handling infectious bodies. You do not need to wait for an influenza pandemic to practise good hygiene that could reduce the spread of infection (*refer to Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*)
- ◇ provide hygiene facilities and personal protective equipment as advised by health authorities at the time, which might include hand wash, tissues, paper towels and no-touch waste receptacles
- ◇ consider staff refresher training on protective equipment and infection control procedures
- ◇ make arrangements so that staff can work one metre or more apart ('social distancing') and avoid face-to-face socialising and meetings. Where face-to-face contact with customers is necessary, consider the use of barriers or screens to reduce the spread of infection
- ◇ review workplace ventilation and cleaning practices (*refer to Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*)
- ◇ maintain up-to-date contact lists for all staff members, including next of kin, and plan what you will do if an employee becomes ill at work
- ◇ develop policies regarding staff travel to or from affected areas.

You should also consider flexible workplace arrangements that could be implemented during a pandemic. Involve your staff in finding solutions and consult them on any changes made (existing Industrial Relations and Workplace Health and Safety frameworks will continue to apply). These practices could include:

- ◇ extending business hours so fewer people are working and visiting your business in the same place at the same time
- ◇ enabling any office-based staff to work remotely from home
- ◇ providing flexible leave options where possible, for people who are ill, have had contact with ill people, or who have ill family members.

### Plan to communicate with staff, customers and suppliers

Develop procedures for keeping staff, stakeholders, customers and suppliers informed of any changes to your workplace during the influenza pandemic. This could include developing procedures for communicating with government about risks to critical services, and communicating with media. Consider whether it is appropriate to establish hotlines and websites. It will be important to try to shape public expectations of funeral services by providing consistent information on the range of services available across industry.

## 2. During a pandemic: RESPOND

- ☑ **Monitor the pandemic threat**
- ☑ **Implement appropriate response actions**

**Monitor the pandemic threat** by listening to government and World Health Organisation advice, and visiting relevant websites (*refer to Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*). Keep track of the government response as this may impact your business (e.g. if schools and childcare centres are closed, staff may need to stay home to look after children).

### Implement appropriate response actions

Depending on current information about the risk, decide whether to implement response actions to maintain essential services, protect your staff and communicate with your staff, stakeholders, customers and suppliers. Review health infection control guidelines at the time – mortuary and funeral staff should consider treating every deceased as though it might be infected.

Review your business response to the pandemic threat regularly as the situation changes. Consider staff based in offices, as well as staff travelling to or from affected areas (overseas travel could be restricted). Use the pre-prepared resources contained in business continuity planning guides (*refer to Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*) such as posters on correct hand washing techniques, cough etiquette and respiratory hygiene. Information on appropriate workplace cleaning methods is also available.

“ While you will not be able to prevent an influenza pandemic from happening, you can take action to prevent more severe impacts. In the event of an influenza pandemic, governments will make every effort to provide timely and reliable advice to the public and businesses through all available means, including television, radio, newspapers, internet sites and public information hotlines. ”

### 3. After a pandemic and between pandemic waves: REVIEW and RECOVER

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- ☑ Monitor the pandemic threat
- ☑ Be supportive and flexible with staff
- ☑ Help your business get back to normal

**Monitor the pandemic threat** by listening to government and World Health Organisation advice, and visiting relevant websites (*see Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*). Keep track of the government response as this may impact your business (eg. if schools and childcare centres are re-opened, staff may be able to return to work).

**Be supportive and flexible with staff** as an influenza pandemic may result in people losing family and friends, feeling disenchanted and suffering financially. It will be important for employers to help staff restore their emotional and psychological wellbeing, and encourage them to return to work and re-establish routines. Staff may also need flexibility to assist family members.

#### Help your business get back to normal faster by:

- ◇ returning to normal routines and services as much as possible
- ◇ assessing the impacts of the pandemic on your business
- ◇ assisting your supply chains to recover
- ◇ debriefing and updating pandemic and business continuity plans to help you prepare for possible future pandemic waves
- ◇ sharing good business practices with others in your industry.

#### What now?

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- ☑ Understand and monitor the risk
- ☑ Plan to maintain essential services and meet increased demand
- ☑ Plan to protect your staff
- ☑ Plan to communicate with your staff, customers and suppliers

Make sure your business is not caught out. Refer to the following fact sheets at [www.premiers.qld.gov.au/Qkit](http://www.premiers.qld.gov.au/Qkit) for more information.

- ◇ Checklist: Fact sheet 2
- ◇ Resources guide: Fact sheet 3
- ◇ Business continuity planning considerations: Fact sheet 4
- ◇ Masks and antivirals: Fact sheet 5

### Take action to protect your business and be prepared.

#### Security planning and coordination

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