




# PANDEMIC PLANNING IN THE WORKPLACE

2009



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## CONTENTS

<b>1. PURPOSE</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. BACKGROUND</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. GOVERNMENT ACTIONS</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4. ROLE OF WORKPLACES</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5. IMPACTS ON THE WORKPLACE</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>6. KEY PLANNING PRINCIPLES</b>	<b>6</b>
1: Maintain business continuity	6
2: Plan early	6
3: Use existing workplace frameworks	7
<b>7. KEY WORKPLACE ACTIONS</b>	<b>7</b>
How to start planning	7
How to go forward	7
<b>8. RESOURCES</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>ATTACHMENT A - WEBSITES</b>	<b>9</b>

This paper has not been prepared as prescriptive legal advice. Business continuity planning, including for employment and workplace relations aspects, should be undertaken on the basis that existing workplace relations and occupational health and safety (OHS) regulations (laws, regulations, awards, agreements) will continue to apply during a pandemic

## 1. PURPOSE

This resource aims to assist employers and employees to consider some of the possible impacts of a human influenza pandemic on their workplace and prepare in advance. It has been developed by the Commonwealth, State, and Territory governments and the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), and is an appendix to the *National Action Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic*.

This resource should be read in conjunction with *Being Prepared for a Human Influenza Pandemic – A Business Continuity Guide for Australian Businesses* and its accompanying *Kit For Small Business*, both available through [www.flupandemic.gov.au](http://www.flupandemic.gov.au) or [www.innovation.gov.au](http://www.innovation.gov.au). A guide to other resources is at Attachment A.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The World Health Organization (WHO) has reported that the world is moving closer to an influenza pandemic. An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus subtype to which there is little or no immunity emerges, is easily spread between humans and is capable of causing severe disease.

It is not possible to predict when the next pandemic will occur or how long it will last. If another pandemic does occur, its impact will depend on how easily the particular strain of the virus is transmitted and the severity of illness it generates. The three pandemics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrate the variation in severity of a pandemic influenza. The “Spanish Flu” in 1918 caused an estimated 20 million to 40 million deaths around the world, while subsequent pandemics in 1957 and 1968 were milder but still caused widespread illness, over one million deaths worldwide and significant economic and social disruption.

## 3. GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

Detailed planning for an influenza pandemic has been undertaken by Australia’s governments at all levels. The *National Action Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic* was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in July 2006. COAG leaders also signed a Statement of Cooperation committing to work together and in partnership with the Australian community to meet the challenges faced as a result of pandemic influenza. The plan, updated in March 2009, is available through [www.flupandemic.gov.au](http://www.flupandemic.gov.au).

Given the high standards of human health and hygiene and good veterinary and farming practices in Australia, it is not expected that a virus would originate and develop into a pandemic form in Australia. However, governments are preparing for an emerging pandemic overseas and subsequent arrival in Australia by applying a combination of strategies to:

**alert** – to the risk of a pandemic and preparing for a pandemic by increasing Australia’s readiness and supporting overseas responses;

**delay** – the entry of the pandemic virus to Australia by applying border measures, supporting the overseas response and increasing surveillance;

**contain** - or slow the early spread of a pandemic virus once it emerges in Australia, including by strategic deployment of the National Medical Stockpile and strengthening public information campaigns to promote individual hygiene practices and community level measures such as social distancing;

**sustain** – the response while a customised vaccine is developed, including by supporting maintenance of essential infrastructure and services and strengthening community social distancing measures;

**control** - the pandemic with a customised pandemic vaccine when it becomes widely available; and

**recover** - providing the necessary support and stimulus to help the Australian community return to normal living as quickly as possible following a pandemic.

Governments will make every effort to keep the disease out, slow its spread if it does arrive and care for the sick through border control measures<sup>1</sup>, surveillance<sup>2</sup>, widespread adoption of good hygiene and infection control practices, public awareness and education, social distancing measures<sup>3</sup>, isolation and quarantine and the use of antivirals from the National Medical Stockpile.

Information on the health response measures that may be taken during a pandemic is contained in the *Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza*. Copies of this plan, revised in December 2008, are available through [www.flupandemic.gov.au](http://www.flupandemic.gov.au).

## 4. ROLE OF WORKPLACES

Workplaces and community organisations will play a vital role in preventing, preparing for, responding to and recovering from a human influenza pandemic.

Governments will actively lead the response to a pandemic, but cannot alone control and manage the spread of disease, or maintain all the essential services the community will require.

The planning undertaken by individual employers and their employees will do much to minimise the impacts on their workplace, and to protect staff in their workplace.

## 5. IMPACTS ON THE WORKPLACE

Planning for, responding to and recovering from a pandemic presents new challenges for organisations. Unlike other disruptive events that Business Continuity Plans normally address, an influenza pandemic will have no direct effect on physical infrastructure and assets. By contrast, an influenza pandemic will directly affect people's health and wellbeing, and potentially the roles that people perform in the ordinary course of employment and business, and their family and social life.

The full impact of a pandemic on the workplace will depend on the severity, location and duration of the pandemic, the nature of the organisation and its planning preparations.

A pandemic has the potential to impact on all areas of workplace operations. Impacts may include:

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<sup>1</sup> Border measures are measures that can be put in place to reduce people movement into Australia from affected areas in order to delay the arrival and development of an influenza pandemic in Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Surveillance refers to the monitoring of new strains of influenza developing around the world and the effectiveness and impacts of control measures.

<sup>3</sup> Social distancing refers to various measures that can be taken to reduce normal physical and social interaction to slow the spread of an influenza pandemic throughout society. There are different levels of social distancing that may be escalated depending on the circumstances. Governments may implement social distancing measures including closure of schools and child care centres, workplace measures, cancellation of mass gatherings, changing public transport arrangements to limit crowding, and movement restrictions to or from certain areas.

### **Staff**

- Increased staff absences for a variety of reasons, including personal illness, fear of contamination, provision of care and support to ill family or household members, isolation or quarantine requirements, the need to care for children unable to attend schools or child care centres during closures, or revised transport arrangements.
- Increased dependency on staff performing key business functions.

### **Supply and demand**

- Disruptions to business operations, including delays to the supply of goods and materials.
- Disruptions to warehousing and dispatch arrangements.
- Reduced movement of goods or people.
- Reduced availability of services from sub-contractors or suppliers.

### **Cashflow**

- Variation in demand of services - some sectors are likely to experience a possible downturn in sales and revenue due to reduced demand during a pandemic, whereas other sectors are likely to experience an increase in demand e.g. pharmaceutical, funeral services and telecommunications.
- Disruptions to financial payments and processing.
- Leave costs may reach a peak during a pandemic.

### **Workplace dynamics**

- Possible higher personal stress and people undertaking different roles in the workplace due to other staff absences.

## **6. KEY PLANNING PRINCIPLES**

The following three Key Planning Principles will assist employers and employees to develop pandemic plans in the workplace:

### **1: Maintain business continuity**

Employers and employees both have a strong interest in the business surviving and recovering after a pandemic, even if the business must close for a period. In addition, emergency management and subsequent national recovery will be greatly facilitated if businesses – particularly those that provide essential services for the community or for other businesses – are able to continue delivering services.

Arrangements and conditions put in place by workplaces at any stage during a pandemic (relating to staff, customers or suppliers) should aim where possible to maintain services and promote recovery.

### **2: Plan early**

The earlier a business plans for a pandemic, the more effective its response is likely to be.

There are many things that businesses can consider, put in place and test *before* a pandemic occurs (some of these are listed below in Section 7, Key Workplace Actions).

### **3: Use existing workplace frameworks**

Existing Workplace Relations and Occupational Health and Safety frameworks form the basis for pandemic planning in the workplace.

## **7. KEY WORKPLACE ACTIONS**

Keeping the Key Planning Principles in mind, employers and employees might wish to consider the following pandemic planning and response activities. The Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research provides useful pandemic planning checklists for small business through [www.flupandemic.gov.au](http://www.flupandemic.gov.au) or at [www.innovation.gov.au](http://www.innovation.gov.au).

### **How to start planning**

- Access health and relevant information and talk to each other about potential impacts on the business, shared concerns, and possible solutions.
- Obtain specific public health information to include in planning and development of key messages for staff.
- Plan how communication channels with staff, suppliers, customers and contractors might be maintained.
- Within the context of current legislative frameworks, consider practices and arrangements which may need modification to allow employers and employees to respond to business and family needs. Early planning activities might include:
  - identifying core business activities, people, skills and minimum staffing arrangements;
  - planning for staff absences by multi-skilling staff and developing a skills register to provide back-up for staff who become ill;
  - considering flexible HR policies;
  - providing opportunities for people to work from home;
  - working flexible hours or rostering of staff to reduce workplace crowding;
  - considering peer support or incident management mechanisms to assist with staff de-briefing and counselling;
  - developing mitigation strategies for disruptions, including to supplies;
  - ensuring the workplace has adequate supplies of hygiene products in advance; and
  - ensuring employees, customers and suppliers are aware of contingency arrangements and that they work.

### **How to go forward**

- Ensure that workplace arrangements have regard to the needs and circumstances of both the organisation and its employees, and that any proposed changes to previously agreed terms and conditions of employment are fairly applied and appropriate to the changed circumstances.

- Seek advice and assistance from relevant Commonwealth, State and Territory Government agencies and employer associations and unions. A guide of relevant industrial relations information and other resources are at Attachment A.
- Formalise any changed workplace arrangements where required through the usual administrative and legislative occupational health and safety and workplace relations processes.
- Continue to monitor updates and advice from health experts. This will help employers and employees to remain well informed about the status of the pandemic.

## 8. RESOURCES

Resources have been developed to provide Australian businesses and other organisations with guidance and information to assist in their business continuity planning. These provide guidance on:

- how a pandemic might affect a business;
- how to help protect staff from getting sick;
- how to manage customers and stakeholders; and
- how to minimise the impact of a pandemic on a business through business continuity planning.

Your first stop should be the Commonwealth Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research Guide *Being Prepared for a Human Influenza Pandemic – A Business Continuity Guide for Australian Business* and its accompanying *Kit For Small Business* which can be accessed through [www.flupandemic.gov.au](http://www.flupandemic.gov.au) or [www.innovation.gov.au](http://www.innovation.gov.au).

Further resources are listed at Attachment A. Individual States, Territories and local governments may supplement this information with further resources in the future.

## ATTACHMENT A

### WEBSITES

[www.flupandemic.gov.au](http://www.flupandemic.gov.au) is a dedicated website, developed by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, to provide a single portal to access information on pandemic influenza. It provides links to Commonwealth, State and Territory government information sources, including many of those listed below.

#### ***National plans***

Australia's national plans for an influenza pandemic outline the responsibilities, authorities and mechanisms to prevent and manage an influenza pandemic and its consequences in Australia. These plans provide detail on Australia's health response and the broader actions the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments would take should a pandemic eventuate.

[National Action Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic](#) (NAP)

[Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza](#) (AHMPPI)

#### ***National information***

Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing website [www.flupandemic.gov.au](http://www.flupandemic.gov.au)

Commonwealth Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website [www.smartraveller.gov.au](http://www.smartraveller.gov.au)

Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry website [www.daff.gov.au](http://www.daff.gov.au)

National pest and disease emergency website [www.outbreak.gov.au](http://www.outbreak.gov.au)

#### ***Business continuity guides***

The Australian Government has developed business continuity guides to assist Australian businesses in their own pandemic planning.

[Being prepared for a Pandemic](#)

[Influenza Pandemic - A Kit for Small Businesses](#)

#### ***Commonwealth workplace related information***

General information on agreement making, wages and conditions and other employment related issues for businesses covered by the Australian Government's *Workplace Relations Act 1996* (including businesses in the Northern Territory, Australian Capital Territory and Victoria) can be found at the following websites:

Workplace Authority: [www.workplaceauthority.gov.au](http://www.workplaceauthority.gov.au)

Workplace Ombudsman: [www.wo.gov.au](http://www.wo.gov.au)

Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations:  
[www.deewr.gov.au](http://www.deewr.gov.au)

## **Occupational health and safety related information**

Comcare website [www.comcare.gov.au](http://www.comcare.gov.au) (1300 366 979)

[OHS preparedness for an Influenza Pandemic: a guide for employers \(September 2006\)](#)

Australian Safety and Compensation Council: [www.ascc.gov.au](http://www.ascc.gov.au)

## ***State and Territory related information***

### **New South Wales**

Pandemic planning information. [www.emergency.nsw.gov](http://www.emergency.nsw.gov) and [www.health.nsw.gov.au/pandemic](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/pandemic)

New South Wales Office of Industrial Relations website [www.industrialrelations.nsw.gov.au](http://www.industrialrelations.nsw.gov.au) (All enquiries Phone: 131 628)

Workcover New South Wales website [www.workcover.nsw.gov.au](http://www.workcover.nsw.gov.au) (NSW WorkCover Assistance Service 13 10 50)

### **Victoria**

Pandemic planning information. [www.health.vic.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza)

Worksafe Victoria website. [www.worksafe.vic.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au) (1800 136 089)

Workforce Victoria website. [www.irv.vic.gov.au](http://www.irv.vic.gov.au) (1800 287 287)

### **Queensland**

Pandemic planning information [www.qld.gov.au/pandemic](http://www.qld.gov.au/pandemic)

Queensland Department of Employment and Industrial Relations  
[www.deir.qld.gov.au/industrial/publications/reports/influenza-pandemic/index.htm](http://www.deir.qld.gov.au/industrial/publications/reports/influenza-pandemic/index.htm) (1300 369 945)

Queensland Workplace Health and Safety website [www.dir.qld.gov.au/workplace](http://www.dir.qld.gov.au/workplace)  
(1300 369 915)

### **Northern Territory**

Pandemic planning information. [www.nt.gov.au](http://www.nt.gov.au)

Worksafe Northern Territory website [www.worksafe.nt.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.nt.gov.au) (1800 019 115)

### **Tasmania**

Pandemic planning information [www.pandemic.tas.gov.au](http://www.pandemic.tas.gov.au)

Workplace Standards Tasmania website [www.wst.tas.gov.au](http://www.wst.tas.gov.au)

### **South Australia**

Pandemic planning information [www.health.sa.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza](http://www.health.sa.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza)

Safework South Australia website [www.safework.sa.gov.au](http://www.safework.sa.gov.au) (1300 365 255)

## **Western Australia**

Pandemic planning information

<http://www.ossec.dpc.wa.gov.au/index.cfm?event=humanInfluenzaPandemicPlanning>

Western Australia Department of Health <http://www.health.wa.gov.au>

Workcover Western Australia website [www.workcover.wa.gov.au](http://www.workcover.wa.gov.au) (1300 794 744)

Worksafe Western Australia website [www.safetyline.wa.gov.au](http://www.safetyline.wa.gov.au) (1300 307 877)

## **Australian Capital Territory**

Pandemic planning information [www.health.act.gov.au/c/health](http://www.health.act.gov.au/c/health) and

[www.health.act.gov.au/healthalerts](http://www.health.act.gov.au/healthalerts)

Workcover Australian Capital Territory website [www.workcover.act.gov.au](http://www.workcover.act.gov.au) (02 6205 0200)