A Quick Look at the Lessons Being Learned from the 2009 H1N1 Outbreak

Members of the New Jersey Business Force started exploring the specter of Pandemic Flu back in early 2006. Two high-profile activities emanated from this in-depth examination: The NJBF Private Sector Pandemic Flu Tabletop Exercise (July 2006) and the Internet Reliability Symposium, “Will the Internet Be There When You Really Need It?” held February 2007. The current H1N1 outbreak has ultimately validated many of the findings produced from these and other related planning efforts.

“What has the H1N1 outbreak taught us?”

All too quickly we have seen firsthand the unpredictability of an emergent, novel virus and how rapidly an unexpected outbreak can spread inadvertently aided by modern technologies. While the current situation is deemed a Pre-Pandemic stage, experts are closely watching the Southern Hemisphere for possible indicators about how H1N1 may evolve if and when it reappears during the next flu season. Fortunately, the H1N1 flu has not yet demonstrated the deadly virulence many feared initially. Conversely, H1N1 is a highly contagious variant aptly demonstrated by the rapid raising of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Pandemic Alert Phase to 5…signaling a pandemic is imminent.

Some argue the 3009 confirmed U.S. cases (12 May 09) and three deaths are a minor “blip” when contrasted against the typical seasonal flu. CDC spokespersons readily admit the H1N1 learning curve is on an upward trajectory and there is simply not enough data to make an accurate assessment of what the world may eventually face. In the meantime, authorities are encouraging governments and the Private Sector to use the intervening respite between now and next flu season to improve preparedness. Although the medical community is more knowledgeable about H1N1 than a month ago, there is still much to learn about the nature and characteristics of this new virus.

“Here’s what we do know…”

1. The Centers for Disease Control’s (CDC) response goals are to:
   - Reduce transmission and severity of the H1N1 Influenza
   - Provide information to help health care providers, public health officials and the public address the challenges posed by this health emergency

2. The CDC will continue to issue and update interim guidance daily in response to a rapidly developing situation. The CDC, in essence, is acting as a clearinghouse for information and is establishing general standards based on acquired rather than historical data. Public health officials are evaluating the severity of the outbreak and recommending actions to protect community health (e.g., hygiene measures, social distancing, etc) through updates to published guidance. Implementation decisions become the realm of local authorities.

3. Employers should review and follow guidance contained in regulations, employee handbooks, manuals, and contracts. Avoid complacency caused by H1N1 overload and/or a belief the worst is over.

4. Self-sufficiency matters! According to a May 1, 2009 article, “Many States Do Not Meet Readiness Standards,” appearing in the Washington Post, “More than two dozen states have not stocked enough of the emergency supplies of antiviral medications considered necessary to treat victims of swine flu should the outbreak become a full-blown crisis, according to federal records.” Consequently, the CDC has deployed 25 percent of the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) and 100 personnel to affected states.
5. H1N1 is, generally speaking, causing a relatively mild illness beyond Mexico. Outside of Mexico, individuals with underlying chronic or pre-existing health conditions often experience more severe symptoms. (NC4 Influenza Update #4)

5. Considerable attention is being turned toward Southern Hemisphere for possible indicators about how the H1N1 might mutate prior to the next flu season. Make maximum use of the intervening time to increase and enhance Pandemic Flu preparations and response plans.

6. Although H5N1 avian influenza is not spread easily to humans, WHO is concerned about how the dangerous bird flu strain is going to behave under the pressure of a pandemic. (NC4 Influenza Update #4)

Sources of Information:

1. CDC Website (http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/) contains a trove of H1N1 Flu information and planning tools.

2. The Department of Homeland Security Infrastructure Protection Directorate and Private Sector Office will continue to post relevant documents on the Homeland Security Information Network (HSIN) Portal. In addition, owners and operators of critical infrastructure and key resources may contact the National Infrastructure Coordination Center (NICC) for questions at NICC@dhs.gov.

3. The Department of Homeland Security Infrastructure Protection Directorate (IP) and Private Sector Office (PSO) held three conference calls since the H1N1 crisis began. In their view, the Private Sector is well prepared by this time. DHS IP and PSO will continue to follow H1N1 developments but will not hold any further calls unless “by exception.”

4. The New Jersey Business Force continues to catalogue recurring H1N1 reports, information and updates on CyberCop Portal in the Swine Flu Folder. Send Dr. Mike Chumer an E-mail at mchumer@gmail.com for a password and log-on if you have not already done so. CyberCop allows connectivity with NJBF members and permits access to other communities of interest.

5. Pandemic Flu planning will remain a topic of Tuesday’s BEOC℠ Planning Cell Conference Calls. The call in number is 218-339-4300, conference ID 493541#.

6. The NC4 NJBF Private Channel provides extensive coverage of the H1N1 outbreak along with analytical tools for tracking trends.

7. Early warning of potential impacts is enhanced through the availability of open and consistent reporting from international locations. The current outbreak apparently began in Mexico and quickly crossed into the U.S. Proactive actions by public and private sector organizations provided valuable H1N1 related information in the early stages of the outbreak and helped attenuate its effects. It is questionable whether the same timely reporting of a novel virus to international health authorities would have occurred if the H1N1Influenza originated in another part of the world; transparency is an issue between the World Health Organization and certain foreign governments. The USA and World maps published daily by Department of Homeland Security became a consistent and reliable data source and served as an invaluable planning tool from the onset of this event.