



# Creating a Communication Strategy for Avian/Pandemic Influenza

Produced by the Pan American Health Organization



**Pan American  
Health  
Organization**

Regional Office of the  
World Health Organization

# ***Creating a Communication Strategy for Avian/Pandemic Influenza***

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**Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization  
Special Advisor, Social and Media Communication**

## **Communicating for and about Avian/Pandemic Influenza**

### **Introduction**

Communication strategies serve as an integral component of national pandemic influenza plans, enabling ideas to be turned into actions. Given the potential impact of pandemic influenza, detailed plans on what to communicate, how to do it, to whom and by who must be planned and repeatedly revised—for all pandemic phases and for all audiences. The Pan American Health Organization presented to its Governing Bodies in September 2005 a detailed strategic plan aimed at directing Technical Cooperation activities to prepare the countries of the Region for an influenza pandemic. That document called on all countries to include risk communication and communication strategies in their plans. The communication planning, preparation and implementation should be in line with guidelines issued by the **World Health Organization** and the **PAHO Strategic Plan for Responding to Pandemic Influenza**.

### **Background**

Communication with the public, stakeholders, within the health system, schools, and numerous others during a public health emergency is critical to managing any crisis. Communication strategies designed in advance to deal with possible scenarios detail objectives, target audiences, key messages, tool or channels and action plans. The following suggestions for themes and topics for incorporation in a strategy are geared toward avian/pandemic influenza, but the applications are far reaching and serve for other outbreaks, disasters and public health emergencies in general.

Communication objectives prior to an outbreak seek to educate, inform, advocate, prepare and prevent. This applies to avian influenza in birds as well as seasonal influenza and potentially an influenza pandemic. When an outbreak or pandemic emerges, communication goals shift to focus on accompanying containment activities, ensuring that the public, in part via media, is provided health messages, supports recommendations, and that health personnel are informed, prepared and ready to act. Given the anticipated social disruption of a pandemic, communication activities must be well in place before the arrival of a pandemic to support and activate public health contingencies and ultimately save lives. Building trust now is laying the groundwork for pandemic communication.

Communication planning accompanies pandemic planning through each step. The major thrust of outbreak communication, according to the World Health Organization, is "to communicate with the public in ways that build, *maintain or* restore trust. This is true across cultures, political systems and level of country development." The loss of public confidence, especially at a time of crisis, threatens the stability and viability of not only the health sector but of economies and the government as a whole. As part of maintaining trust, the health sector must inform the public quickly of developments, include various sectors in planning, listen, and

react quickly to stakeholders to address rumors and diminish social turbulence. In today's global world, viruses and news travel quickly, and so does misinformation.

## **Justification**

Today's pandemic preparedness as well as the accompanying communication planning serves the public health community as a platform for strengthening basic public health infrastructure, not just for a pandemic but for future health crises of international importance. WHO's outbreak communication guidelines state, "The overriding public health goal is to bring the outbreak under control as quickly as possible, with as little social disruption as possible. Effective outbreak communication is one tool to achieve that goal."

PAHO, as the regional office for the World Health Organization and the world's oldest public health agency, is in a privileged position to work with all the countries in the Americas and to collaborate with other international organizations and partners to prepare for a potential influenza pandemic.

The following is a guide and some considerations for creating a communication strategy and a preparedness check off list. Each section focuses on a target audience and will require an action plan detailing how each activity will be carried out. The plan also should include the goals, methods, participants and costs for each activity. Subsequent annexes serve as examples and provide additional information on such topics as key messages, ways of dealing with the media, and basic aspects of risk communication.



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## **Pandemic Alert Period (current phase)**

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### **Goals:**

- To build trust through broad agreement among senior management to adhere to the WHO Outbreak Communication Guidelines.
- To inform the public and increase awareness about the differences between seasonal influenza, avian influenza and pandemic influenza.
- To prepare the society at large for ways to prevent or mitigate the impact of pandemic influenza.
- To ensure that mechanisms exist within National Influenza Preparedness Plans to communicate among agencies and to the media, the public and essential partners focusing on prevention and preparation.
- To reduce the possible disruption and widespread social and economic turbulence of pandemic influenza.
- To build support for pandemic preparedness efforts and to encourage similar efforts in the private sector, local governments and civil society.
- To provide information that can lower the risk of infection with the pandemic precursor, the avian influenza virus.

### **Activities:**

1. Ensure that a communications officer (or team) is part of the National Pandemic Influenza Planning Group. That team should be a **cross-cutting, inter-agency group that, among other things,** supports the main goals of understanding, informing, preventing and increasing awareness prior to and in the event of an actual pandemic. The team should include epidemiologists, virologists, immunologists and other technical experts, as well as health educators, agriculture officials, trained communicators, media officers, health services experts, and state and local health officials. The group also should include representatives from such sectors as transportation, finance, the military, civil defense and others.

If you have the staff and the personnel, **create a communications group** that includes communication staff from throughout the government. Part of this group's work should include ways to create consistent messages about pandemic influenza, leverage government resources, develop activities, coordinate media planning and outreach to partners, and ensure a coordinated response by the government for the public. A meeting schedule should be established.

2. **Define who will lead the communication efforts.** This can vary at different times so that during avian influenza the senior communication staff member from the Ministry of Agriculture may take the lead. Health issues, in the case of preparing for a pandemic, may come under the Ministry of Health.

Each sector should **define their audiences.** And each target audience should have a separate plan and checklist. Target audiences would include the general public, media, healthcare system and providers, farmers, veterinarians, poultry industry, partners, and special or vulnerable groups.

- **Name and train spokespersons.** The government should strive to speak with one voice, even if there are several people acting as spokespersons. Ensure the spokespersons have training in risk and outbreak communication. Outbreak communication is essentially an attempt by the public health community to provide information that allows stakeholders to make the best possible decisions during a crisis. It involves multiple messages about the nature of risk, and increasingly is a challenge when done quickly, in multiple languages and across cultures. It requires that public health experts acknowledge uncertainty and doubt.

The goal of **outbreak communication** is to maintain trust and confidence during a crisis and to avoid fear-driven responses. The five components of WHO's Outbreak Communication Guidelines are trust, announcing early, transparency, involving the public and planning.

- **Train other senior officials** in risk and outbreak communication, stressing the importance of openness, acting quickly, empathy and trust. In the event of a pandemic the highest government level officials will be called on to address the report on the status of action and the situation.
- **Create a chain of command line** for each audience outlining how you will communicate, to whom, when, what will you say. For example, in the event of a pandemic the Minister of Health will communicate to whom or receive communication from whom? How will hospitals communicate to nurses? Who will communicate to the public the state of the hospitals? Detail who will communicate to the minister of health, schools, hospitals, other providers, the media, etc. What happens with surge capacity?
- **Create action plans** to detail the specifics of who will do what and when, especially in the event of a real or suspected pandemic. Who will speak with the other government officials? Where should staff report? Who will define messages? Who will coordinate with the international community? Include the name and title of the responsible party as well as the current contact information.
- **Assess current preparedness**, taking into account ongoing personnel changes and whether there will be adequate human and financial resources available for all the phases of a pandemic. This applies to communication staff as well as all other staff members. Who can assist? Is there a way to bring in volunteers?
- **Work closely with technical authorities to support** activities focusing on prevention, possible economic losses and preparations for business continuity, school preparations, containment activities, status of antivirals and vaccines, and rapid response.
- **Stage simulations, discuss scenarios**, what-ifs, so that contingencies can be made to keep the public prepared, the government operating, and basic services available. All contingency plans should be flexible and adaptable.

- Research **what the public perceives and believes** about seasonal influenza, avian influenza and a potential pandemic influenza. Awareness of knowledge and attitudes and perceptions will enable the communication group to tailor messages and information. The research can be carried out by neighborhood surveys or phone surveys.
- Seek ways to have a formal and informal **dialogue with the community** to monitor what they need and want, and inform on what the government can provide. For example, town hall meetings or panel discussions could be set up. Engage the business community in pandemic preparedness and find ways in which they can support a public health response. Find out who the community trusts to deliver credible information.
- **Reach out to partners**, such as representatives from community groups, youth groups, schools, mayors, unions, churches and associations. Include them in the preparedness planning and get their support from the start so they can assist later in keeping the public informed.

Identify and work with key stakeholders from multiple sectors, private and public, as well as civil society to advocate for resources to serve as an ongoing catalyst for preparation and early intervention to prevent and respond to outbreaks.

- **Enlist the support of primary health care doctors, nurses**, midwives and community health promoters, who are key in supplying as well as transmitting information about influenza, avian influenza and pandemic influenza. Make sure they understand the potential severity of pandemic influenza. Solicit their suggestions as to their needs and the materials they feel can be used to communicate and educate.
- **Create preparedness messages** for the public based on the research of attitudes and knowledge about influenza. Preplan messages both in terms of content and distribution that can be used for later pandemic preparedness phases. In all cases, messages must be clear, concise and consistent.

Some topics, for example, could include personal hygiene messages that encourage frequent hand washing and urge people to cover their mouths when they cough or sneeze. Other messages should explain vaccines and antivirals and prepare the public for what measures they should take in the event of a pandemic, such as staying home with a fever.

- **Contact celebrities, noted personalities**, and leaders that you have used in past communication campaigns and get them on board. Work with them now to prepare preparedness messages as well as messages that can be transmitted about pandemic influenza plans.
- **Create informational materials**, such as fact sheets and news releases that can be used by the media, doctors' offices, hospitals, pharmacies, clinics, schools, and government offices that explain what pandemic influenza is and how to prevent it as well as the difference between avian and seasonal influenza. Offer suggestions as to what the public can do and should do. Action helps overcome the sense of helplessness.

**Fact sheets** can be presented in a question and answer format, asking and responding to such basics as: what is seasonal influenza? Why is there concern now about possible pandemic influenza? How does avian influenza differ from pandemic influenza?

**News releases** are short stories, answering questions—who, what, where, when, how—to explain and convey messages about actions the government or health officials are taking or want the public to take.

Create **public service announcements** for print, television and radio to carry prevention and education messages now and in the event a pandemic is declared. For broadcast, these are short messages designed to encourage an action. For example: hand washing is a good way to avoid many illnesses. Or, advice on when to stay at home.

- Decide **what communication channels will be used** to distribute your messages: e-mail, radio, web, television, posters, billboards, direct mail, loud speaker. Consider creating a special web page that can be updated routinely. Radio remains the strongest channel to reach the largest number of people. Community and rural radio reaches hard-to-reach populations. Use the crisis communication team to distribute to various networks, such as doctors, community health workers.
- Work out **ways to reach vulnerable and isolated populations**, including ways to overcome challenges related to technology, language and culture. Send these groups targeted messages in their own languages. Include representatives of these groups in the planning, solicit their ideas and find out what they believe will bring the messages home.
- **Update media lists** and contact information, seeking the best and most reliable channels to reach journalists. When appropriate, consider non traditional media, such as Internet blogs.
- **Engage the media now** and work with them to build their professional capacity and scientific understanding. Early involvement with the media in your planning can help bridge informational gaps later.
- **Plan media training** sessions that include simulations. Help journalists understand the complex science surrounding influenza viruses. For example, a key message should explain that even the best government planning cannot prevent a pandemic from occurring. Training should bolster both knowledge as well as professional skills. Media owners also should be included so that they understand the scope of the potential impact.
- Work out details on **how you will work with the media** during pandemic influenza. Will you hold daily briefings? Where? How will you keep the media informed? Who will do the briefings? How will you stay out front of the story? Make sure that communication professionals are accompanied by qualified technical experts and vice versa.
- **Work on messages you can provide the media now, thinking ahead about** questions journalists and editors might have. Create other messages geared

to getting the media to carry preparedness messages. Still other messages should include mental preparedness in the event of a severe pandemic.

Anticipate public concern and explain to the media how those concerns would be handled during a pandemic period.

- ☐ Create **messages and materials that explain containment**, which is the likely strategy to be used following the first sustained human-to-human transmissions. Explain how that phase works and how it has been used in the past, such as with SARS. Basically the goal is to detect, isolate and contain cases.
- ☐ Decide how you will promptly **deal with and respond to rumors**. It is important to proactively address reports that will create misplaced fear or unrealistic expectations. Call journalists calmly to correct rumors. Set up a schedule to brief journalists and editors now as well as during later stages.
- ☐ Set up **mechanisms for communications surveillance**. Alert the communications staff in the ministries and on the local level to keep track of what the media is covering about avian/pandemic influenza, how they are covering it. This is a way to track rumors, correct misperceptions and even find out about new cases or clusters.
- ☐ Make sure your **plan is flexible** and can be readily revised. Update your plan with new information and relevant staffing.

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## **Rapid Response and Containment Phase**

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### **Goals:**

- To instill and maintain the public's trust in the global and national public health system and to convey realistic expectations in its ability to respond to and manage the initial outbreak of an efficient transmission of a pandemic virus.
- To provide accurate, timely, consistent and comprehensive information about containment activities.
- To identify and address rumors, inaccuracies, and misperceptions quickly and prevent stigmatization of affected groups.
- To promote compliance within the containment zone, to rapidly identify barriers to compliance, and to react with new approaches to increase compliance through a policy of transparent communication.

### **Activities:**

- ☐ **Integrate communication staff** into all discussions regarding the containment plan.
- ☐ **Activate the outbreak communication committee** and put into place tasks outlined in communication plan to call on the spokesperson, release

- prepared messages, alert staff following defined command and control mechanisms. Attempt to ensure consistent messages.
- ☐ **Alert partners and international organizations** and request assistance if required.
  - ☐ **Create a schedule for media and public briefings** to maintain transparency and credibility. Offer concrete suggestions for action for the public.
  - ☐ **Call on opinion leaders and trusted sources** to assist with explaining the containment phase, the needs, challenges and opportunities.
  - ☐ **Work with technical experts to explain measures** and stress the importance and implications of compliance. Some studies have shown that social distancing might increase the likelihood of containment, such as closing schools, cancellation of mass gatherings and public transportation, at-home confinement.
  - ☐ **Create public awareness of first symptoms**, such as fever and/or cough, and explain self-monitoring for fever.
  - ☐ **WHO communications with the media** will adhere to WHO Outbreak Communication Guidelines to maintain trust, provide accurate and timely information, to quell fear.

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## **Pandemic Influenza Phase Declared**

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### **Goals:**

- To communicate rapidly among health and other government agencies and to reflect transparency with the public to ensure trust.
- To transmit to the public consistent messages in a full, timely and transparent manner about the evolution of the pandemic.
- To respond to rumors and inaccuracies to minimize concern, disruption and stigmatization.
- To reduce morbidity, mortality, and social disruption through a coordinated response.
- To identify the media and public's concerns.

### **Activities:**

- ☐ The communication team should **operate around the clock** at the start of the pandemic. Staffing should provide for at least two people for each function. Members should take turns carrying out the different functions, given what could be a high level of stress.
- ☐ **Put into place prepared communication command and control actions**, such as the notification system, the call to activate this stage of the plan, reporting to international authorities, alerting the media. **Make sure that plans** are still flexible and subject to frequent revision.

- ☐ Have the spokesperson **provide information to the public quickly**, even if the whole picture is not known. Decide whether to hold a news briefing and simultaneously releasing a prepared statement via a news release. Respond to initial questions openly and rapidly. Credibility hinges on early reaction and response to an outbreak.
- ☐ Brief the spokesperson on **crisis and outbreak communication measures** that should be used in accordance with WHO's guidelines.
- ☐ **Establish a schedule for updates** and releases for the media and the public.
- ☐ Release two or three of the **prepared messages** to the media at the start of reported human-to-human cases to keep public anxiety at a minimum and offer timely, precise, and up-to-date information. The messages should offer suggestions on what the public should do, for example, staying at home with a high fever, or where to get additional information.
- ☐ **Provide clear information on the threat** and what is being done and actions that will be taken. Plan to report on when the government received word, what steps were taken and when the public can expect an update.
- ☐ Put your plan into action to **work with educational and religious institutions** to convey action steps and ease concern. They should know in advance that they should distribute your messages on what needs to be done. Give the public activities to do, such as looking after neighbors.
- ☐ Work with the **private health sector**, especially **physicians, on messages** they will provide to the public, and with health care workers aiding the sick.
- ☐ **Promptly address rumors**, misperceptions, and stigmatization. Work with the media and community groups to correct misinformation. Be proactive about calling reporters to **set the record straight**.
- ☐ **Activate communications surveillance** with government communicators at all levels so you can monitor rumors, concerns, attitudes and actual cases.
- ☐ Put into place **scheduled updates** to the media and the public. Set a time to respond to questions as well as report on actions taken. Be prepared. Anticipate what the questions will be and decide what messages to highlight.
- ☐ **Be prepared to meet a possibly hostile media**. Keep three things in mind: don't lie, don't over-reassure, and acknowledge uncertainty.

The media will want to know what the public should do, what the government is doing, and when it will all be over. Don't speculate on numbers. Concentrate on building trust and credibility.

- Have top level government officials speak** to the public to promote calm and reflect the level of concern. It may be necessary to include the highest government representative, depending on the severity of the pandemic. Risk and crisis communication training is essential.
- Release public service announcements** prepared earlier to print, broadcast and radio media. It may be necessary to buy airtime now so that it can be used during a pandemic to get the government messages out clearly and quickly.
- Create a channel so that the concerned public can reach government** to share views, such as a phone hotline, radio line, internet web page.
- Continue research on what the public thinks and believes** that the government is doing to make sure that perceptions match realities.
- Continue to educate the media** by making sure they understand the terms you are using, such as "suspected cases." At the same time, avoid jargon and technical terminology when dealing with reporters.
- Transmit latest information of status of the disease**, explaining the situation with drugs, social distancing, measures that can be taken.
- Create measures to handle the elderly and isolated** so that they can receive help even if they have not contracted the disease.
- Brief the public on business continuity** measures and other activities that will affect their daily lives.
- Announce measures to provide testing** or other mechanisms designed to identify the course of the virus.
- Alert the public on how to handle dead bodies**, relying on prepared guidelines for emergency situations.
- Set up ways to alert the public that the crisis has passed** and that public services will be resumed.

## Target audience: Media

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### Pandemic Alert Period (current phase)

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#### Goals:

- To communicate preparedness measures and information to the public and external stakeholders via the media.
- To ensure that the media receives accurate, consistent and clear messages.
- To coordinate with WHO on pre-pandemic messages and prepare for pandemic responses.
- To prepare the public via the media about possible social disruption.
- To reaffirm government/organization position as the credible source for information about seasonal, avian and pandemic influenza.
- To educate the media about the science and techniques of risk communication.
- To establish and assess the communication infrastructure to respond to potential pandemic influenza.

#### Activities:

- Designate a spokesperson who can serve as the consistent and credible face for delivering messages to the media.
- Prepare Executive Management and selected technical staff for encounters with the media by offering outbreak and risk communication techniques. Emphasize the need to maintain credibility and trust, and focus on the need to acknowledge doubt and not to over-reassure. Messages and tone should be geared toward avoiding panic-driven responses.
- Create and distribute informational materials geared toward the media, such as fact sheets, questions and answers, and news releases. This should be part of an overall plan that includes a timeline for releasing materials regularly.
- Use research regarding knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about influenza to design story angles for the media, including television, specialized publications, radio and magazines as well as traditional newspapers. Highlight messages approved by the technical staff.
- Anticipate public concern and explain to the media how those concerns would be handled during a pandemic. Anticipate what the media will want to know.
- Produce public service announcements for print, radio and television aimed at preparedness and prevention. Focus on encouraging action, such as hand washing. Work with celebrities who have been used in the past and create psas for use during the pandemic as well as for prevention and preparedness.
- Generate materials to reach vulnerable and isolated populations, using appropriate language, channels and technology.
- Update media lists and contact information.

- ☐ Plan and implement media training sessions that include simulations. Assist journalists in understanding the science surrounding influenza viruses. Training should bolster both knowledge and professional skills. Let media owners know the potential impact on society.
- ☐ Define ways to work with the media during a pandemic, setting out guidelines for news conferences, updates, and interviews.
- ☐ Prepare measures to deal with rumors and inaccuracies. Public Information should contact reporters and/or editors to correct information that could lead to further misunderstandings or create social unrest.

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## **Pandemic Influenza Phase Declared**

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### **Goals:**

- To communicate rapidly, accurately, and clearly to the media about the dimensions of what is known about the pandemic. To transmit clear messages to the staff.
- To reflect transparency with the public via the media and to ensure trust.
- To respond to rumors and inaccuracies to minimize concern, disruption and stigmatization.
- To reduce morbidity, mortality, and social disruption through a coordinated response.

### **Activities:**

- ☐ Work with WHO and the countries to coordinate messages and activities. Activate measures enacted by the global pandemic communication network.
- ☐ The communications team should operate around the clock at the start of the pandemic.
- ☐ Put into place prepared communication steps, such as alerting the media to actions and measures. Make sure that plans are still flexible and subject to frequent revision.
- ☐ Have the spokesperson provide information to the media quickly, even if the whole picture is not known. Respond to initial questions openly and rapidly. Credibility hinges on early reaction and response to an outbreak.
- ☐ Release two or three of the prepared messages to the media at the start of reported human-to-human cases to keep public anxiety at a minimum and offer timely, precise, and up-to-date information. The messages should offer suggestions on what the public should do, for example, staying at home with a high fever, or where to get additional information.
- ☐ It is important to give clear information on what the threat consists of and what is being done and actions that will be taken. Plan to report on when the

Organization or government received word, what steps were taken and when the public can expect an update.

- ☐ Promptly address rumors, misperceptions, and stigmatization. Work with the media and community groups to correct misinformation. Be proactive about calling reporters to set the record straight.
- ☐ Put into place scheduled updates to the media and the public. Set a time to respond to questions as well as report on actions taken. Be prepared. Plan what the questions will be. Decide what messages should be highlighted.
- ☐ Have top level government officials speak to the media. It may be necessary to include the highest government official, depending on the severity of the pandemic.
- ☐ Release public service announcements prepared earlier to print, broadcast and radio media. It may be necessary to buy airtime now so that it can be used during a pandemic.
- ☐ Create channels through which the media can receive more information, such as a phone hotline, radio line, internet web page.
- ☐ Be prepared to meet a possibly hostile media. Keep three things in mind: don't lie, don't over reassure, and acknowledge uncertainty.

The media will want to know what the public should do, what the government is doing, and when it will all be over. Don't speculate on numbers. Concentrate on building trust and credibility.

- ☐ Continue to educate the media by making sure they understand the terminology, such as "suspected cases." At the same time, avoid jargon and technical terminology when dealing with reporters.

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**Components of a communication plan should include:**

- The health issue, problem or scenario based on various pandemic phases.
- Goals—to inform, persuade, or motivate, save lives.
- Objectives that are that are specific, measurable, assignable, reasonable, and time related and that focus on specific targeted audiences.
- Strategies and tactics that support the achievement of goals and objectives.
- Key audiences prioritized in order of importance.
- Partners, including their resources, strengths, and weaknesses.
- Lead spokespersons and public information officers.
- Training requirements and obligations for the media communication team.
- Preferred channels of communication – for example, through news releases, news conferences, the Internet, toll free telephone line, brochures, radio announcements, special events, door to door canvassing, media interviews.
- A timeline showing the start and completion of each phase of the communication plan.
- The proposed budget—how much it will cost to implement the communication plan.
- Tasks to be accomplished and who is responsible.
- Means for measuring achievement of objectives.

**An Effective Pandemic Influenza Communication Plan Should:**

- Inform and educate
- Enhance knowledge and understanding
- Establish and maintain trust and credibility
- Position the organization/agency as the main source of information and expertise
- Engage the public
- Encourage collaboration and cooperation
- Encourage constructive dialogue
- Gain support for policies and plans
- Create informed decision making
- Address rumors and misinformation
- Encourage appropriate behavior

### **Seven Key Risk Communication Concepts\***

- When health risks are uncertain, as likely will be the case during an influenza pandemic, people need information about what is known and unknown, and interim guidance to formulate decisions to help protect their health and the health of others.
- An influenza pandemic will generate immediate, intense, and sustained demand for information from the public, healthcare providers, policy makers, and the news media. Healthcare workers and public health staff may need training in media relations and public health communications.
- Timely and transparent dissemination of accurate, science-based information about pandemic influenza and the progress of the response can build public trust and confidence, particularly when such communication efforts are guided by established principles of risk communication.
- Coordination of message development and release of information among federal, state, and local health officials is critical to help avoid confusion that can undermine public trust, raise fear and anxiety, and impede response measures.
- Guidance to community members about how to protect themselves and their family and colleagues is an essential component of crisis management.
- Information to public audiences should be technically correct and sufficiently complete to encourage support of policies and official actions without seeming patronizing to the public.
- Information presented during an influenza pandemic should minimize speculation and avoid over-interpretation of data, overly confident assessments of investigations and control measures, and critical comments related to other jurisdictions.

\*U.S. Health and Human Services

### **Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication**

1. **Accept and involve the public as a partner.**  
Your goal is to produce an informed public, not to defuse public concerns or replace actions.
2. **Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts.**  
Different goals, audiences, and media require different actions.
3. **Listen to the public's specific concerns.**  
People often care more about trust, credibility, competence, fairness, and empathy than about statistics and details.
4. **Be honest, frank, and open.**  
Trust and credibility are difficult to obtain; once lost, they are almost impossible to regain.
5. **Work with other credible sources.**  
Conflicts and disagreements among organizations make communication with the public much more difficult.
6. **Meet the needs of the media.**  
The media are usually more interested in politics than risk, simplicity than complexity, danger than safety.
7. **Speak clearly and with compassion.**  
Never let your efforts prevent your acknowledging the tragedy of an illness, injury, or death. People can understand risk information, but they may still not agree with you; some people will not be satisfied.

(Covello and Allen 1988)



## **Pandemic & Avian Influenza Messages**

### **Pre-Event Messages**

#### **What is pandemic flu?**

##### **Pandemic flu is a worldwide flu outbreak.**

- The outbreak is caused by a new influenza virus. Flu pandemics occurred 3 times in the last century.
- The flu spreads from person to person and is highly contagious.
- Pandemic flu is expected to have a high death rate.

##### **Pandemic influenza is different from seasonal flu.**

- Seasonal outbreaks of flu are caused by viruses that have already spread among people.
- Pandemic influenza is the development of a new virus that most people in the world have never been exposed and have no immunity.
- Vaccine will not be available initially. New vaccine production can take as long as 3-6 months.

### **Treatment Messages: Pandemic Flu**

#### **What treatment is there for pandemic flu?**

##### **This is a new strain of flu. There would be no specific vaccine available.**

- Researchers are currently trying to make a vaccine to protect humans against H5N1 and H9N2.

##### **Antivirals or Tamiflu may be available.**

- There are influenza antiviral drugs approved for the treatment and or relief of influenza symptoms.
- They will not keep someone from getting the flu.
- They can lessen symptoms if taken within 48 hours of becoming ill with the flu.

##### **Those who are ill should remain at home.**

- Drink plenty of fluids and rest.
- Use good respiratory hygiene (wash hands, cough into sleeve or tissue).
- Limit exposure to family members and friends.

## **Symptom Messages: Pandemic Flu**

### **What are the symptoms of pandemic flu?**

#### **Signs and symptoms of seasonal flu are well known.**

- Symptoms include fever, headache, aches and cough.
- Signs and symptoms appear approximately 2-5 days after exposure.
- Illness may last 1-2 weeks.

#### **Signs and symptoms of pandemic flu may differ.**

- Do we know
- If you believe you have the (event specific) flu, contact your health care provider right away.
- Receiving the proper health care early is important.

## **Event Messages: Pandemic Flu**

### **What should the public know about an outbreak of pandemic flu?**

#### **A worldwide outbreak of influenza virus now poses a worldwide risk.**

- Influenza is highly contagious and is spread by coughing and sneezing.
- Past influenza pandemics have led to high levels of illness, death, social disruption and economic loss.

#### **To reduce the risk you should**

- Avoid close contact with the sick, wash hands (use soap), quit smoking, avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- If you're sick, stay away from others, cover your mouth when sneezing or coughing, throw away used tissue, and sanitize household objects.

#### **Reduce contact and slow the spread of disease.**

- Schools may close and public gatherings may be postponed for protection.
- You may be asked for voluntary isolation of those who have been exposed for as long as the incubation period of the disease.
- Those who are ill should remain isolated until \_\_\_ after the end of fever.

## **Messages: Avian**

### **What is Avian Flu?**

#### **Avian flu is any flu found in birds.**

- The Avian flu (H5n1) that has spread to humans is widespread in Asia and has occurred in other countries.

#### **It's possible for avian flu to spread to humans.**

▼

- Although rare, human cases have been reported in Southeast Asia and other countries.
- Most cases have come from direct contact with infected birds or their droppings.
- Avian flu has caused serious disease and death.

**An outbreak is possible.**

- Disease could change to a human infectious form and spread from country to country.
- Plans are being developed to produce vaccine quickly.
- Anti-viral drugs will be stockpiled, but will likely be in short supply for the next year or two.

## **Preparedness Messages: Pandemic Flu**

### **What can the public or a business do to prepare for pandemic flu?**

**Determine the impact a pandemic would have on your business.**

- Determine the impact for a large number of employees getting sick.
- Determine the impact from a customer perspective.
- Determine the impact on your inventory of products or services.

**Develop an emergency plan to operate during a pandemic.**

- Train personnel, identify critical positions and test plan.
- Cross-train for critical positions.
- Prioritize personnel for possible vaccination (if available).

**Network with external partners to ensure continued services**

- Set up brainstorm sessions to meet and begin discussion.
- Develop strategies.
- Practice these strategies.

**What can people do to prepare for a flu pandemic?**

- Right now, people can practice healthy behaviors:
  - If you smoke, stop.
  - Wash your hands regularly, cough and sneeze into a tissue, and keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth.
  - Eat nutritious food.
  - Get exercise.
  - Get enough sleep.
  - Get an annual influenza shot to protect from seasonal strains that are circulating.
- Families can create their own safety plan, keep a chart with basic medical information about family members, prepare a first aid kit and stock emergency supplies including food, medicines and cleaning supplies.

## **Messages: Pandemic Flu**

### Why could there be voluntary isolation?

#### **Flu is very contagious.**

- Flu can be spread through the air (by coughing or sneezing) or by direct contact with someone who is infected.
- An infected person can spread flu before developing symptoms.
- A person who has the seasonal flu is possibly contagious for up to five days after getting sick.

#### **Isolation may slow down the spread of flu.**

- Isolation limits personal contact.
- Slowing the spread of flu can allow manufacturers of flu vaccine time to develop and dispense a vaccine that is effective against this virus. Slowing the spread of flu may have an impact on how widespread the pandemic becomes, and reduce the number of people infected.

## **Protective Messages: Pandemic Flu**

### Now that there's an outbreak, what can people do to protect themselves?

#### **Avoid close contact with people who are sick.**

- Limit attendance at public events.
- Cover mouth and nose with your hand, sleeve or tissue every time you sneeze or cough.
- Put used tissue in the trash.

#### **Stay home from work, school or errands when you are sick.**

- You can spread flu to coworkers, resulting in severe staff shortages.
- Have extra food and symptom relieving medications on hand or ask others who are not ill to bring them to you.
- Friends or helpers can leave supplies outside your door so that you do not expose them to the flu.

#### **Wash your hands often with soap or use a hand sanitizer if soap and water aren't available.**

- Flu can be spread by direct contact.
- Soap or hand sanitizer can kill the flu virus.
- Hand washing is a very effective way to reduce the spread of flu.