



## Preparing A Pandemic Plan

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### Feature

A well-understood plan can be the difference between the proper handling of an outbreak and mass hysteria.

### CM/Spotlight: Outbreak Control

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Though the chances of a communicable disease outbreak at your facility may seem slim and the notion farfetched, the prospect is all too real and many facilities are ill prepared to handle such a fiasco.

As with most aspects in life, extensive research and strategization are the foundations of any successful system — be it a cleaning regimen or a pandemic plan.

Increasing national media coverage of H1N1 Influenza A (swine flu) virus infections have caused many building service contractors and in-house operations to rethink the way they clean and disinfect their buildings.

The spread of infectious diseases is nothing new, as norovirus, vancomycin-resistant *enterococci* (VRE), methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), *Clostridium difficile* (*C. diff*), shigella, listeria, etc., have caused calamity for cleaners over the years.

However, it is a general practice to "not rock the boat" unless outside stimuli warrant such action.

That tipping point has been reached — arguably during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) scare of 2003 — and more companies and organizations are putting their ideas on paper and drafting formal pandemic preparedness plans for their facilities.

### The Importance Of A Plan

While there are numerous reasons why a written pandemic preparedness plan is important, the benefits all relate to the improved management of resources.

A written plan can help:

- Set expectations for the handling of any situation that may arise by both management and staff
- Define what products and techniques should be used in various circumstances
- Organize the thoughts of management and staff and aid in the implementation and execution of the plan.

"I've never seen a written plan without some intrinsic value," says Thomas Bell, Ph.D., product safety and regulatory affairs senior scientist with the Procter & Gamble Company.

A plan not only provides peace of mind for managers and supervisors if and when an outbreak occurs, but also increases the knowledgebase of custodial professionals and serves as a refresher course to previous training.

For additional information about drafting a pandemic preparedness plan, visit: [emergency.cdc.gov](http://emergency.cdc.gov); [www.who.int/en](http://www.who.int/en); or [www.cpha.ca/en/default.aspx](http://www.cpha.ca/en/default.aspx).

## **What To Include**

A well-thought out plan should address and define, at the very least: Who the plan benefits and which individuals are leveraged to carry it out; what tactics should be employed at various stages of implementation; where custodial professionals should focus their cleaning attention; when the plan should come to fruition; and how much time and attention should be denoted to specific tasks in designated areas.

"One important item to mention: Confirm that the correct disinfectant is being used on the appropriate surfaces," notes Terry Zastrow, owner of Zastrow Building Maintenance Company Inc. "For instance, our 'regular' disinfectant cleans a whole list of things — including *Staphylococcus aureus* — but doesn't cover the H1N1 virus. So, we reminded all staff which disinfectant to use on touch points. You may want to confirm that your chemical will be adequate for the virus or it defeats the purpose of 'disinfecting' surfaces."

Increased signage and building occupant awareness campaigns are important aspects of a holistic plan.

Because repetition is a key to remembering, signage and awareness campaigns should stress the importance of preparation and be administered in such a way that their messages are not quickly forgotten.

"What we are doing for our customers is education," says Ken Galo, owner of L&K Office Cleaning Services. "We are letting them know, again, what we do, how we do it and what we do it with. This seems to be the best answer. They know we are making our best effort for control, containment and risk reduction in the limited frequency and amount of time we are allotted in the facility."

When preparing a pandemic plan, reinforcement is a key metric to success.

## **Say What?**

The more individuals involved in the preparation of a pandemic plan the better.

It would be counterintuitive to insist that only upper management can have a say regarding what the plan consists of — and vice versa.

Managers and supervisors tend to have a better understanding of the expectations of building owners while end users generally have greater knowledge of what building occupants require from the custodial staff.

According to Bell, there are three levels of involvement with pandemic planning:

- Experienced medical staff and sanitarians who can offer expertise and technical insight for eradicating threats
- Management personnel who understand the business aspect of having a written plan
- Custodial professionals who know building occupant expectations and hurdles associated with service delivery.

Many facility managers say they are "cleaning as usual" in this age of increased cognizance because they have employed sound infection and outbreak control protocols for many years.

There is, however, no such thing as being "too well-prepared."

"I would congratulate any company, organization or facility with a system robust enough to account for any outbreak because systems sway and change over time and are not strictly adhered to in every instance," states Bell.

"Assume the worst case scenario," Bell continues. "We release 10,000 virions with one sneeze. All the germs and bacteria are present because we don't constantly clean every touch point."

### **Preferred Equipment And Techniques**

Bacteria are adaptable while viruses are not.

Therefore, your plan should address this issue by eliminating bacterial threats and neutralizing those of the viral designation.

This is accomplished with a two-step process: Adequately clean the surface and then disinfect it — allowing sufficient dwell or contact time.

Because disinfectants are classified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as pesticides — and therefore fall under the regulatory blanket of the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) — caution must be exerted with their use, especially in schools and health care facilities with susceptible or at-risk populations.

Another important factor in the effectiveness of a plan put is the dilution of chemicals.

An improperly diluted disinfectant will have an adverse effect than what is expected.

Instead of killing or neutralizing the threat, a weak solution will actually foster resistance in the bacteria or virus, making it more virulent and increasingly more difficult to eliminate.

Similar situations arise with the overuse of prescription medication and the subsequent antibiotic-resistant superbugs that ensue.

It is now clear that simply offering additional gel- or foam-based hand sanitizers throughout facilities — although important — is not adequate to curb the threat of a pandemic outbreak in the facility or facilities you maintain.

Establishing and implementing a comprehensive plan that includes both cleaning performance and occupant awareness is a necessary and logical course of action.

Failure to do so is unnecessarily foolish and downright dangerous to you, your employees, your building occupants and the rest of society.

Provision profound professionalism by procuring a pandemic preparedness plan — it is in the best interest of us all.