It’s Not Flu As Usual
WHAT FAITH-BASED AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PANDEMIC FLU
A LETHAL PANDEMIC FLU COULD DEVASTATE OUR COMMUNITIES

“Pandemics happen globally but must be managed at the state and local level…. Preparation works and it can save lives.”
-- U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt 1-12-06

Every winter, the U.S. suffers a seasonal flu that kills approximately 36,000 Americans and hospitalizes more than 200,000. Terrible as that is, health experts are now warning about a far more lethal kind of flu -- a pandemic flu that could kill over half a million Americans, hospitalized more than two million, cost our economy a staggering $70-$160 billion in lost productivity and direct medical expenses, and impact virtually every community.

Public health authorities are particularly concerned about the H5N1 avian "bird flu" virus that could mutate into a new strain of flu against which humans would have no immunity. The World Health Organization has warned that such a bird flu pandemic could infect 25-30 percent of the world's population.

If a severe pandemic were to hit the U.S., life as we know it could be seriously disrupted.

Businesses and schools might have to shut down. Travel could be restricted. Essential government services -- including sanitation, water, power, and social services -- could be interrupted. The food supply could be affected. And public gatherings, including worship services, might have to be canceled.

If the U.S. is to meet this threat, every segment of our society must be informed and prepared. Faith-based and community organizations have an especially important role to play. As we saw in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many people turn to religious and community organizations for assistance and comfort in the event of a health emergency. Your organization may also be called upon to work directly with government agencies and health officials to protect the public if a pandemic flu strikes.

But just at the time when your services will be in great demand, your ability to provide assistance may be limited because many of your employees or volunteers may be unable to work. They may be sick themselves, or taking care of sick family members, or perhaps afraid of catching the flu from others. Public health officials project a cumulative absenteeism rate of 25-30 percent over three to four months during a pandemic flu outbreak. This could disrupt or even shut down your operations.

To help you meet the challenge, this brochure offers guidance on how faith-based and community organizations can:

- Prepare for a pandemic flu in order to maintain a continuity of operations and services.
- Work with health officials to minimize organizational disruption.
- Encourage congregations, those you serve, and your volunteers and staff to take common-sense precautions to prevent the spread of flu.
The role of government

If pandemic flu strikes, government will be responsible for issuing information and warnings to the public, and for working with the media to disseminate advice on how to avoid becoming ill. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov), the federal government’s consolidated pandemic influenza Web site (www.pandemicflu.gov), and the World Health Organization (www.who.org) are good sources of information about pandemic flu.

Your state and local public health departments are also excellent resources. You should know who to contact in your local health department to report flu cases and learn who within the local health department will be issuing official guidance should a pandemic strike. If you do not have a relationship with your local health department, your county or city government Web site should have a link or you can find the information in the government pages of your local phone book.
Common Sense Precautions to Prevent the Spread of Flu

All flu, including pandemic flu, is caused by viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. It is generally spread from person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

An effective vaccination against the pandemic flu – when it is available – will be the best way to prevent the disease.

To fight the annual flu, members of high-risk groups should get a flu shot. Even those who are not in the high-risk categories should get a flu shot if enough vaccine is available, especially healthcare workers.

The following simple, common-sense precautions can also help. Recommended by the CDC, they should be communicated to your employees, volunteers, and those you serve.

I Avoid close contact with people who are sick. If you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick, too.

I Stay home when you’re sick or have flu symptoms. Get plenty of rest and check with your doctor.

I Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. If you don’t have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve, not your hands. It may prevent those around you from getting sick.

I Clean your hands. Washing your hands often will help protect you and others against germs. When soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based disposable hand rubs or gel sanitizers.

I Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are often spread to your system when you touch something that is contaminated with germs and then touch your eyes, nose or mouth.

I Practice other good health habits. Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious foods. Avoid smoking, which may increase the risk of serious consequences if you do contract the flu.

Funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, a supporter of the Pandemic Preparedness Initiative and The California Endowment.