As Coronavirus Spreads, Prepare Infectious-Disease Plans

By Allen Smith, J.D.

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More countries are reporting cases of coronavirus, and employers around the world have been asked to educate their workforces on how to prevent the spread of the virus.

🔒 **SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT**

Managing Communicable Diseases in the Workplace (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx)

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has issued travel notices advising that precautions be taken when traveling to Hong Kong, Iran and Italy, as the number of cases of coronavirus has spiked in these countries. Precautions include cleaning hands often by washing them with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, and covering the mouth and nose with a tissue or sleeve (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/Coronavirus-Virus-What-Employers-Need-to-Know.aspx)—not hands—when coughing or sneezing. The CDC also issued travel precautions for Japan and South Korea, including postponing nonessential travel for older adults and those with chronic medical conditions.

Such advice goes only so far, however. While employers can take commonsense steps (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/address-workplace-coronavirus-concerns.aspx) to prevent the spread of the virus, such as issuing travel restrictions (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/global-hr/Pages/travel-to-China-cut-due-to-coronavirus.aspx), or more-controversial steps such as telling people to stay away from work during the 14-day incubation period if they are returning from regions with high infection rates, they might not be enough to prevent the spread of the disease. Employers in the U.S. should review their infectious-disease management plans. If they don't have these plans, now is the time to create them. [See "Health Agencies: Prepare Now for Coronavirus (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/Health-Agencies-Prepare-Now-for-Coronavirus.aspx)"]

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Global Spread

Worldwide, at least 2,600 people have died from the coronavirus, mostly in mainland China, and more than 79,350 have been infected, according to CNN.

Feedback

CNN reported that the virus had spread to 32 countries and territories outside mainland China. As of Feb. 24, these countries and the number of infections are:

- Afghanistan: 1
- Australia: 22
- Belgium: 1
- Cambodia: 1
- Canada: 10
- Egypt: 1
- Finland: 1
- France: 12 infections, 1 death
- Germany: 16
- Hong Kong: 79 infections, 2 deaths
- India: 3
- Iran: 61 infections, 12 deaths
- Israel: 1
- Italy: 219 infections, 5 deaths
- Japan: 838 infections, including 691 linked to a cruise ship (https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/18/asia/japan-health-guidelines-coronavirus-hnk-intl/index.html), and 4 deaths
- Kuwait: 3
- Macao: 10
- Malaysia: 22
- Nepal: 1
- Philippines: 3 infections, 1 death
- Russia: 2
- Singapore: 89
- South Korea: 833 infections, 7 deaths
- Spain: 2
- Sri Lanka: 1
- Sweden: 1
- Taiwan: 28 infections, 1 death
- Thailand: 35
- United Arab Emirates: 9
- United Kingdom: 13
- United States: 35
- Vietnam: 16

The mayor of Daegu, South Korea, has asked residents to stay inside after cases of coronavirus infection were linked to a church service, *The Washington Post* reported Feb. 20. "Many international experts say the disease will continue to spread globally, even as the Chinese government seeks to present the image that it is coming to grips with the epidemic," the article stated (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/south-korean-coronavirus-spike-linked-to-doomsday-sect-with-messianic-leader/2020/02/21/cd3e1220-54c2-11ea-9e47-59804be1dcfb_story.html).

In Singapore, a 14-day leave of absence for employees returning from China is compulsory and being strictly enforced, said Erika Collins, an attorney with Epstein Becker Green in New York City.

Infectious-Disease Management Plans

Many organizations, particularly multinationals, have infectious-disease management plans, but the majority do not, said John Beattie, a principal consultant with Sungard Availability Services (Sungard AS) in Wayne, Pa. Sungard AS assesses the state of companies' business continuity plans to identify gaps, including vulnerabilities when there is an outbreak of an infectious disease.

Employers not only have to deal with the current outbreak, but they also must prepare for the virus to recur next year. If the coronavirus is not controlled soon, it could materialize stronger and faster next winter, he cautioned.

Companies need emergency teams headed by a coronavirus coordinator and a cross-functional team that includes HR, legal and information technology, said Joseph Deng, an attorney with Baker McKenzie in Los Angeles.

An effective pandemic plan addresses such topics as:

- Workplace safety precautions.
- Employee travel restrictions.
- Provisions for stranded travelers unable to return home.
- Mandatory medical check-ups, vaccinations or medication.
- Mandatory reporting of exposure, such as employees reporting to employers and employers reporting to public health authorities.
- Employee quarantine or isolation.
- Facility shutdowns.

[SHRM members-only toolkit: Managing Through Flu and Other Epidemics in the Workplace (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/Pages/managingfluandepidemics.aspx)*]*

Plans should detail how to communicate with employees about staying away from work when they are sick and telecommuting if necessary, Beattie noted.

Consider other forms of social distancing that can help prevent the spread of the virus. He noted one company located in a New York City skyscraper that didn't want its employees exposed to the germs of everyone else in the building, so it had a bank of elevators reserved solely for its floors.

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"Giving a sense of calm is important if there is an outbreak," he added. "Employees should feel like they're in good hands with management and that managers are concerned about them."

Even if companies don't have pandemic policies, many have disaster-preparedness policies, which are analogous, Deng said. If an office is in the path of the pandemic, it should shut down, just as it would if it were in the path of a hurricane or wildfire, he noted.

Employers should check the CDC website (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html) every day to track the coronavirus, recently named COVID-19, Collins said. The World Health Organization (https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/21/805287609/theres-a-flood-of-fake-news-about-coronavirus-and-a-plan-to-stop-it) is reaching out to *Fortune* 500 employers, asking them to educate their workers.

Susan Gross Sholinsky, an attorney with Epstein Becker Green in New York City, added, "People should be mindful of the regular flu, as well."

Be Reasonable in Applying Policies

Feedback

In implementing an infectious-disease management plan, employers should be reasonable in how they apply their policies, Deng said. How long a company keeps a facility shut in the event of a pandemic is a key consideration. In China, that issue is raising questions about whether there will be furloughs, in which case employees will need to be notified and paid at a furlough rate, he stated.

"This will pass. Don't forget about the needs of employees," Deng said. "How will you turn on lights again and keep the workforce engaged so you come out stronger and more resilient?"

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