

A NOVEL APPROACH FOR A NOVEL VIRUS: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Contingency Planning

“The unseen enemy is always the most fearsome” - GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

As I awaited my flight to Washington DC this past weekend, the airport appeared to be noticeably less crowded than usual. Perhaps the early morning flight, on a Sunday, after losing an hour of sleep as a result of daylight savings time wasn't exactly everybody's cup of tea. Over the next couple of hours, however, I began to suspect that the decline in travel volume might be more so related to fear surrounding the current coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak than as a result of my poor travel planning. The expanding reach of the COVID-19 outbreak took on even greater significance when, just moments before my flight, I received an email indicating that the national conference I had planned on attending had been canceled due to a reported COVID-19 case at the hosting hotel/convention center.

It has been just over two months since this novel virus made its entrance on the world stage, and a little over one month since the first case was reported in the United States. As of the date of this posting, COVID-19 has been detected in over 115 countries and has infected over 130,000 globally including over 1,400 documented cases in the US. While we can reasonably expect that the actual number of cases will vary widely from the current “reported” cases and that facts and figures related to mortality and persistence will become clearer over time, what we do know (and I could be wrong ... please be wrong) is that this “novel” virus appears to have every intention of sticking around for quite some time.

I've spent the greater part of 25 years as an environmental, health and safety (EH&S) consultant and have essentially made a career out of assessing and managing risk. In my experience, there are two basic categories of risk. There are those risks that can be reasonably predicted and controlled, and there are those that cannot. And history has shown us that those risks that are most difficult to predict and control often bring with it the greatest level of fear and associated economic impacts.

While we cannot predict the level of risk that COVID-19 will represent a year from now, two things have become abundantly clear. The threats posed by this emerging pathogen are very real, and the risks posed to businesses, institutions and public health are significant.

While this is not a time for panic, it is most certainly a time for preparedness. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and other public health agencies have issued extensive guidance on how to protect ourselves from exposure. What is equally important, however, are the steps that businesses and institutions can take to help mitigate the level of risk posed to their employees, customers and the general public while limiting economic risk.

AN EFFECTIVE CONTINGENCY PLAN

In the EH&S industry, we often refer to this planning process as “contingency planning”, or a series of actions or steps to provide for business continuity, disaster recovery and risk management in the case of an uncertain but potentially significant future event. This approach has been used effectively by organizations for threats ranging from emergency chemical releases to cyber-attacks. While this approach has not been used wisely for viral pathogen outbreaks, the elements of contingency planning apply equally as well to our ability to respond to the novel coronavirus outbreak.

The following is a summary of critical elements and considerations for an effective contingency plan:

- 1. Risk Assessment** – Every business or institution faces their own unique risks. Understanding the unique threats and potential impacts of a crisis are critical to identifying appropriate response measures.



2. Policies and Procedures – The mere existence of a written plan is perhaps the most important element of a contingency plan. Without a written plan, all else is likely to fail. The written plan should include both “proactive” elements to prevent a critical event and “reactive” elements in the event that a critical event occurs. For instance, corporate policies and procedures may include the following considerations:

- 1) Will employee travel be limited to “essential business” travel?
- 2) Are any travel restrictions to be put in place?
- 3) If an employee travels to a restricted destination during personal travel, do any special quarantine provisions apply prior to returning to work?

3. Communication – An effective contingency plan must identify who must be informed, what information will be communicated, and how the information will be delivered. All relevant parties should be considered in the plan including employees, customers, suppliers, and even the general public (as applicable).

4. Responsibilities – The written plan must not only clearly define the different individuals responsible for the execution of the plan, but also the specific responsibilities of each individual.

5. Scenarios, Triggers, Responses – Different levels of events may require different levels of responses. For instance, a University may evaluate the following questions:

- 1) What policies do we have in place to proactively protect our employees/customers/occupants from exposure?
- 2) How do we respond in the event that a “suspected” case is identified at or near our University?
- 3) How does this response differ from a “confirmed” case identified within one of our facilities?

By evaluating the various plausible scenarios, we can better evaluate not only when to take action but what specific action is to be taken based upon the defined “trigger” criteria.

6. Training, Decontamination, Personal Protective Equipment – When dealing with specialized chemicals or working with potential human pathogens, employers are responsible for providing employees with a safe and healthful work environment. While routine janitorial services may appear to be similar to pathogen-related cleaning methods, they are inherently different. Employers should evaluate the preparedness level of their employees including the following considerations:

- 1) Do employees understand the potential hazards associated with their work operations and how to protect themselves from exposure?
- 2) How do “routine” cleaning procedures differ from those performed to combat potential coronavirus exposure?

7. Timelines – Detailed timelines should be identified for responses and communications. We can all probably think of at least one organization that has successfully handled a crisis, and several more that have failed miserably in responding in a timely and prudent manner. In our work environments, we should all consider the following:

- 1) If a documented case is reported in the work environment, when will employees be notified?
- 2) How quickly and with what frequency will cleaning measures be implemented to prevent the spread of disease?

8. Verification – Once the critical elements of the plan have been established, it’s important to periodically verify that the elements of the plan are sufficient, that responsibilities are clearly understood, and that plan elements are effectively implemented. The best time to evaluate your ability to respond to a critical event is before it happens, not after.

THE WISDOM TO PREPARE

None of us can predict what the future holds, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 coronavirus, but we do have the choice in how we respond to the challenges ahead. It’s quite possible that the COVID-19 coronavirus becomes so pervasive over time that living with it becomes our new normal. However, until that time, we will hopefully have the wisdom to prepare thoroughly and respond prudently to the emerging threat.

For more information on how True North may assist your organization with emerging pathogen contingency planning, COVID-19 awareness training, cleaning and disinfection procedures, or cleaning verification procedures, please visit our website at www.consulttruenorth.com or reach out directly to Michael D. Brennan at mbrennan@consulttruenorth.com.