



## “How to Protect Your Faith Community from Influenza”

Faith based communities can play an important role in helping to protect their members and the community at large from influenza. This fact sheet outlines some options that your faith community might consider to help maintain the health of your members and prevent the spread of flu.

### Easy ways to prevent influenza

The best ways to prevent flu are also the easiest. Encourage your congregation to adopt these safe hygiene practices and help keep your faith community healthy and influenza-free:

- Wash your hands frequently,
- Cover your coughs and sneezes by coughing or sneezing into a tissue or into your sleeve, and
- Avoiding contact with others when you are sick with the flu.

Here are some other things you can do to prevent flu in your faith community:

- Keep adequate supplies of hand washing soap and single use hand drying supplies or equipment (e.g., disposable towels, air dryers) available at all times in food service and dining areas, bathrooms, children’s nurseries, and other areas where toileting or food service may occur.
- Consider making hand sanitizers available throughout the facility, especially where food is prepared or eaten.
- Encourage members who have flu-like illness to not attend services or events until they are feeling better.
- If your staff members have flu-like illness, ask them not to come to work or go into the community (except to seek medical care), from the start of their illness until they are feeling better.
- Clean your facility regularly, with special attention to washroom facilities. Also, thoroughly clean frequently touched surfaces such as counter and table tops, doorknobs and handles, faucets, toys, sports equipment, computer keyboards, telephones, etc.
- For more information, see the following fact sheets:
  - [Environmental Cleaning and the Influenza Virus](#)
  - [How You Can Reduce the Spread of Influenza](#)

## **Changes to worship and other services:**

In the event of a serious flu pandemic, faith communities should consider canceling or modifying worship and other basic services to prevent the spread of infection. Here are some infection control measures that you might consider:

- In the event of a serious pandemic, faith groups should be prepared to cancel all gatherings, including worship services. Decisions need to be made about which services are essential and need to be maintained through a time of emergency and which services can be suspended.
- Look for new ways to communicate rapidly, using a wide range of communication channels so that communication can continue when normal communications are disrupted.
- Identify ways to provide the experience of communal worship remotely, such as:
  - Telephone conference calls
  - Posting audio or video copies of sermons on faith community websites
  - Internet groups that provide interactive opportunities for members to communicate with each other
  - Interactive email list serves and bulletins
  - Mailed newsletters or worship bulletins, or pre-recorded phone messages on a designated call-in line.
- If you are blessing (e.g., the laying on of hands) or anointing someone (e.g., with oil) who has 'flu', your hands should be washed immediately afterwards.
- Sharing of common vessels for food and drink should temporarily cease (e.g., the sharing of cups for Christian Communion or Eucharist, and the tradition of Langar in the Sikh religion for the free vegetarian-only food served in a Gurdwara).
- Situations where a faith leader may cross-contaminate others should temporarily cease (e.g. communion on the tongue, which may contaminate the priest's fingers and lead to the infection of others).

## **Plan for staff to be away due to illness**

A flu pandemic is likely to result in significant increases in the levels of absenteeism within all organizations. Expect between 15-35% of your staff to be away due to influenza.

Faith communities should have succession plans, and should clarify in advance who will function in key roles if leaders are affected by illness and become unavailable for lengthy periods of time. Faith communities may also identify persons in the congregation who are prepared and able to help offer services.

To the extent possible, cross-train staff and volunteers to help ensure essential jobs will be performed.

Plan for job flexibility. As example, working at home may be a viable option for some positions. For those jobs that cannot be done from home, flexible work hours and staggered shifts may help to limit the number of people who gather at the workplace at one time.

## **Plan for increased demands**

In addition to maintaining delivery of core activities, faith-based communities should also plan for increased demand for specific services. For example, it is likely that faith leaders will face increased calls to visit ill people at home and in hospitals. It is therefore advisable to start planning for how you might cope with increased demand. Faith-based communities may therefore wish to expand their volunteer base of pastoral care providers, in anticipation of increasing demand and reduced availability of volunteers.

In the event of a worst-case scenario with a more virulent flu, there may be a need to support dying and bereaved persons. In addition to planning with other local stakeholders for higher than usual levels of funeral services, plans should take into account that people including workers and ministers may be bereaved. This may not be manageable within existing resources.

## **Plan to serve the community during a crisis**

Faith leaders and their communities are regarded as a critical resource and may be called upon to help serve the community during a pandemic. Here are some areas where faith communities can provide support:

- Helping to reach vulnerable populations that others may not be able to (e.g. refugees and illegal immigrants who attend religious events but are not known to authorities; persons with disabilities).
- Helping to promote important health care and prevention messages issued by local health authorities.
- Help care for ill members of your community through volunteer visitors who are trained in infection control. Volunteers could help monitor those who are ill when other health services are stretched beyond their limit.
- Organize members of your community to be Flu Friends to collect medications, essential supplies and food for those in the community that are unable to do so themselves. Participants should be instructed in how they can do this safely without putting themselves or others at risk for transmission of flu.
- Faith leaders can help to explain to their communities the rationale for recommendations made by the health system in response to the flu.

## For more information

Consult with Health Links at 788-8200 for health care advice as needed. Access emergency services if an individual is acutely ill and requires immediate medical attention.

Please contact your local community health office and ask to speak with a public health nurse if you have questions about flu prevention. Community health office phone numbers are listed on page 9 of the Winnipeg Health Services Directory (blue pages in the middle of your Winnipeg MTS White Pages telephone book).

Related Sources: Faith Communities and Pandemic Flu: Guidance for faith communities and local influenza pandemic committees Department for Communities and Local Government, London England, May 2009. [www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)