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Safety & Health

Unions' Survey Finds Over One-Third Of Facilities Not Ready for Pandemic Flu

Only 4 percent of surveyed union leaders representing health care workers reported that their workplaces were “very ready” to respond adequately to an influenza pandemic, while another 33 percent felt their facilities were “ready for most things,” according to a report released April 16.

By contrast, the report found, 29 percent said their workplaces were “ready for some things” and 34 percent reported that their workplaces were either “ready for just a few things” or “not ready at all.”

The AFL-CIO and six unions prepared the report, “Healthcare Workers in Peril: Preparing to Protect Worker Health and Safety During Pandemic Influenza.”

The report made several recommendations for protecting health care workers, who would face a high risk of infection during a pandemic flu. Among the recommendations, the unions urged the Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration to issue a mandatory workplace standard addressing airborne transmissible diseases.

Unions had called on the Bush administration to propose and finalize a standard to protect health care workers during a pandemic flu. In May 2007, OSHA released a guidance on pandemic influenza preparedness for the health care industry ([98 DLR A-10, 5/22/07](#)), which unions criticized as insufficient. In January, the AFL-CIO called for an OSHA pandemic flu regulation, similar to that proposed by California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health.

In the current report, the unions pointed out that 34 percent of the facilities represented in the survey did not have a pandemic flu plan. “In our view, the finding that a substantial proportion of the facilities surveyed lack a comprehensive plan speaks to the failure of the voluntary approach the federal government has taken regarding the planning for pandemic influenza,” the unions said.

In addition to the AFL-CIO, the unions involved included the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; American Federation of Teachers; Communications Workers of America; Service Employees International Union; United American Nurses; and United Food and Commercial Workers.

Survey Distributed to Union Leaders

In order to assess whether employers were taking adequate steps to protect workers, the group of unions developed a “pandemic flu preparedness survey” that was distributed nationwide to union leaders who represented health care workers in unionized facilities. Completed surveys corresponding to 104 facilities were collected by six unions in 14 states, the group said. Covered facilities were mostly hospitals, they said, but other facilities, such as home health, corrections,

and outpatient clinics, were included. The surveys covered more than 190,000 health care employees.

According to the survey results, 64 percent of the facilities had a procedure to identify and isolate patients with symptoms associated with pandemic flu, while 34 percent did not. Fifty-four percent of facilities had identified workers who are at risk of exposure to pandemic flu, while 46 percent had not.

The survey found that 57 percent of facilities had not provided training to workers on pandemic flu, 52 percent had not communicated a pandemic flu plan to workers, and 69 percent had not conducted drills to determine if their plans would work.

Unions' Recommendations

In addition to urging OSHA to issue a mandatory workplace standard on airborne transmissible diseases, the unions offered the following recommendations:

- Congress should identify a mechanism to assure that health care facilities not covered by the Occupational Safety and Health Act comply with an OSHA transmissible disease standard.
- Congress should assess the readiness and the deficiencies in health care facilities in addressing pandemic influenza.
- Congress or the Government Accountability Office should evaluate the funding and readiness of state and local pandemic influenza plans.
- The worker protection measures in the Health and Human Services and the Center for Disease Control's current pandemic influenza plan should be strengthened.
- State public health departments should strengthen the worker health and safety elements of their state pandemic influenza plans.

An OSHA representative could not be reached for comment.

Text of the report may be accessed at <http://op.bna.com/dlrcases.nsf/r?Open=vros-7rbnjs>.