

**Whatcom County Pandemic Influenza Task Force
Community Preparedness Planning Recommendations
July 2006**



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Executive Summary

Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Planning

Pandemic influenza is different from most emergency situations in that it involves a communicable disease, it is sustained, and it is universal. A pandemic influenza event has a high potential to instill panic due to the ongoing threat after the initial event. Exposure and risk of infection may not be visible, and a scarcity of products to prevent and treat illness will contribute to community unrest. Preparedness planning and response efforts face a much bigger challenge beyond influenza treatment and prevention. Since up to 35% of the population may be unable to work, planning efforts must take into consideration how Whatcom County will maintain its social and economic fabric and continue to provide critical services during and after a pandemic influenza event. With these considerations in mind, Whatcom County's Pandemic Influenza Task Force was created to support development of an integrated approach to community preparedness planning for this unique type of emergency.

Whatcom County Pandemic Influenza Task Force

The Whatcom County Pandemic Influenza Task Force was formed in February 2006 to conduct an inter-organizational planning effort to better understand our community's capacity and adaptability in the event of a sustained emergency. Task Force membership includes 120 individuals and organizations from a broad cross section of private businesses, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community members. (See Appendix H - Task Force Membership Roster.)

The Pandemic Influenza Task Force worked across disciplines to identify how our community would respond to a sustained emergency with limited outside resources. While possible influenza infection rates may vary, the Task Force worked with a common set of planning assumptions, keeping in mind that the community must be able to scale up or down based upon new projections or information during an outbreak. (See Appendix H - Task Force Planning Scenario.) While pandemic influenza served as the catalyst for this planning effort, the work of the Task Force and the recommendations outlined in the Pan Flu Report can contribute to increasing our county's ability to provide a healthy community response in a variety of adverse circumstances.

The primary goals of the Pandemic Influenza Task Force are to:

- Develop a community-wide plan and planning process that provides a framework for organizations to integrate their emergency response with an overall community emergency response.
- Assess our community's existing levels of capacity, flexibility, adaptability, and threshold for maintaining critical services.
- Build working relationships between organizations and increase community capacity and adaptability.
- Identify further challenges in preparedness planning and proposals for meeting those challenges.

To accomplish its work the Task Force operated in five Work Groups:

- Communications
- Infrastructure & Organizational Contingency Planning
- Legal & Ethical Considerations
- Medical Care
- Social & Economic Support

Task Force members selected the Work Group in which they would participate for the four-month planning period. Work Groups met monthly for two to three hours, with direction provided by the chairpersons and facilitation provided by a consultant. Several Work Groups formed subcommittees that met in addition to the monthly work sessions.

Planning Focus

The Task Force's work was guided by four fundamental planning directives: 1) limit sickness and death during an emergency, 2) maintain continuity of critical services, 3) minimize social disruption, and 4) reduce economic losses. The Task Force examined the community's capacity, identified gaps in our ability to meet anticipated needs during a pandemic, and developed strategies for integrating community preparedness planning and response across organizations.

The Pandemic Influenza Community Planning Feb 06 Report served as a starting point for the Task Force. From this summary of community challenges, members selected core issues—specific challenges or dilemmas that must be addressed early in preparedness planning. These core issues provided a focal point for the Work Groups' planning. A brief overview of each Work Group's focus and accomplishments are outlined below.

Communications Work Group

The Communications Work Group was comprised of professionals in emergency communications, public information officers, and print, radio and web-based media.

The group focused on the following core issues:

1. Communications planning for centralized, local community education in all phases of a pandemic.
2. Assuring communications services are maintained throughout a sustained emergency, with attention to the unique needs of all populations in Whatcom County.

The following work products were developed by the Communications Work Group:

- Community communications guidelines for pandemic influenza phases, a framework for public information and education message development and delivery for each phase of a pandemic.
- Early planning messages regarding pandemic influenza preparedness and risk reduction and early media story ideas to promote increased awareness and education regarding pandemic influenza and preparedness planning.
- Criteria for assessing critical communications resources necessary to maintain communications across Whatcom County during a pandemic emergency.
- Draft structure and considerations for a Joint Information Center to assure coordinated, accurate and timely information is provided to the public.

Infrastructure & Organizational Contingency Planning Work Group

The Infrastructure & Organizational Contingency Planning Work Group was comprised of professionals in emergency management, public agencies response planners, nonprofit operations, and private businesses. The group focused on the following core issues:

1. Incorporating needed preparedness and response functions within the Unified Area Command (UAC) structure for pandemic influenza and increasing general awareness of the UAC in the community.
2. Promoting contingency planning and developing inventories of resources.
3. Maintaining critical services in a pandemic emergency and promoting awareness and readiness across all size organizations that provide these essential services.

The following work products were developed by the Infrastructure Work Group:

- Identification of critical services necessary to maintain social order and care for all populations.
- Initial inventory tool to assess capacity and the challenges that will arise when conducting a thorough countywide inventory.
- Pandemic Influenza Unified Area Command structure to address the unique challenges a pandemic influenza presents.
- Compilation of contingency planning resources and guidelines to support readiness at critical services provider, small business, large employer, and neighborhood levels.

Legal & Ethical Considerations Work Group

The Legal & Ethical Work Group included members of the legal community, law enforcement and emergency management personnel, public health professionals, and members of the faith community. This group focused on the following legal and ethical issues that should be considered as part of a countywide response in the event of a sustained pandemic influenza emergency, including:

1. Establish clear legal process and templates for pandemic influenza specific isolation and quarantine orders.
2. Plan for fair, equitable, and safe distribution of available antiviral and vaccine resources.
3. Promote a culture of readiness to assure critical infrastructure systems are maintained and the necessary workforce is prepared and resources are in place.
4. Develop local structure, leadership and recommended guidelines to lead inter-organizational pandemic preparedness planning.

The following work products were developed by the Legal & Ethical Work Group:

- Implementation strategy for activating interim and expanded UAC in coordination with local jurisdictions' existing responsibilities.
- Selection criteria for appointing UAC staff.
- Whatcom County Health Department isolation and quarantine policy for use in a pandemic influenza emergency.
- Draft Isolation and Quarantine order legal templates.

Medical Care Work Group

Members of the Medical Care Work Group included professionals from public and private health organizations, cemetery and funeral homes, public institutions, and social health agencies. This work group addressed core issues in the following areas:

1. Prevention and illness risk reduction, including early public education messages.
2. Illness management, including triage and treatment strategies, vaccine and antiviral distribution policy and care facilities.
3. Funeral and mortuary service needs, including death certification, handling of remains and support for surviving family and friends.

The following work products were developed by the Medical Care Work Group:

- Prevention levels and illness risk reduction message recommendations.
- Medical planning assumptions.
- Initial triage and treatment pathways for illness management.
- Compilation of alternative care sites assessment tools to support local planning and an initial assessment of community resources.

Social & Economic Support Work Group

The Social & Economic Support Work Group members included individual business owners, social service providers, both public agencies and private non-profits, a representative from the Whatcom County Health Board, and members of rural business districts and communities. The Work Group focused on core issues in the following areas:

1. Contingency planning for private businesses and social service agencies.
2. Emergency preparation education for individual homes.
3. Planning for special needs populations.
4. Psychological and emotional well-being and community support.

The following work products were developed by the Social & Economic Work Group:

- A draft action plan for engaging mental health practitioners.
- A compilation of special and at-risk populations and outreach strategies.
- Compilation of contingency planning resources, checklists and guidelines.

The complexities of inter-jurisdictional planning for a sustained emergency presented many challenges for the Task Force. Members worked across disciplines and levels of expertise. Valuable working relationships were built between organizations and members expanded their knowledge of the complexity a pandemic emergency presents. The Joint Coordinating Team, which included each Work Group chairperson(s) and Whatcom County Health Department staff, provided an important coordinating function for this inter-organizational planning effort.

“Thank you so much for taking the lead and supporting this planning effort with the County Health Department. Our time was well spent. I believe the end result will be a more effective, creative, and humane response to this pandemic when it knocks on our door.”

*Participant Evaluation
Comment*

Task Force Key Recommendations

The Joint Coordination Team reviewed all of the Task Force recommendations and identified key focus areas for the next phase of community preparedness planning. The Task Force recommendation that the Pan Flu Unified Area Command structure be activated with the Planning Section functional at this phase of alertness has been completed. The initial structure will include a three-member Unified Area Command team:

Don Boyd, representing Whatcom County
Regina Delahunt, representing Whatcom County Health Department
Bill Boyd, representing the City of Bellingham

The Unified Area Commanders will appoint a Planning Section Chief, Public Information Officer, and be responsible for leading efforts on the following recommendations:

- Develop and implement an immediate communication campaign.
- Finalize legal order templates related to isolation and quarantine.
- Finalize MOA's with the tribes and WWU to establish clear jurisdiction related to health orders during disease outbreaks.
- Finalize plans for fair, equitable and safe distribution of available antiviral and vaccine resources.
- Identify alternative care sites to increase bed capacity to care for large numbers of influenza patients.
- Establish a Medical Reserve Corps to address needed medical surge capacity.
- Finalize pandemic-specific triage and treatment procedures to be used by all Whatcom County health care providers.
- Finalize plans to address a surge in deaths including morgue capacity and expanded capacity for death certification.
- Develop and implement a preparedness campaign for the local business community.
- Recommend employee personal preparedness plans.
- Develop and implement neighborhood preparedness planning campaigns.
- Develop an emergency childcare plan with consideration of necessary social distancing.
- Develop and implement a preparedness campaign with local special population service providers and advocacy groups to support coordinated preparedness planning.
- Complete an inventory of critical services capacity including utilities, law enforcement and food supply and distribution to ensure continuity of service during a pandemic.
- Quantify community food needs and develop emergency distribution plans.