

**ENSURING PREPAREDNESS AGAINST THE FLU VIRUS
AT SCHOOL AND AT WORK**

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY
OF**

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**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR**

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The Washington, DC office of ORC Worldwide has provided specialized occupational safety and health services to businesses for more than 35 years. On behalf of ORC Worldwide, I would like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to discuss some of the steps businesses are taking to ensure that workers are protected from emerging infectious diseases, such as H1N1.

Over the past few days, there appears to be a growing consensus among the experts that the novel Influenza A (H1N1) virus is proving to be, at least for now, a less serious threat than originally feared 13 days ago. But the story could have been very different and there are a number of important lessons that can be learned from our observations of the actions taken by businesses as the situation rapidly evolved.

Lesson #1: Advance Planning Counts!

ORC Worldwide conducted two teleconferences for our Networks membership of several hundred multinational companies from diverse industry sectors to share critical information on strategies for responding to the H1N1 outbreak. On April 28, over 300 individuals participated in the call. On May 5, more than 120 participated. In addition, on May 1, ORC fielded a survey to the health, safety and human resources functions of more than 600 ORC client companies, regarding aspects of their company's preparedness and response activities. Based on information from the 89 companies that have responded so far, it has been apparent that businesses have been diligent and thorough in their consideration of the appropriate response. We are also pleased to see responses that are thoughtful, measured and without over-reaction. We believe we are seeing the benefit of responsible planning, much of which was initiated in response to the threats of SARS and avian flu, but most importantly, planning that has been maintained and proven to be practical and useful in the situation we find ourselves in today.

While our survey is still in progress, we would like to provide some preliminary information about what we can conclude from responses received to date:

- An overwhelming majority of the responders have a business continuity plan or pandemic preparedness plan in place to respond to global outbreaks of flu or a full-blown flu pandemic.
- Over 60% of the companies responding implemented changes to business travel practices as a result of the outbreak. These changes primarily involved banning all non-essential travel to affected areas, requiring higher-level approval for travel to various locations, and specific restrictions related to travel to Mexico. Another 12-14% already had restrictions in place due to current economic conditions. A minority of respondents have taken no action at all, with most of these continuing to closely the situation closely.
- Communication in the form of health briefings and contact numbers for medical advice when traveling is reported by the majority of respondents.
- Almost half of those responding had at one point instituted policies requiring that employees returning from areas with confirmed cases of H1N1 to stay at home for a period of time before returning to work.

I realize this is a small snapshot of information, but until the survey is complete, it is difficult to provide much more detail. We will provide the Committee with the full survey report when it is finalized.

Recommendations:

- Although we believe that large businesses are taking significant steps to prepare for a flu pandemic, it is likely that small and medium-sized businesses will need additional messages about the need for planning and assistance tools that are clear and easy to use.
- Our members report that existing plans were geared to “worst case scenarios” and that plans had to be adjusted as new information about the severity and scope of the H1N1 outbreak became available. Plans must be scalable, flexible, and adaptable to rapidly changing conditions.
- Our members report that internal communication and coordination has often been a challenge. Companies need to ensure that preparedness plans provide for effective communication among critical functions such as health and safety, human resources, security, legal and others.

Lesson #2: Timely and Consistent Government Information and Guidance is Critical to Effective Response!

The timeliness of the government messaging about the outbreak—at the federal, state and local level--has proven to be critical to company efforts to respond effectively to the outbreak. The frequent, clear messages from the CDC have been invaluable. In addition, preparedness planning activities related to avian flu and bioterrorism by state and county/local health departments in California, provide a particularly compelling example of how public/private partnerships and outreach to the business community have helped inform the business response. Important groundwork has been laid over the past few years educating businesses about the public health system and government response plans, and making connections between key contacts. Again, the experience in California is instructive: there have been a number of cross-sector pandemic planning events and exercises that have included business representatives. There have also been efforts at the county level to encourage business participation in the CDC’s Cities Readiness Initiative, involving the mass dispensing of critical medications from the Strategic National Stockpile. The H1N1 outbreak has proven the value of this preparation.

OSHA’s outreach to the business community this week was also welcome. Particularly heartening is the commitment by OSHA, NIOSH, the CDC and other agencies to coordinate their response activities and eliminate inconsistencies in messages.

Recommendations:

- “On the ground” coordination is necessary in many more jurisdictions. This is a two-way street and both business and government entities at all levels need to look for new ways to effectively connect and collaborate on public health preparedness issues.

- The on-going effort to use novel ways to deliver critical public health information to a vast and diverse audience must continue. CDC's use of Twitter is a great example of this.
- Efforts to ensure consistency of content and timing of public health messages must continue.

Lesson #3: Making Pandemic Flu Planning Part of an Overall Safety and Health Management System Optimizes Protection of Workers and Helps to Ensure Business Continuity!

It is well-established that a basic foundation for effective worker protection is the establishment of a comprehensive safety and health management system which focuses on elimination of injuries and illnesses through a continuous process of identifying, assessing and reducing risks. Companies with such systems in place and with the active engagement of senior leadership, have been able to sustain the effort necessary to mobilize action in response to public health emergencies such as the current H1N1 outbreak.

ORC looks forward to working with the Committee as it continues to evaluate the key components of effective programs and policies to ensure workplace preparedness for public health emergencies such as the H1N1 outbreak.