



## ***Pandemic Influenza Q & A for Homeless Population/Shelters***

### **Q: If an influenza pandemic were to occur, how should the homeless be notified and cared for?**

A: Homeless people should **not** be encouraged to come to shelters. Close contact actually increases the spread of the disease. Instead, educate outreach workers ahead of time about signs and symptoms of influenza and what to watch for while they are doing normal distribution of supplies. There may be a need to increase the distribution of supplies to keep people away from the shelters. If health care providers wish to check on people in the streets, they should be accompanied by a regular outreach worker because strangers are often not trusted by the homeless population. A third person to act as a scribe and do charting would also be helpful.

### **Q: What should the homeless know about a possible influenza pandemic?**

A: The homeless population should be aware of the threat and should be educated about symptoms and about when medical care is and is not necessary. Mild symptoms like a slight cough, runny nose, and sore throat with no fever and no difficulty breathing may not require medical attention.

### **Q: What should outreach and shelter workers be taught?**

A: Outreach workers should know how to take temperatures and at what point to refer a person to medical care. Shelter staff should know how to identify symptoms such as a high fever (100° and over) and severe cough. They should also be taught simple steps that can help reduce the spread of the disease. These steps include:

- Encourage staff and clients to cough into tissues and dispose tissues in the trash.
- Encourage frequent hand washing.
- Hang sheets between beds if sleeping is dorm style.
- Wear gloves when picking up trash, changing bed linens, and doing general cleaning.

### **Q: What steps should be taken at a shelter during a pandemic?**

A: In a pandemic, shelter staff should use the Incident Command System (ICS) to manage the situation. This means placing someone in charge of the whole program, and then others in charge of specific areas such as logistics, supplies, and medical care. Special consideration should be given to the following issues:

- Take care of staff mentally and physically so they will be able to continue to work under stressful conditions.
- Ask for mental health support at the shelters.
- Serve meals in shifts so people will not have to sit so close together and fewer people will be at the shelter at any one time.
- Prepare for increased security if crowd control is necessary. Use familiar people such as outreach workers or members of the homeless population if possible. Law enforcement personnel may have a negative impact.

**Q: What other issues need to be considered?**

A: There are several potential issues that may need to be addressed and planned for in advance.

They include:

- Use outreach workers who know the areas where the most people are located to give medical care or prophylaxis on the street.
- Arrange for hand washing stations at the more populous homeless areas.
- Some homeless people have jobs, so evaluation and care may need to be provided after hours.
- People at domestic violence shelters should be visited at their shelter. They should not be asked to go out for medical evaluation and treatment.