

Pandemic planning under way

By Megan Secatore

Ramae Philippou needs to buy a bullhorn. A nurse at The Bromfield School in Harvard, Philippou is also shopping for whistles for the teaching staff — and probably some more face masks.

These items all have been identified as essential equipment in her community's plan for dealing with a public health emergency, such as a flu pandemic.

With the specter of pandemic influenza looming, public health officials worldwide are making plans. In Massachusetts, regional pandemic planning conferences were convened in May and June. School superintendents, school nurses and higher education administrators were invited, along with representatives from local government and public safety agencies and the business and religious communities. The meetings included working breakouts for groups with particular interests, such as higher ed and preK-12.

Throughout the state, the prospect of a pandemic is drawing increasing attention. In May, the delegates at the MTA's Annual Meeting voted to have the association prepare an advisory for locals on pandemic planning.

"MTA local and chapter leaders should contact superintendents and college administrators to find out what plan is in place," said MTA President Catherine A. Boudreau. "If they don't know, then we suggest you contact your town or city fire chief. Most important is that each local has a seat on any committee or task force, since it is the schools that would be most immediately affected if something were to occur."

Public health officials worldwide are keeping an eye on the H5N1 strain of Influenza A, commonly called avian flu or bird flu. If this virus should become adapted for human-to-human transmission, a pandemic — a widespread or global outbreak — could occur. If not H5N1, another Influenza A strain could adapt, according to a Massachusetts Department of Public Health presentation prepared for the regional conferences.

Influenza is highly contagious. The time from exposure to symptoms (the incubation period) can be as short as two days. Adults may be

On-line Resources



Visit massteacher.org/flu for these and other essential Web links:

MDPH Influenza Web site:
<http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/flu/flu1.htm>

U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services:
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov>

Planning Checklists:

PreK-12 School Districts:
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/pdf/schoolchecklist.pdf>

Higher Education:
http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/pdf/colleges_universities.pdf

infectious for seven to 10 days and children under 5 for two to three weeks, according to the MDPH.

The MDPH estimates that in the Commonwealth, over the course of a six- to eight-week "wave" of influenza, 2 million may become ill. Of those, 80,000 could need hospital care and 20,000 could die. Estimates indicate that as much as 40 percent of the work force could be absent at a pandemic's peak, either because they themselves are ill or because they are caring for others.

"Whether or not this particular 'crisis' materializes, 'emergencies' seem to be increasing in number and importance. See the recent flooding in Massachusetts as an example," said Charles Levenstein, a retired UMass-Lowell professor and co-chair of MTA's Environmental Health and Safety Committee.

"Schools, teachers and students can be affected profoundly," Levenstein said, "so we are convinced that our union ought to be knowledgeable — and involved — in the planning processes at the state and local levels. Our work has included consideration of the range of collective bargaining issues that must be dealt with to have a reasonable emergency plan."

The Environmental Health and Safety Committee plans to discuss and disseminate flu planning information at the upcoming MTA Summer Conference in Williamstown.

Meanwhile, Massachusetts superintendents have been looking into an automatic phone bank that could deliver homework assignments to quarantined families,

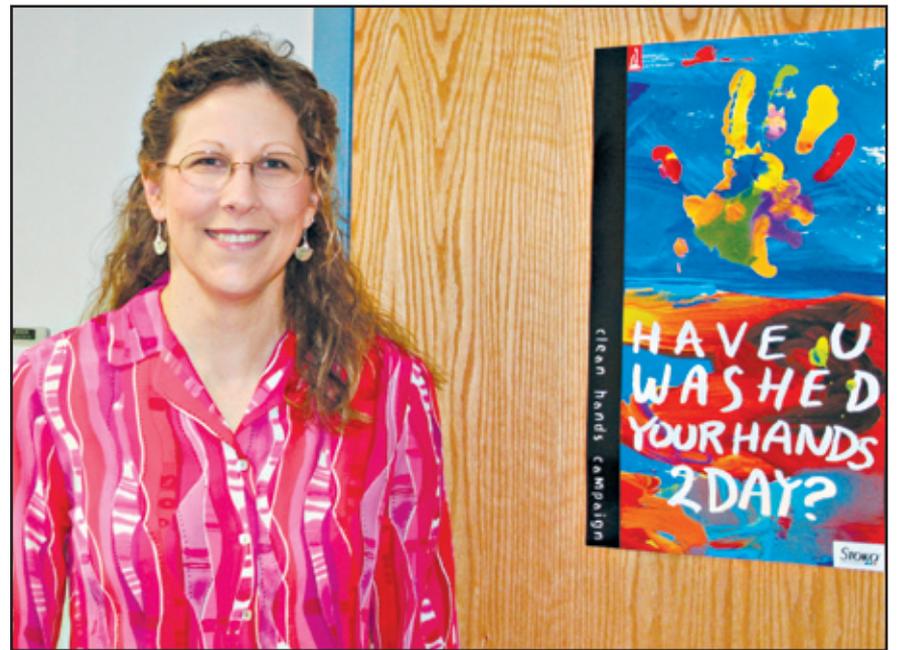


Photo by Megan Secatore

Ramae Philippou, a nurse at The Bromfield School in Harvard, has been working on pandemic preparations. "We really are getting the whole town involved," she says. "For me, that's the big deal."

Tom Scott, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, told The Associated Press. The Internet could also be used to communicate with students and parents. But Scott told the AP: "I don't think we're anywhere near having a systematic way of approaching this."

In Harvard, Philippou is well versed in emergency planning terminology and procedures. But pandemic planning has become a much larger endeavor.

"We really are getting the whole town involved," she said. "For me, that's the big deal."

The Bromfield, which is home to Harvard's high school students, has already been designated an Emergency Dispensing Site in Harvard's pandemic plan. "It's the largest building in the community — with computers and fax machines and a cafeteria," Philippou said. In other words, it's a good place to evaluate sick residents or distribute vaccinations or antibiotics.

"It's large enough so that we could divide the building," she added. "If you're sick, go this way. If you're not sick, go that way."

The first town-wide emergency preparedness meeting was held in Harvard on April 5.

"We looked at communications and transportation issues," Philippou said. Members of the planning team, which includes the fire and police chiefs, an EMT director and others, are also collecting data on facilities and personnel that could be used in a public health emergency. What buildings could be used?

Who has medical skills? Where are the pharmacists? Who can provide mental health services?

Philippou is also preparing her building. Public areas, such as the computer lab, have been outfitted with dispensers for sanitizing students' and staff members' hands. "That's really important in the computer lab, where people have their hands on keyboards," Philippou said.

The sanitizing dispensers were ordered even before flu planning began as a common-sense measure that could cut down on the spread of viruses in the building. (Nothing beats soap and water, Philippou said, but the sanitizers are a great alternative in locations where sinks do not exist.) Posters that promote and explain proper hand-washing hang throughout the building.

Other steps Philippou recommends that educators adopt:

- Learn to spot and report symptoms. "Send sick students to the nurse so the nurse can make an assessment." The school nurse will have a building-wide or even district-wide perspective and may also need to report data on confirmed and suspected cases of flu to health officials.
- Have a good supply of tissues in your classroom.
- Be prepared to teach students good health habits, such as covering the mouth while coughing.
- Know your first aid kit. It should contain rubber gloves, face masks and other items you will need in an outbreak or other health emergency.

A Pandemic Primer

Five Reasons To Prepare

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health notes that an influenza pandemic “presents challenges unlike those of any other public health emergency or community disaster” and lists the following reasons for planning:

1. Simultaneous outbreaks are expected to occur throughout the U.S. and the world. The effect of influenza on communities will be prolonged—weeks to months—when compared to many other disasters.
2. Vaccines, antiviral agents and antibiotics will be in short supply. Vaccine for the pandemic influenza strain will not be available for four to six months after the strain is first identified.
3. Medical facilities will be quickly overwhelmed, requiring the use of non-medical settings and personnel.
4. Health care workers and other first responders may be at higher risk of exposure and illness, further impeding the care of the sick.
5. Widespread illness may result in sudden and significant shortages of personnel who provide critical community services (e.g., firefighters, police, utility and transportation workers, teachers and child-care providers).

(Sources: *Influenza Pandemic Planning a High Priority*, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Communicable Disease Control; The Center for Emergency Preparedness.)

Bargaining Issues

Michael Sireci, MTA field representative and staff consultant to the Environmental Health and Safety Committee, offers these examples of issues for potential bargaining and discussion. The complete list of issues is a work in progress and will be modified throughout the planning process.

General Issues

- Distance Learning: In case of quarantine, will computers be provided to students and staff to take home? Will software and training be provided?
- Extension of the work year if schools or campuses are closed.
- Continuity of pay in the case of school or campus closures.
- Who would be considered essential staff in a flu emergency? What working/living conditions will be provided? Who would be required to report? What cross-training will be provided in the case of a surge of staff illnesses?
- Time off with pay if sick with pandemic flu.
- Teach staff and students to practice general contagious disease prevention techniques (universal precautions).
- What volunteer opportunities are available for members? Will there be training?

PreK–12

- All sinks and faucets should be put into working order during the summer of 2006.
- Schedules should be modified so students can wash their hands several times a day.
- All flat surfaces and other appropriate areas should be cleaned daily with a disinfectant.

Higher Education

- What happens if residence halls are forced to stay open and students remain on campus because of illness/quarantine or because borders or airports close prior to sending students home?
- How will authorities handle the distribution of vaccines or antiviral medications and masks or gowns and other personal protective equipment?
- What preparations are being made to provide proper supplies: food, water, power generation, medical?

Pandemic Glossary

Influenza: Commonly called the flu. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health defines influenza as a “contagious disease that is caused by the influenza virus.” The virus infects the respiratory tract and may be characterized by fever, muscle aches and sore throat.

Pandemic Influenza: Widespread or global flu. A pandemic is said to occur when a “novel and highly contagious strain of the influenza virus emerges.” In the last century, pandemics occurred in 1918, 1957 and 1968. While many experts consider pandemics to be inevitable, no one knows when the next one will break out. (MDPH)

Quarantine: A quarantine order might place restrictions on the movement of “well persons or domestic animals who have been exposed to a communicable disease...in order to prevent effective contact with those not exposed.” (MDPH)

Social Distancing: School and workplace closings maybe recommended, and large gatherings such as conferences may be canceled, to reduce opportunity for exposure to a pandemic virus. The World Health Organization notes that in the event of a pandemic, “there is likely to be much discussion and debate over the usefulness of travel recommendations, quarantine/isolation policies and social distancing.”

Shelter in Place: In emergency management terms, to stay at home, or where you are, rather than evacuate. In a pandemic, this might mean that college students must stay on campus.

COOP: Continuity of Operations Plan. A governmental entity or a business may have such a plan to ensure that essential services continue to be performed during an emergency. In Massachusetts, local boards of health and health departments are expected to develop COOPs in 2006,

according to the MDPH. The Department of Education is requiring superintendents to have a COOP for a pandemic.

EDS: Emergency Dispensing Site. Many schools will be or have already been designated as EDSs, or locations where vaccine and antibiotics will be distributed to the public.

Incident Command System: According to FEMA, an ICS “consists of procedures for controlling personnel, facilities, equipment and communications” in time of emergency. At the local level, the ICS plan might also designate what personnel or agencies are in charge during an emergency.

Multi-Hazards Evacuation Plan: State law requires all superintendents to meet each year with local fire and police chiefs to develop an evacuation plan for each building in the district. Superintendents have been asked by the state to devise “annex” materials for their plans to address a possible flu outbreak. (DOE)

