PANDEMIC PLANNING

Social Distancing

This fact sheet provides information on how to utilize social distancing as a means to help control or minimize the spread of a possible pandemic among individuals and in the community.

BACKGROUND

A severe pandemic (defined as a worldwide epidemic) in a vulnerable population, such as the 1918 flu pandemic, represents a worst-case scenario for pandemic planning and preparedness. Communities, individuals, employers, schools, and other organizations are asked to prepare and plan for the use of interventions that will help limit the spread of disease. Pandemic concerns have escalated due to the more recent impacts of disease outbreaks such as the SARS coronavirus (SARS-CoV) in 2002, pandemic H1N1 in 2009, MERS coronavirus (MERS-CoV) in 2012, and novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in 2019. Future disease outbreaks are likely, but difficult for scientists to predict.

What Is Social Distancing?

Social distancing (SD), self-shielding, voluntary isolation, and reverse quarantine are all methods that attempt to limit close physical proximity between infected and healthy individuals. They provide individuals with some measure of personal control over their own exposure to a potential pandemic. SD can be instituted voluntarily by individuals or through actions taken by local, state, or government officials (for example, closure of schools, discontinuance of public transportation, and restrictions on large gatherings or public venues). During the 1918 pandemic, leaders of the Church were supportive of SD efforts to curtail public meetings and other social functions sponsored by the Church. Some examples of their efforts were:

- Postponing the April 1919 sessions of general conference until June.
- Holding a nonpublic funeral for President Joseph F. Smith.
- Suspending local Church meetings in areas affected by the pandemic.
- Holding special fasts to help ease the pandemic.
- Publishing articles in Saturday’s edition of the Deseret Evening News to help fill the spiritual void left when church services were suspended.

Why Social Distancing?

Infectious diseases like influenza, SARS, and COVID-19 appear to spread mainly by respiratory droplets (droplet transmission) that directly contact the nose, mouth, or eyes. How easily COVID-19 is transmitted between persons is currently unclear. Respiratory droplets are produced when infected people cough, sneeze, or talk, sending the infectious droplets and very small sprays (aerosols) into the air and into contact with other people. Large droplets can travel only a limited distance; therefore, people should limit close contact (within 6 feet) with others when possible. To a lesser degree, some infectious diseases may be spread by touching contaminated objects and then transferring the infected material from the hands to the nose, mouth, or eyes.

Benefits of Social Distancing

Adults may decrease their risk of infection by practicing SD and minimizing their nonessential social contacts and exposure to highly populated environments. Low-cost and sustainable SD practices can be adopted by individuals within their community (such as going to the grocery store once a week rather than every other day or avoiding large public gatherings) and at their workplace (for example, spacing people farther apart in the workplace, telecommuting when feasible, or substituting teleconferences for meetings) for the duration of a community outbreak. Many factors make children especially important in the transmission of infectious diseases. Compared with adults, children may be less skilled in handling their secretions and are in close proximity with many other children for most of the school day. Infected children and parents also play a major role in introducing and transmitting disease within their households.

Therefore, given the disproportionate contribution of children in spreading disease and viruses, targeting their social networks both within and outside of schools would be expected to help disrupt the spread of disease. Given that children and teens are together at school for
a significant portion of the day, dismissing students from school could effectively disrupt a significant portion of infectious disease transmission within these age-groups. Mathematical modeling also suggests a reduction of overall disease, especially when schools are closed early in the outbreak. Parents may determine to keep their children at home, therefore providing a form of voluntary SD. During this period, parents are encouraged to consider childcare arrangements that do not result in large gatherings of children outside the school setting.

**Basics of Social Distancing**

Social distancing may be a viable alternative for the general public to avoid a pandemic infection until a vaccine becomes available. Below, in order of potential effectiveness, are various SD suggestions:

1. Limit exposure to other people within 6 feet.
2. Minimize exposure to enclosed spaces containing crowds, such as movie theaters, grocery stores, gas stations, schools, malls, and so forth.
3. The CDC does not recommend the routine use of respirators in the community.
4. Wash hands after touching any item that may have been touched by others, or use disposable gloves (see the “Pandemic Planning—Personal Hygiene” fact sheet for more details). Studies have shown that influenza virus can survive on environmental surfaces and can infect a person for 2 to 8 hours after being deposited on the surface.

**Potential Impacts of Social Distancing**

Closures of office buildings, stores, schools, and public transportation systems may be feasible community containment measures during a pandemic and are considered forms of forced SD. All of these have significant impact on the community and workforce. Careful consideration should be focused on their potential effectiveness and on how to maintain critical supplies and infrastructure while limiting community interaction. For example, when public transportation is canceled, other modes of transportation must be provided for emergency medical services and medical evaluation. The mandatory closure of public venues will have a direct and significant impact on worship services as well as on proselytizing efforts by missionaries.

**REFERENCES**


http://www.who.int


For more information about this topic, call the Risk Management Division:
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