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FEATURE: Food Safety: Prepare for the worst

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-By Regina Phelps

Grocers in many regions of the United States are accustomed to seeing their shelves cleared just before a severe snowstorm or hurricane hits. In the case of extreme weather disasters, it's not uncommon for shelf stocks to remain depleted for weeks as customers struggle to maintain their own supplies of food and other staples.

Now imagine if grocery shelves across the entire country were repeatedly emptied over an 18-month period. That dire situation could become a stark reality, should a severe flu pandemic strike the nation.

A flu pandemic occurs when a new flu strain emerges for which there's no immunity in the human population; it begins spreading easily from person to person, and can cause serious illnesses and deaths worldwide.

Three pandemics have occurred in the past century, and health officials say that the risk of another pandemic remains real. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there have been 387 human cases of H5N1 avian influenza since 2003, 245 of them fatal (figures current as of Sept. 16, 2008).

What grocers need to consider

Efforts are underway by the federal government to encourage individuals to prepare their households with extra supplies of food, water, and other staples.

But the essential role of food retailers in the wellbeing of the nation will be intensified during a pandemic. Grocers across the country have a special responsibility to take reasonable measures to ensure business continuity, both during and after a pandemic. Fortunately, many operators are planning some measures, but there's a lot more that still needs to be done -- and now.

Earlier this year, executives from the food retail industry gathered in a workshop that I moderated, to discuss how the industry would strive to keep its stores open, food on the shelves, customers coming in, and employees safe during a flu pandemic.

Employee protection was a crucial focus of the workshop. I presented a five-step plan to assist companies in making decisions about how to protect their employees:

By **educating employees about hygiene practices**, the importance of staying home when sick, and methods to avoid contracting the virus, employers will instill good habits, while positioning themselves as trusted and reliable sources of information. **Personal protective equipment (PPE)**, such as face masks and respirators, can prevent others from contracting the virus, and will be important for food retailers, since employees interact often with each other and customers. PPE is recommended in areas where staff can't be separated from others by at least six feet (i.e., cash registers). Food retailers will need to be sure **proper facility cleaning measures** are in place during a pandemic, to protect both their employees and customers. They should pay particular attention to areas that both groups touch often: shopping carts, cash registers, bathrooms, credit card machines, checkout lines, etc. **Social distancing** -- the practice of creating physical space (of at least six feet) between people where it doesn't usually exist -- can be implemented by staggering work schedules, establishing alternative work locations, limiting face-to-face meetings, closing break rooms, and creating gaps in checkout lines. The last component is **pharmaceutical interventions**. While a vaccine will ultimately quell a pandemic flu, antiviral medications will be a key line of defense until an effective vaccine can be developed and distributed, which experts estimate will take at least five months. The WHO recommends stockpiling these medications in advance so they can be available to people at the start of a pandemic. In June the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued proposed guidance encouraging U.S. businesses to consider stockpiling antiviral medications as part of their pandemic plans. The primary antiviral that's being stockpiled by the U.S. government is Tamiflu, and its manufacturer recently introduced a program to help facilitate antiviral stockpiling by allowing U.S. companies to maintain access to their own stockpile of Tamiflu for a nominal annual fee. More information is available at www.PandemicToolkit.com.

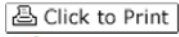
According to www.PandemicFlu.gov, "in the event of a pandemic, businesses and other employers will play a key role in protecting employees' health and safety as well as limiting the negative impact to the economy and society."

Regina Phelps, CEM, RN, BSN, MPA, is the founder of *Emergency Management & Safety Solutions (EMSS)*, a consulting company specializing in emergency management, continuity planning, and safety. For a white paper on pandemic planning for the industry, visit www.ems-solutionsinc.com/handouts_whitepapers.html.

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