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 is defined as a worldwide epidemic in a vulnerable population. Communities, individuals, employers, schools, and other organizations can prepare and plan for how to help limit the spread of disease. Pandemic concerns have increased 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 to predict.

What Is Social Distancing?

Social distancing (SD) increases physical distance between infected and healthy individuals. This provides individuals with some control over exposure to a potential pandemic. SD can be instituted voluntarily by individuals or through actions taken by local, state, or government officials (for example, closing schools, ending public transportation, and restricting 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 private 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 spread mainly by respiratory droplets (droplet transmission) that directly contact the nose, mouth, or eyes. Respiratory droplets are produced when infected people cough, sneeze, or talk, sending the infected droplets and very small sprays (aerosols) into the air and into contact with other people.

Large droplets can travel only a limited distance. For this reason, people should limit close contact (within 6 feet or 2 meters) with others when possible. 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 reducing nonessential social contacts and exposure to highly populated environments. Low-cost and sustainable SD practices can be followed 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 (such as 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 managing coughs and sneezes.
- They are in close proximity with other children for most of the school day.
- Infected children and parents also play a major role in introducing and sharing disease with other family members.
- Since children and teens are together at school for a significant portion of the day, dismissing students from school can significantly reduce the spread of disease within these age-groups.

When schools are closed early in the outbreak, the spread of disease is reduced. Parents may decide to keep their children at home, providing voluntary SD. Parents should consider childcare options that avoid large gatherings of children outside schools.

Basics of Social Distancing

Social distancing helps the general public avoid spreading disease until a vaccine becomes available. Below, in order of effectiveness, are various SD suggestions:

1. Limit exposure to other people within 6 feet (2 meters).
2. Avoid enclosed spaces with large groups, such as movie theaters, gas stations, schools, malls, and so forth.
3. The CDC recommends wearing a cloth face mask in public combined with SD.
4. Wash hands after touching anything 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 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 occur during a pandemic and are considered forms of forced SD. These have significant impact on the community and workforce. 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

Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic. OSHA 3327-02N 2007. http://www.osha.gov/Publications/influenza_pandemic.html

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http://www.who.int

"Frequently Asked Questions about Personal Protective Equipment." CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/respirator-use-faq.html

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

- 1-801-240-4049
- 1-800-453-3860, ext. 2-4049 (toll free in the United States and Canada)

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