

THINKING LIKE A VIRUS

By Laura Horstey

EPIDEMIC OR INFODEMIC?

BEND SO YOU DON'T BREAK

The speed and unpredictability of the spread of viruses present enormous challenges to building owners and managers. Another challenge is adapting to an unexpected flu strain. Joe Donovan, senior vice president, Beacon Capital Partners, LLC and chair of BOMA International's Preparedness Committee, explains how the industry had to shift focus quickly when this new strain popped up. "BOMA and its members have prepared plans for pandemic flu focused on the H5N1 strain coming from southeast Asia," says Donovan. "This event, which occurred so close to the U.S., caught many off guard and required people to dust off old plans and adapt them for H1N1."

To help shift focus and prepare for the unexpected H1N1 strain, BOMA International's Preparedness Committee immediately directed BOMA members to public health agencies for up-to-date information and guidance. Currently, the association is in the process of canvassing various member organizations and vendor teams to understand the lessons learned.

Flexibility is clearly an essential but sometimes overlooked component to preparedness and contingency plans. The H1N1 media intensity died down considerably by mid-May when the strain revealed itself to be milder than first presumed (approximately 40,000 people die each year from seasonal flu; at press time, 121 people worldwide had died from H1N1, with 21 of those deaths in the United States). Many fear that H1N1 could reappear in the fall as a much more virulent strain. Having a plan that will bend so it won't break might be the most important takeaway from this experience. "H1N1 was an exercise for a lot of people," stresses Nuzzo. "Many organizations, both government and private, probably realized the limitations to certain elements of their plans."

Those limitations might also include not having a plan to react to a mild virus and possible pandemic. Despite the mildness of the strain, the World Health Organization (WHO) raised the H1N1 alert level to pandemic stage (level 6) in June because of growing worldwide cases. "Many people have a phased planning approach, where they do one thing in alert Phase 3 and something else in alert Phase 5, regardless of the actual severity or impact," explains Nuzzo. "People are starting to realize the importance of having very flexible plans—ones that can be constantly reassessed as more information becomes available."

BUILDING ON LESSONS LEARNED

If H1N1 was an exercise in preparation for the United States and other countries, SARS was an exercise in preparation for Canada. The SARS outbreak of 2003 saw just over 8,000 cases and 774 deaths worldwide, with 443 probable cases in Canada (including 44 deaths). Toronto was particularly hard hit, to the

A lot can happen in a week. That was about the time it took in late April for news of the spread of H1N1 "Swine" Flu in Mexico to go from news blip to massive media focus as cases began showing up in the United States and other countries. In Mexico, soccer matches that would normally have drawn 80,000 spectators were played to empty stadiums. In Egypt, the government called for a mandatory slaughtering of the nation's 300,000 pigs. And in the United States, schools were closed for cases both confirmed and suspected.

Jennifer Nuzzo, an associate at the Center for Biosecurity, an organization established in 1997 to deal with civilian responses in times of epidemic or pandemic, explains that it's often the unpredictability and swiftness of epidemics that cause the most fear and difficulty. "These things spread rapidly and it's incredibly difficult to tell who is affected and who is not," says Nuzzo. "It's hard to draw boundaries around these outbreaks. We saw that, within a matter of weeks, it had spread around the globe."

The 1957 pandemic, which claimed the lives of 70,000 in the United States and two million worldwide, also spread rapidly. The first cases occurred in the U.S. in late August and, by the end of September, it had spread across the entire country. "And that was 1957—arguably a time of less travel," emphasizes Nuzzo. "You can only imagine how much faster it spreads now."

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

WHEN YOU PEER INSIDE THE MIND OF A FLU VIRUS

point where some buildings closed and citizens donning surgical masks were a common sight on city streets.

Cheryl Gray, senior vice president, national real estate services, Bentall LP, managed properties in Toronto during the SARS outbreak. One evening the cleaning staff in one of her buildings showed up to work wearing surgical masks, heightening the anxiety level of her tenants and prompting her to rethink preparedness for the next time. "For those of us in Toronto, SARS was as close to a pandemic situation as we had seen," recalls Gray. "SARS started the thinking process." That thinking process led to Gray contacting other major managers in Canada and heading a task force that brought the industry together to work on pandemic preparedness instead of doing it ad hoc.

The BOMA Canada task force set to work developing guidelines for pandemic preparedness, resulting in the publication of the *Pandemic Planning Guide for Commercial Buildings* by BOMA Canada in April 2007, a publication that built on the tools from BOMA/Toronto's *Pandemic Guide for Building Owners and Managers*. The comprehensive guide addresses a broad range of issues, from establishing a business plan for absences to communicating with tenants and service providers to hygiene tips and workplace cleaning.

The BOMA Canada Guide, which is free to the public, has become the standard in pandemic preparedness in Canada for commercial real estate; its reach has expanded well into other industries and across North America. Ralph Dunham, managing director with Marsh Canada, an insurance and risk management company, was brought into the task force as an external expert source to advise on best practices for pandemic preparation. "Many of my clients who aren't in real estate still recommend it. It provides my clients with a good perspective on how to work with a landlord." The guide was also included in the *Canadian Emergency Management and Response Manual—A Guide to the Law and Practice*, a publication produced by a major Canadian law firm.

Among the challenges of putting together the guide was meeting expectations for the many stakeholders that property managers have to work with every day, whether it's owners, tenants or local municipalities. The task force received feedback from tenants and suppliers. "We brought in focus groups of janitorial and security companies and spoke to them about what would be top issues in a pandemic scenario, and each task force member held tenant focus groups," says Gray. "The intent of the guide was to create consistent standards that we can implement in response to a potential or real pandemic situation to effectively manage the properties under our supervision to the best of our ability. These standards help establish expectations of what will be and can be done by the property manager during a pandemic."

PRIVATE/PUBLIC PARTNERING

Another valuable takeaway to come out of the H1N1 outbreak is the importance of partnering with local health authorities and other public organizations to communicate the latest information to coordinate messages and disseminate information. The Center for Biosecurity has been pushing these partnerships since it was founded and looks to elevate the role of the private sector. "Government resources are quite limited, so we have to rely on external organizations," Nuzzo points out. "The reach of commercial real estate is enormous. Public health may have the great advice to offer but they struggle to get it out to the community."

The private sector also has the responsibility for ensuring that government strategies don't cripple industry. Says Nuzzo, "It's really important for the private sector to have input. We need to protect public health, but we also have to balance the overall impact on society."

H1N1 LESSONS LEARNED

Just when we all thought we would get through the flu season without mention of the dreaded "P" word, the H1N1 virus hit. Here are a few essential takeaways...

BE NIMBLE. Most of us were expecting Avian flu but we got the Swine version instead, which was closer to home and spread much more quickly. Make sure your preparedness plan is flexible.

STAY ALERT. Consider H1N1 a test for something bigger to come. How well did you communicate the outbreak in the mere days it took to reach full panic mode? Have your communication, contingency and preparedness plans up to date and ready to go at a moment's notice.

PARTNER TO PROTECT. You have a plan; great, but do you have the latest information? Partner with local health authorities and other public organizations to get the word out.

ESSENTIAL PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS RESOURCES

Public Resources

World Health Organization, www.who.int/en

Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, www.cdc.gov

PandemicFlu.gov, www.pandemic.flu.gov

Center for Biosecurity, www.upmc-biosecurity.org

Industry Resources

Pandemic Flu Resources site (BOMA International), www.boma.org

Pandemic Planning Guide for Commercial Buildings (BOMA Canada), www.bomacanada-pandemic.ca

Pandemic Planning Toolkit (BOMA Canada), www.bomacanada-pandemic.ca

Pandemic Influenza: Are You Prepared? (BOMA International), <http://shop.boma.org>

The Property Professional's Guide to Emergency Preparedness (BOMA International), <http://shop.boma.org>

Image of H1N1 virus courtesy of the CDC