



EMS SECTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS

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Pandemic Alert Phase 6: Implications for Fire/EMS

The World Health Organization (WHO) uses pandemic phases 1 through 6 to categorize disease spread and set public health goals. Phase 6 signals that spread of an infection can no longer be contained. The decision to escalate from pandemic alerting to declaration of an actual pandemic is based on scientific observations of increased and sustained human-to-human transmission of an infection among the general population. The overarching goal of Pandemic Phase 6 is to minimize the impact of the pandemic; containing the virus and controlling spread are no longer possible. Phase 6 requires Fire/EMS to work closely with government and public health authorities to address local and regional needs.

The priority public health goal at Phase 6 is determined by how the disease impacts the country, state, and locality. Thus far, the impact of the 2009 H1N1 flu on the United States has been very small when compared to the seasonal influenza period (currently winding down).

Leadership and coordination of resources is the key to minimizing the community impact of a contagious disease. Leaders, including Fire/EMS Chiefs, must collaborate to preserve the operational effectiveness of the local health care system, minimize social disruption, and reduce the economic impact of a pandemic. These tasks are not easily accomplished; social disruption begins long before Phase 6. Gaining and maintaining the trust of citizens requires transparency and credible actions. Fire/EMS leaders must work with public health officials to reassure the community that they are safe. The current H1N1 influenza is no different from a seasonal flu; in fact, some public health experts and government officials would argue it is less problematic. Fire/EMS providers must model common sense behaviors to prevent spread of illness. To do this, they need reliable and accurate information from Fire service leaders.

At the conclusion of Phase 6, the WHO progresses to a post pandemic period during which an assessment of pandemic response is incorporated into plans for future pandemics.

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