



Pandemic Guide For Real Estate Managers

► March 2020

For those who manage to make a difference.™

IREM® Pandemic Guide

For Real Estate Managers

March 10, 2020

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Introduction

Being prepared is critical to preventing the spread of infectious diseases and minimizing impact should an outbreak occur. From our governments and health systems, to the personal responsibility of each individual, we all must maintain a state of readiness and ability to act.

Property managers inherently have a high standard of responsibility, but especially in uncertain times there are many people who rely on us as leaders to keep them safe and protect their interests. From employees, to owners, investors, residents, and tenants, there are several aspects of preparedness, business operations, and communication needed to address each one of these stakeholders when faced with the threat of a pandemic.

The single most important action to take is to plan now.

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- (ii) The World Health Organization; or
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Planning

Creating a pandemic plan

A well-designed pandemic plan should allow you to respond in a flexible way to varying levels of severity and to refine your response as needed.

Consider the "Continuum of Pandemic Phases" (shown below.) As a pandemic worsens your strategies and response will need to change accordingly.

The continuum of pandemic phases*



*This continuum is according to a "global average" of cases, over time, based on continued risk assessment and consistent with the broader emergency risk management continuum.

Content source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD)

Stating objectives

When developing your pandemic plan, decide on your objectives, which might include:

- Reducing spread of infection among your employees, residents, and tenants.
- Maintaining business operations.
- Minimizing impact on your customers, owners, and investors.
- Communicating with transparency.
- Maintaining a calm and controlled leadership.

Assessing workplace exposure risk

As you develop your plan, you'll want to identify the health risks your employees may face based on their job responsibilities and environment. Ask yourself these questions:

- Are employees, in the course of their duties, likely to:
 - Have face-to-face contact with large numbers of people?
 - Spend time in work sites, like health care settings, where they may come into contact with ill people?
 - Handle materials that could be contaminated, like laboratory samples or health care waste?

Ensure that your plan addresses these higher risk scenarios accordingly.

Activating your plan

Creating a pandemic team and clearly identifying decision-makers are important first steps in developing a process to activate your plan. The team will decide when and how to activate your plan, and should agree on which events will trigger action. Trigger events are those that would initiate implementation. These may be driven by federal, state, or local government agencies – or by actions such as the closing of a business or school district. The team should also lead testing exercises to identify gaps or problems with the plan.

Include representatives from various departments such as operations, information technology (IT), and human resources. Your pandemic team should include members from all teams across the company. Individuals from these departments should be trained on pandemic protocols.

A pandemic plan considers the entire company, its locations and all the levels of business. Site managers will most likely be expected to take the lead on activating your plan at their particular building, so make sure to involve them in the process.

Getting input and buy-in

Employees will feel empowered if they are invited to help develop and review the plan. You should also reach out to your local health officials and municipalities for a better understanding of their plans and how they can be integrated into yours.

You might also consider sharing your plan and best practices with other real estate management professionals, including your IREM network. This is the ideal time to take part in the generous knowledge-sharing that IREM members are known for.

Deactivating your plan

The pandemic plan should not only include triggers for action, but also guidance on returning to normal business operations. Similar to plan activation, identify triggers or other indicators that would alert you and staff to return to normal. This could be a slowdown in number of infections reported, guidance from federal, state, or local governments, or other signs that the threat of infection is reduced.

Infection control

Our constant interaction with employees, tenants, residents, and customers in the real estate business means we must be diligent in our actions to prevent the spread of infection. But this isn't just your responsibility, this is everyone's responsibility. You can help those in your companies and buildings to control infection by educating them on the following guidance from the CDC:

Emphasize staying home when sick, respiratory etiquette, and hand hygiene

- Place posters that encourage [staying home when sick](#), [cough and sneeze etiquette](#), and [hand hygiene](#) at your workplace and properties where they are likely to be seen.
- Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles.

- Instruct employees to wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or clean their hands often with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60-95% alcohol.
- Provide soap and water and alcohol-based hand rubs in the workplace. Ensure that adequate supplies are maintained. Place hand rubs in multiple locations, such as building entrances, common areas, conference rooms, and at all employee workstations to encourage hand hygiene.
- Visit the CDC's [coughing and sneezing etiquette](#) and [clean hands webpage](#) for more information.
- Routinely cleaning and disinfecting commonly touched surfaces is particularly important with a pandemic respiratory virus.

Separate sick employees

The CDC recommends that employees who appear to have acute respiratory illness symptoms (i.e. cough, shortness of breath) upon arrival to work or become sick during the day should be separated from other employees and be sent home immediately. Sick employees should cover their noses and mouths with a tissue when coughing or sneezing (or an elbow or shoulder if no tissue is available). The work area of the ill employee should be cleaned and disinfected upon departure.

Prepare for social distancing

Social distancing is an intervention to increase the physical distance between people and reduce the spread of disease. If recommended by your local public health agency, consider what policies and procedures your business can implement to accomplish work remotely.

Anticipate absenteeism

Prepare for employee absences resulting from personal illness, caring for ill family members, and dismissal of early childhood programs and K-12 schools. Be ready to adapt your business practices to maintain critical operations.

- Cross-train employees to carry out essential functions so the workplace can operate when essential staff are out.
- Identify alternative suppliers to meet supply chain needs.
- Consider prioritizing customers with the greatest needs.
- Prepare to temporarily suspend operations if necessary.

Plan for restricted travel

If there's evidence of an outbreak in the U.S. or to another business destination, you may need to cancel non-essential travel. Consider:

- How can you accomplish work-related meetings or events remotely?

- How can you support employees who are abroad when travel restrictions are put into place, particularly those who become sick? Ensure you have clear policies for obtaining medical care during travel.

Encourage personal preparedness

Your business is only as healthy as your employees. Encourage employees to take standard steps to prepare for staying at home if needed:

- Store a two-week supply of water and food.
- Make sure to have enough prescription drugs at home.
- Keep non-prescription drugs and other health supplies on hand. This includes pain relievers, stomach remedies, cough and cold aides, fluids with electrolytes, and vitamins.
- Get copies of electronic health records from the doctor, hospital, or pharmacy.
- Talk with family members and loved ones about how they would like to be cared for if they got sick, and what's needed to care for them at home.

Considerations for multi-family property managers

Property managers and employees working in multi-family buildings should consider additional precautions. Because public health organizations encourage sick employees to stay home during a pandemic, there may be an increased risk of the spread of disease to employees and other residents. To protect employees and other residents from sick individuals, when maintenance requests are received, it is important to qualify whether or not someone in the unit is ill and then evaluate whether the request is an emergency. If a resident is ill, facilities or maintenance staff should only be dispatched to the unit in the event of an emergency.

If you believe or have confirmation a resident is ill with a pandemic virus, contact your local health department and your national health agency for guidance on next steps.

In the event of a maintenance emergency, staff should follow these precautions:

- Wear a mask and gloves while in the unit and dispose of gloves and mask immediately after work is completed.
- Wash hands in soap and warm water immediately after work is completed or use hand sanitizer.

Leasing staff should also be trained to ask prospective residents to reschedule showings if they are sick and avoid shaking hands.

Operations

Your pandemic team should identify essential operations, employee skills, supply channels, dependent relationships (i.e. your residents/tenants), and the impact of a pandemic on critical resources. Include evaluation of the absence, disruption or interruption of those key systems.

Workplace policies

Updating policies to include family, sick and medical leave, and work from home guidelines can help mitigate disruption in business operations, as well as keeping employees well.

- Ensure that your sick leave policies are flexible and consistent with public health guidance and that employees are aware of these policies. Visit the [Department of Labor's website](#) and the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's website](#) for more information.
- Employers should maintain flexible policies that permit employees to stay home to care for a sick family member. Employers should be aware that more employees may need to stay at home to care for sick children or other sick family members than is usual.

Policies may need to be adapted while the pandemic plan is activated, which may mean making policies more flexible than usual while the plan is operational in case current policies are not working with the recommended infection control measures.

For companies that have employees who travel, it would be beneficial to create classifications of travel such as discretionary travel, scheduled travel, critical travel, and emergency travel. Then apply policies to these classifications that will help decide whether the travel should be authorized during the pandemic phase. Consult current [travel guidance](#) on the CDC website.

Employee skills

Property managers should consider cross-training employees to ensure work continues in the event of high absenteeism in a pandemic. You may also consider outsourcing some tasks through online virtual assistants. You may also want to look at compensation guidelines when job tasks change.

Vendors and suppliers

With a pandemic outbreak, vendors and suppliers may suffer from a loss of staff, and their on-site team could also be diminished. As a result, they may need to reduce their services. Property managers should review regular building operations including service calls, garbage collection, maintenance, and move-ins and move-outs to identify operational vulnerabilities.

It's always a good idea to find back-up providers for basic building operations. Consider these steps:

- Identify your critical suppliers.
- Identify vendors who could negatively affect your business if they fail to deliver.
- Review current service provider agreements to see if you can use alternate suppliers in the event of a supply disruption.
- Identify backup suppliers and initiate agreements with them, if possible.
- Ensure that "single point" vendors are aware that back-up vendors will be used only if service is disrupted.
- Ask your critical suppliers to share their pandemic plans with you. What does their plan include? Have they tested their plan? When was it updated?

- Set boundaries with suppliers – ask that they do not send staff who may be showing signs of illness to your property.

IT and security

Most property managers rely heavily on building technologies to support routine operations, including security, payments, and showings. When developing your pandemic plan, explore viable options to help keep your property operational in the event of a crisis. And, make sure your property can manage the capacity of an increase in internet use.

Remote access for employees

- Identify current remote access capabilities.
- Determine internet capacity required during a pandemic event.
- If remote access capabilities fall short of needs, enhance resources.
- Provide remote access and remote access procedures to staff.

Phone and computer system support

- Provide voice mail remote access and phone forwarding instructions to employees.
- Determine required computer systems support.
- Identify how much on-site support required you need, or if it can be handled remotely.

Security

In a severe pandemic, businesses may experience decreased security availability, both private and public, such as police and fire department. To fill this potential gap, include security staff in pandemic plans

Here are a few suggestions:

- Ask about your security provider's pandemic plan, and how they intend to manage staff absenteeism.
- Develop relationships with third-party service providers to fill any security gap during a pandemic event.
- Plan for additional equipment or back-up security staff.
- Include training requirements for back-up security in your pandemic plan.

Legal considerations

Pandemics can raise many legal issues for property managers that should be evaluated before your building experiences the effects of an outbreak. Your property could be exposed to liability from resident illness, employee exposure to sick residents, evictions, and employee leave of absence scenarios.

Be prepared to manage legal scenarios that may come up during a pandemic. Failure to plan could expose your company to charges like "negligent failure to prepare." Such legal claims are not unprecedented.

Thoroughly review all your leases to make sure they address potential business disruptions in a pandemic. Some tenants may default on their contractual obligations because they are suffering economic repercussions from a pandemic. Create a written policy as an addendum to existing leases to enforce it effectively and quickly.

You should also:

- Review contracts with tenants, residents, and suppliers to determine what rights and remedies they have as a result of disruptions due to “force majeure”, a legal term for unforeseeable circumstances that prevent fulfillment of a contract.
- Provide these key stakeholders with timely notice should a force majeure event occur.
- Prepare for potential litigation for application of force majeure clauses – document the steps taken to mitigate the impact of the infectious disease.
- Update force majeure clauses to consider for diseases, epidemics, and quarantines.
- Consider insurance options for covering pandemic-related losses.

Of course, property managers should engage with counsel when crafting their pandemic plan to help limit potential liability. As laws and regulations change frequently, make sure to update your plan accordingly.

Communication

Communication is as critical as preparation, and it’s important to be factual and transparent when sharing information with employees, clients, tenants, residents, and suppliers.

Your pandemic team should decide how you will relay information to each one of these stakeholders during an outbreak, and the frequency with which you will communicate. In emergencies employees will look to you for guidance and clients will feel more comfortable knowing you are prepared.

- Establish a communication protocol – key contacts, chain of command, channels, and documentation process.
- When your plan is in place ensure that everyone knows how it works. Include your plan as part of your new hire orientation program and make it accessible by posting notices on your web site and apps.
- Discuss how to prevent and address rumors and misinformation.

Keep your communication calm and fact-based to avoid tapping into individuals’ innate fear. Identify your best local and regional resources for updated and real-time data and advice to help you monitor the situation.

As a pandemic unfolds, prepare communication templates for response to residents, tenants, and guests. Keep it factual and reference your local authority’s recommendations.

Sample communication template

These are suggested messages only. Please carefully read and edit all information as appropriate to your circumstance. Advice and guidance sourced from the [CDC](#).

Tenant advisory

Your safety, health, and well-being are of the utmost importance to us. We understand that there are many concerns around [pandemic name] and we want to assure you that we are doing all that we can to protect our [residents/tenants/employees] and prevent the spread of disease.

We are committed to doing our part to keep you healthy and will continue to communicate any changes in service to you as quickly as possible.

In addition to our existing cleaning, disinfecting, and maintenance policies, we are also taking the following measures:

Cleaning and education

- Increased frequency and deep cleaning of hard surfaces in common areas – countertops, doorknobs, and the like.
- Increased hand sanitizer dispensers in the lobby and other common areas, including frequent maintenance to ensure the dispensers remain operational.
- Additional signage posted to educate you on how to prevent the spread of infection.

Staff precautions

- All staff is equipped with masks, disposable gloves, and disinfectant and are instructed to discard gloves and masks after each use (such as after cleaning).
- All staff are trained on infection prevention and control measures.
- All staff are cross-trained to ensure critical building functions are maintained in an emergency.
- All staff are instructed to stay home if they are feeling sick.

Communication updates

- We are increasing the frequency of electronic communications – such as text messaging, email, and social media notifications to eliminate unnecessary touching of frequently used hard surfaces.

Building operations

- We've reviewed business continuity plans with all staff and external vendors to ensure critical functions continue to be met in the event of staff absences.

Preventing a pandemic is everyone's job. You can help us prevent the spread of infection by doing the following:

(For commercial tenants)

- Develop a business continuity and pandemic plan to prevent the spread of infection in your office and support your business operations in the event of increased absenteeism.

- Provide employees with sanitizing products for their own workspaces or other personal protective equipment.
- Educate employees and visitors on the importance of proper handwashing or using hand sanitizer.
- Recommend that employees stay home when sick.
- Communicate with your property manager if your pandemic plan depends on us to perform specific functions so we can determine if we can fulfill your requests.

(For residential tenants)

- Wash your hands frequently – especially after touching doorknobs or pushing elevator buttons – and follow proper hand-washing procedures:
 - Using warm water and soap, wash hands for 20 seconds.
 - Use hand sanitizer with at least 60-95% alcohol.
- If you feel ill, stay in your unit and let building management know you are feeling sick by (texting, calling, or emailing) us at (insert contact info). Separate yourself from other residents and pets.
 - If you need to leave your unit to go to a doctor, please wear a mask over your nose and mouth (or in the absence of a mask, use a scarf or handkerchief) and disposable gloves. Discard these items upon return and/or wash immediately.
 - Any co-residents should use a face mask and or gloves when in the same room as you.
 - Do not use public transportation, ride sharing, or taxis.
 - Do not enter any public areas in the building.
- Before leaving to go to the doctor, call ahead to let them know if you may have been exposed to a virus.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue and discard immediately in a lined trashcan and wash your hands immediately afterwards following the steps noted above.
- Do not share personal items (dishes, utensil, cups, bedding, towels, etc.)
- Clean all high-touch surfaces every day.

Keeping the lines of communication open

We are monitoring information from the World Health Organization (WHO) and [insert local/national public health agency] for updates. We will continue to be proactive and transparent in our communication to avoid panic, misinformation, and ensure your expectations are managed.

Preventing a pandemic from affecting our building is our job, as well as the job of all our tenants/residents, and we thank you all for doing your part in preventing the spread of disease.

If you need more information, we recommend the following resources for the most up to date news and developments related to [pandemic name]:

- Placeholder – resource #1
- Placeholder – resource #2
- Placeholder – resource #3

Contact us with questions at [phone] or [email].

Summary checklist

Planning

- Identify objectives for a pandemic plan.
- Build a pandemic team and identify decision-makers in an activation process.
- Engage employees in the development and review of the plan.
- Share the plan with local health agencies as well as other real estate management professionals and your IREM network.

Infection control

- Place posters communicating effective hygiene, respiratory etiquette, and staying home when sick at your workplace and properties.
- Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles.
- Instruct employees to wash hands properly and frequently using soap and water or hand sanitizer.
- Provide soap and water and hand rubs in multiple locations.
- Routinely clean and disinfect commonly touched surfaces.
- Separate employees showing symptoms of disease from others and send home immediately.

Operations

- Review and update family, sick and medical leave policies and work from home guidelines.
- Develop guidelines around travel for employees.

- Cross-train employees on critical skills to minimize downtime with employee absenteeism; review compensation guidelines for when job tasks change.
- Create back up plans for service providers; review critical suppliers' pandemic plans and share yours with them.
- Review remote access capabilities for employees and enhance resources where needed; communicate procedures for remote access to employees.
- Determine support needs for phone and computer systems.
- Include security staff/providers in development of pandemic plan.

Legal considerations

- Engage counsel in development of pandemic plan.
- Review leases and consider creating an addendum to existing leases in the event of tenant defaults.
- Review force majeure clauses and update to include diseases, epidemics, and/or quarantines.
- Review contracts with tenants, residents, and suppliers to ensure they understand their rights in the instance of a force majeure.

Communication

- Create a communication protocol including frequency of communications during an outbreak.
- Train staff on the communication plan/protocol to ensure everyone knows how it works, including how to prevent rumors and the spread of misinformation.

Conclusion

Unlike companies that have a single or few workplace locations, real estate managers are typically scattered across many regions, offices, and properties. The multi-geographic nature of the real estate industry makes planning, preparedness, and communication essential in the event of a pandemic.

Education and communication for tenants, residents, and employees will be the key factors in preparing for and responding to a pandemic, in addition to keeping business continuity plans and risk assessments as up to date as possible.

Pandemics are unpredictable – we cannot know when the next one will strike or how severe it may be. This guidance is intended to help you evaluate your current policies and procedures, but pandemic planning should be an ongoing process that is revisited as your business grows and changes.

Resources and references

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

[Pandemic influenza](#)

[Environmental infection control guidelines - Air](#)

[Stop the spread of germs](#) (PDF)

[Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\), February 2020](#)

[Show me the science – Why wash your hands?](#)

[Unified Process Practices Guide – Contingency Planning](#)

[Interim Guidance for Preventing the Spread of Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) in Homes and Residential Communities](#)

[Interim US Guidance for Risk Assessment and Public Health Management of Persons with Potential Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) Exposures: Geographic Risk and Contacts of Laboratory-confirmed Cases](#)

World Health Organization (WHO)

[Whole-of-Society pandemic readiness](#) (PDF)

U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)

[Guidance on preparing workplaces for an influenza pandemic](#)

[Personal protective equipment](#)

National Institutes of Health (NIH)

[Pandemics: Risks, impacts, and mitigation Preventing COVID-19 spread in communities](#)

National Multifamily Housing Council (NMHC)

[The Pandemic Flu: Are you ready?](#)

National Apartment Association (NAA)

[Guidance for dealing with the Coronavirus](#)

Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA)

[Security and emergency preparedness](#)