

The Role of Public Works during a Pandemic Flu Outbreak

The Issue

As the voice of public works in Canada representing more than 2,000 members, from over 450 municipalities, the Canadian Public Works Association (CPWA) and its members are interested in working with the federal government to find solutions and implement strategies that increase awareness and recognition of public works as stakeholders during the planning, response, recovery and mitigation of a pandemic flu outbreak.

Disasters of any type and size can significantly affect the citizens and communities of the nation and worldwide. Pandemic influenza is a worldwide, global outbreak of a novel influenza virus. This novel virus, when it can be transmitted efficiently from human-to-human, could cause serious illness and be devastating to the human population globally. Past influenza pandemics have led to high levels of illness, death, social disruption and economic loss. Pandemics can also lead to the disruption of public services that are deemed essential to everyday life as well as to the mitigation, response and recovery process.

During large-scale events such as a pandemic, public works professionals play a key role in the planning, response, recovery and mitigation for their communities. Planning and preparedness for implementing pandemic mitigation strategies is complex and requires participation by public works professionals, other first responders from all levels of government, the private sector and society as a whole.

Why Is This Important to Canada?

Canada's Public Health Agency recognizes the authority of the provinces and territories to deliver health care, but it also acknowledges that the federal government has a leadership role to play both for coordinating with other levels of government and for providing health care to First Nations and Inuit reserves.

The current pandemic plan makes recommendations and guidelines for healthcare workers on issues like infection control, resource management and the distribution of anti-virals and vaccines. However, those national standards and guidelines should be extended to include public works professionals who play a key role providing continuity of operations and in operating critical infrastructure services, such as water treatment and distribution systems, power generation and distribution, transportation and communications, and other vital services such as waste removal and disposal, and clearing snow from city streets to facilitate access for emergency vehicles. Failure of these services directly affects the ability of our communities to respond to an outbreak.

What Can the Federal Government Do?

CPWA urges all government officials to consider the following when preparing, responding, recovering and mitigating the devastating impact of a pandemic and in allotting resources for such outbreaks:

- Establish a comprehensive strategy to protect critical workers that extends the definition of front-line services to acknowledge and include public works providers from both the public and private sector.
- Involve public works professionals in evaluating, updating and implementing plans at the federal, provincial, and local planning processes for response to an epidemic or pandemic outbreak.
- Use the resources of CPWA to identify qualified and experienced individuals and groups to discuss how an epidemic or pandemic will affect public works professionals and the communities they serve.
- Include public works officials in priority distribution of anti-viral vaccines and medications.
- Account for the needs of public works professionals when purchasing personal protective equipment, such as masks.
- Support and provide opportunities for training public works employees on personal protective equipment that will be utilized during an epidemic or pandemic.

What Is CPWA Doing to Help the Federal Government?

The Canadian Public Works Association and the American Public Works Association are working in tandem to assure that federal, provincial, state, and local governments on both sides of the border are aware of the essential role of public works as “first responders” in times of emergency.

What We Are Asking

CPWA urges all government officials to recognize and designate public works personnel as “first responders” when preparing, responding, recovering and mitigating the devastating impact of a pandemic. As such, government should solicit the input and include public works professionals in the planning for such outbreaks and allot the necessary resources for public works personnel on a priority basis.

For More Information:

Mr. W. Gary Losier, P Eng
President, Canadian Public Works Association
Director of Engineering and Works
Town of Quispamsis, New Brunswick
Telephone: 506-849-5749
glosier@quispamsis.ca

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