

**Strengthening Communications Capacity
in the Non-Governmental Sector
for Pandemic Influenza**

Executive Summary

Ottawa, Ontario

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National Advisory Committee Members & Core Network Members:

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- Michael Murphy, Canadian Chamber of Commerce
- Nick Jennery, Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors
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Associate Network Members:

- Judith Cutler, Canadian Association for the 50 Plus
- Jennifer Lanzon, Canadian Association of Police Boards
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Issue Experts:

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- Fiona Murray, Movement for Canadian Literacy

Focus Group Participants:

- 80 Canadians in Ottawa, Ontario, Renfrew Town, Ontario, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Montreal, Quebec.

CPHA Project Staff:

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The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official policies of the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Executive Summary:

Background

The Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) was funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada to strengthen the non-governmental sector's capacity to communicate information about how to prepare Canadian organizations and individuals for an influenza (flu) pandemic.

The overarching goal of the project was to enhance Canadians' preparedness for an influenza pandemic. This project was a contribution to Canada's flu pandemic planning. Three key objectives were developed to achieve that goal:

- i) the establishment of a non-governmental communications network;
- ii) the development of a plain language toolkit on pandemic influenza; and
- iii) the promotion and dissemination of the toolkit via the network.

The project was led by a team of three CPHA staff members and advised by a National Advisory Committee.

Research

Research informed the project and guided it with evidence-based decision-making. Research activities included: an environmental scan of online pandemic influenza information to review existing communications and gaps in outreach; qualitative interviewing of key informants to solicit guidance on network development, outreach, toolkit design and dissemination; the compilation of national and international inventories of key messages on pandemic influenza preparedness and research on message content; the focus testing of draft toolkit products; and a test of the network's dissemination capacity.

Network Development

Disseminating public health information through established and credible networks is an important communications strategy in times of crisis, such as health emergencies. In recognition of this, the project's first objective was to establish a non-governmental communications network for pandemic influenza. As of March 2007, the Pandemic Health Alert Network had 16 members. They are national organizations with expertise in a wide range of sectors and outreach across Canada. The current network has the potential to reach over 4.5 million Canadians through more than 170,000 organizations. Network members also have strong links with the federal, provincial and territorial, regional and municipal orders of government.

Toolkit Development

Research identified the need for short, concise, practical information in plain language that would be accessible to the average Canadian adult. The project's second objective was to develop a plain language toolkit using evidence-based messaging on pandemic influenza preparedness. Its target audience is network member organizations and the general public. The *Flu Pandemic Communications Toolkit* offers a variety of tools to help Canadian organizations and individuals prevent, prepare for, and protect against an influenza pandemic. It is available in English and French, online and in hard copy.

Dissemination

With the establishment of the Pandemic Health Alert Network and development of the *Flu Pandemic Communications Toolkit*, the third key objective was to disseminate the toolkit via the network. The toolkit was disseminated electronically, via the project website and network member sites, and by mail to 101 organizations (including chapters and branches) across Canada.

Conclusions

The *Flu Pandemic Communications Toolkit* provides Canadian organizations and individuals with a range of plain language tools, practical guidelines, and links to further information on pandemic flu preparedness. Its primary focus is on basic public health practices. These are the non-medical interventions that the World Health Organization has described as the frontline defence against and during a pandemic.

The toolkit was designed to meet the needs of network members, with tools for organizations and individuals. The tools for members of the public were produced to be accessible to Canadian adults with a grade 8 level of literacy. Despite its accessibility in this respect, the toolkit is relevant primarily to Canadians with secure housing, employment and family support.

The toolkit may be inappropriate to Canadians who face particular communication barriers and social issues. Research activities throughout the course of the project have identified gaps in outreach to residents who do not speak either official language or face particular social and economic barriers to accessing mainstream communication channels. These needs were beyond the scope of this project. However, to be adequately prepared to cope with an influenza pandemic, Canada must meet the needs of all her citizens, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Recommendations

Four sets of recommendations are provided that advocate funding to:

- i) Monitor and evaluate dissemination of the toolkit and its uptake by users with a view to promoting the project as a best practices model for other public health issues;
- ii) Sustain, expand, and enhance the Pandemic Health Alert Network in order to strengthen the linkages between the government and non-governmental sector and ensure the consistency of messaging and activities on planning for the next influenza pandemic;
- iii) Make pandemic preparedness messaging accessible to communities with more specialized communication needs, including visually and/or hearing impaired Canadians, ethno-cultural groups, and aboriginal communities; and
- iv) Address the information and resource needs of high-risk and hard-to-reach Canadians and the organizations serving them, to help them plan and prepare for an influenza pandemic.