

# Electric Companies & Pandemic Planning

## What You Should Know

Electric companies have a strong track record of preparing for many kinds of emergencies that could impact their ability to generate and/or deliver electricity to their customers and the communities they serve. This business continuity planning includes preparing for events such as storms, earthquakes, and other natural disasters; cyber and physical attacks; and “high absenteeism” events that typically involve health emergencies and that could severely limit the number of employees who are able to report to work.

The electric power industry coordinates its efforts to plan for, prepare, and respond to all hazards that could potentially impact the energy grid—including a pandemic—with our partners at the highest levels of government through the CEO-led Electricity Subsector Coordinating Council (ESCC).

Planning for a health emergency, such as a pandemic, is unique from other business continuity planning because it requires businesses to prepare to operate with a significantly smaller workforce, a threatened supply chain, and limited support services for an extended period of time at an unknown date in the future. The business continuity and pandemic plans developed by electric companies are designed to protect the people working for them and to ensure energy operations and infrastructure are supported properly. These measures help to guarantee that companies can continue to provide safe and reliable electricity throughout an emergency.

The following information is designed to present an overview of the pandemic planning efforts undertaken by the electric power industry, as well as federal, state, and local governments; provide an update on current pandemic threats; and offer additional resources where you can learn more about pandemic planning.

**Note: Information is current as of February 27, 2020.** Please visit the World Health Organization’s (WHO’s) [website](#) for the most current information on global disease outbreaks, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC’s) [website](#) for the most current information on U.S. pandemic planning efforts.

# Pandemics: The Basics

## What is a pandemic?

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. Three conditions must be met for a pandemic to start:

1. a new virus subtype must emerge for which there is little or no human immunity;
2. it must infect humans and cause illness; and
3. it must spread easily and sustainably (continuing without interruption) among humans.

A pandemic is a rare, but recurring event.

## What are the current pandemic threats?

In late 2019, a novel coronavirus (Covid-19 or 2019-nCoV) was first reported in Wuhan, China. Coronaviruses are responsible for illnesses ranging from the common cold to more severe respiratory diseases, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). A novel coronavirus is a new strain that has not been found previously in humans.

A Covid-19 infection may cause mild symptoms, including a runny nose, sore throat, cough, and fever. However, it also may be more severe in some cases, leading to pneumonia or breathing difficulties, and can be fatal. According to the WHO, older people and people with pre-existing medical conditions appear to be more vulnerable to becoming severely ill.

## Why is pandemic planning important?

While most nations, governments, and businesses have business continuity plans to help them respond to natural disasters, technological failures, or other disruptions, planning for a pandemic requires a different set of continuity assumptions. Unlike natural disasters—such as a hurricane or earthquake—which are confined to certain geographic areas and defined periods of time, a pandemic might be dispersed geographically and could arrive in waves that last several months at a time. Due to the widespread nature of a pandemic, resources cannot easily be shifted geographically to help an area in need, as with other emergencies.

Developing a comprehensive pandemic response plan is essential for all organizations in the United States. However, critical infrastructure industries—such as the healthcare and electric power industries—carry an additional responsibility to provide services during a pandemic.

## How does the federal government prepare for a pandemic?

The federal government engages in both domestic and international pandemic planning efforts.

The federal government has divided its planning responsibilities into two categories: healthcare and public health, and critical/essential infrastructure. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is responsible for healthcare planning, while the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is charged with coordinating plans to protect our nation's critical infrastructure. These two agencies meet with state and local governments, businesses, and other stakeholders to promote cooperation and communication throughout the planning process.

The federal government also works with other countries to develop regional approaches to prevent and control pandemic outbreaks.

To learn more about the federal government's preparations, visit <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/federal/index.html>.

## How do state and local governments prepare for a pandemic?

Planning efforts at the state and local levels are critical to mitigate the potential impact of a pandemic. State and local governments would be on the “front lines” of a pandemic outbreak and must be prepared to respond immediately. States continuously update their pandemic plans to respond to new guidance from government sources. The federal government also provides state and local governments with emergency response training, planning guidance, and other assistance to prepare for a pandemic. In turn, state and local governments work with healthcare providers, businesses, schools, and community leaders to coordinate their pandemic plans.

To learn more about state and local planning efforts, including individual state pandemic plans, visit <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/wherelive/index.html>.

## Which critical industries and key resources must be able to operate during a pandemic?

To maintain essential levels of service and to ensure that basic goods are available during a pandemic, the Department of Homeland Security has identified 16 critical infrastructure sectors. These sectors should coordinate pandemic planning with all appropriate private and public entities:

- chemical
- commercial facilities
- communications
- critical manufacturing
- dams
- defense industrial base
- emergency services
- energy (includes electricity, natural gas, and oil industries)
- financial services
- food and agriculture
- government facilities
- healthcare and public health
- information technology
- nuclear reactors, materials, and waste
- transportation systems
- water and wastewater systems

Critical sectors and government entities work together to ensure that our nation can deliver the essential goods and services needed in the event there is a pandemic.

## Electric Company Planning Efforts

### How would a pandemic affect electric companies?

Electric companies could feel the effects of a pandemic much like any other business. It is predicted that a large percentage of a company's employees (up to 40 percent) could be out sick, quarantined, or might stay home to care for sick family members. Likewise, the vendors and suppliers that electric companies depend upon could experience similar personnel shortages.

Electric companies focus on maintaining the availability of key personnel—such as power plant operators, lineworkers, and call center representatives—during extreme events, including a pandemic. Depending on the severity of a pandemic, it may be necessary to utilize contractors and other companies to help maintain service.

Because of the widespread nature of a pandemic, companies may not be able to depend on the traditional mutual assistance programs that help companies restore service after natural disasters and weather events.

### What steps do electric companies take to prepare for—and operate during—a pandemic?

Electric companies typically focus on three phases when preparing for a pandemic: Alert (Pre-Pandemic), Outbreak (Pandemic), and Recovery (Post-Pandemic).

#### Pre-Pandemic or Alert Phase

During the **Pre-Pandemic or Alert phase**, the WHO and the CDC issue statements about potential health emergencies, which signal to the electric power industry and other industries and businesses that a pandemic is possible and preparedness plans should be reviewed and updated, if needed.

During this time, electric companies and the electric power industry will:

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### Monitor the Situation

Electric companies monitor the various threats and pandemic situations at the global, national, state, and local levels. Specific monitoring methods vary among companies and include contacting local public health officials and receiving information from the WHO, the CDC, and other federal and state government sources. Electric companies also monitor their own business travel activities and normal absenteeism rates to determine any unusual increases. The ESCC works to ensure that actionable information is being shared across the electric power industry and between industry and government partners when necessary.

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### Review Their Company Policies

Electric companies review various policies within their organizations that may be affected by a pandemic, as well as identify additional policies that may be needed to provide guidance to their employees during a pandemic. These policies cover the following areas: human resources, absenteeism, hygiene and sanitation, returning to work, telecommuting, travelling, antiviral/vaccine policy, and others.

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### Conduct Training Refreshers

There inevitably will be new employees who have joined since the last training sessions were conducted, so, during this phase, companies will work to ensure that all employees understand their roles and responsibilities during each phase of a pandemic response.

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### Communicate Their Plans

Electric companies focus on communicating with employees and their families; suppliers; customers; public health officials; interdependent critical infrastructure; and federal, state, and local agencies. Companies communicate with their employees through email, mailings, internal web sites, and company hotlines.

Electric companies also recognize the importance of discussing their pandemic response plans with other critical infrastructure providers—such as communications, nuclear, natural gas, transportation, and emergency services—as well as their contractors and suppliers to ensure that these interdependencies are not compromised during a pandemic. The ESCC facilitates this information sharing between the electric power industry and the other critical infrastructure sectors.

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### Emphasize Personal Preparedness and Good Hygiene

Electric companies understand that people will be most concerned about their health and the welfare of their families during a pandemic. Electric companies focus on making sure that their employees:

- follow good personal hygiene and illness prevention measures;
- have accurate information;
- review their emergency preparedness plans, including having a 14-day supply of food, medicine, and toiletries on hand;
- feel confident that their workplace is a healthy environment; and
- know when to stay home and when to come to work.

### Pandemic or Outbreak Phase

During the **Pandemic or Outbreak** phase, electric companies will activate their pandemic response plans to mitigate the impact of the outbreak on their workforces and their business operations. They will take actions to:

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### Control the Infection

Protecting the energy grid and ensuring a safe and reliable supply of electricity are the top priorities of electric companies. In order to do this, electric companies need to ensure that their employees and their families are healthy and safe.

Depending on the severity of a pandemic, electric companies may implement strategies to reduce the spread of the virus, including spacing workers farther apart, canceling large business meetings, canceling non-essential travel, and implementing work-from-home policies for non-essential employees.

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## Maintain Their Operations

Electric companies' pandemic preparedness plans are designed to ensure that operations and infrastructure are properly supported so that they can continue to provide reliable electricity throughout an emergency. To do so, electric companies identify those functions critical to their continued operations and the people needed to fill those positions.

Companies also identify functions of the organization and other activities that can be suspended or postponed. For those employees who may be able to work from home, companies are ensuring that they have the necessary technology support in place.

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## Remain Vigilant

Working through the ESCC, electric companies will continue to remain vigilant in the face of evolving cyber and physical security threats. As is the case during power restoration efforts following severe weather events, companies are prepared to maintain their focus on protecting their systems from malicious actors seeking to capitalize on the disruption in normal business operations.

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## Communicate Actions Taken

Companies maintain a framework for communications to ensure that they can keep their many stakeholders—employees, customers, media, suppliers, interdependent infrastructure providers, and government agencies—appropriately informed. Electric companies regularly test their notification systems (manual and automated) and their absentee tracking systems, and they perform tabletop exercises and various drills around the country to prepare for coordinating with stakeholders during emergency situations.

## Post-Pandemic or Recovery Phase

Once public health officials have declared that the pandemic threat has passed, electric companies will focus on the **Post-Pandemic or Recovery** phase. During this time, electric companies will:

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### Manage the Return to Business-as-Normal

If distancing restrictions were in place, or if non-critical employees were working from home, electric companies will begin the process of notifying employees of when it is safe to return to their normal place of work. Business conditions may remain altered in some cases, as outside contractors and suppliers may not have returned to normal operations yet.

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### Communicate the Return to Business-as-Normal to External Stakeholders

Electric companies will inform their many stakeholders of their return to business-as-normal operations and highlight any lingering challenges that may remain due to suppliers or other stakeholders still working to resume business-as-normal operations.

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### Review the Response

Electric companies will carefully evaluate how they performed during the pandemic emergency, just as they would following a hurricane, earthquake, or other major crisis. During this time, they will identify opportunities to improve and enhance their pandemic response plans in order to be even better prepared for future health emergencies.

## Do electric companies coordinate their pandemic plans with government agencies and other key industries?

Yes. The CEO-led ESCC serves as the principal liaison between the federal government and the electric power industry, with the mission of coordinating efforts to prepare for, and respond to, national-level disasters or threats to critical infrastructure. This includes scenarios such as pandemics that could impact the energy workforce.

The ESCC focuses on actions and strategies that help protect the energy grid, prevent various threats from disrupting electricity service, and develop capabilities that help the sector quickly respond and recover when major incidents impact the grid.

Through the ESCC, electric companies plan closely with other segments of the sector and with other critical infrastructure sectors—such as communications, nuclear, natural gas, transportation, and emergency services—as well as contractors and suppliers to ensure that none is compromised during a pandemic.

As recognized leaders in the field of emergency preparedness, many electric companies are actively involved in their local community efforts to prepare for a pandemic. The world-class emergency planning and response skills that electric companies demonstrate in storm restoration have positioned companies as leaders in their communities—a role that they take very seriously.

Through the ESCC, and in coordination and collaboration with the Department of Energy, the electric power industry will continue to work with other federal government agencies, including the DHS, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Department of Transportation, as well as state and local authorities, to identify opportunities to improve the effectiveness of the industry's response to disasters and other emergencies.

## What would happen if weather events cause power outages during a pandemic?

Given that a pandemic outbreak could extend for as long as two months, or perhaps longer, it is possible—and in some parts of the country perhaps even likely—that weather-related or other types of outages could occur during the same time period that a community is affected by a pandemic.

During non-health emergencies, such as severe storms, electric companies often can speed restoration of electricity by bringing in additional skilled workers from companies and contractors outside the area affected by an emergency. This practice is known as mutual assistance. However, during a pandemic, mutual assistance either may not be available or may be severely limited.

Another factor that electric companies consider in their planning is the availability of equipment and materials for restoration. Companies depend on many types of businesses to supply equipment and materials used in maintaining and restoring their infrastructure. A pandemic could affect all types of businesses, including manufacturing and transportation industries, and restoration times may be impacted.

# Preparing Yourself and Your Family

## What can I do to prepare myself and my family for a pandemic?

Every family should have an emergency plan to respond to any number of emergency situations (e.g., natural disaster, terrorist attack, etc.).

Part of this planning should include preparing for a possible viral pandemic. For example, during a pandemic, you may not be able to leave your house for an extended period. Therefore, you should have at least a two-week supply of water, food, medicine, and other essentials on hand.

If a pandemic occurs, government health officials will issue information and warnings to help individuals avoid becoming ill. Misinformation, particularly on social media, will occur. You should pay close attention to guidance provided by local and state health departments and the CDC, <http://www.cdc.gov>.

The WHO, <http://www.who.int/en>, is another good source of information.

For information on how to develop a family emergency plan, visit Ready America at <http://www.ready.gov>.

For information on how to prepare your family for a pandemic, visit PandemicFlu.gov at <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/individual/index.html>.

You and your family also should be on the lookout for suspicious emails, phone calls, or persons impersonating business employees or charitable organizations. Unfortunately, scammers take advantage of opportunities such as holidays, natural disasters, and other disruptive scenarios when households are otherwise preoccupied.

Never provide or confirm personal information (Social Security number, date of birth) or financial information (banking account information, debit or credit card information) to anyone initiating contact with you, whether by phone, in-person, or email, claiming to be an electric company or other business or charity representative. When in doubt, hang up, and contact the organization directly using the contact information listed on the organization's website.

For more information about how to protect yourself from common scams, visit Utilities United Against Scams at <https://www.utilitiesunited.org/>.

## What is the best way to prevent the spread of viruses?

Many respiratory illnesses are caused by viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs, and generally are spread from person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The following simple, common-sense precautions recommended by the CDC can help prevent the spread of all types of influenza and other common viruses.

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. If you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick, too.
- Stay home when you're sick or have symptoms. Get plenty of rest and check with a health care provider as needed.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve, not your hands, to help prevent those around you from getting sick.
- Clean your hands. Washing your hands often will help protect you against germs. When soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth. Germs often are spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Practice other good health habits. Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious food.

## Where can I get more information?

To get the most current information on pandemic outbreaks visit:

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov>

The World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int>

## About EEI

The **Edison Electric Institute** (EEI) is the association that represents all U.S. investor-owned electric companies. Our members provide electricity for about 220 million Americans, and operate in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. As a whole, the electric power industry supports more than 7 million jobs in communities across the United States. In addition to our U.S. members, EEI has more than 65 international electric companies, with operations in more than 90 countries, as International Members, and hundreds of industry suppliers and related organizations as Associate Members.

Organized in 1933, EEI provides public policy leadership, strategic business intelligence, and essential conferences and forums.

For more information, visit our Web site at **[www.eei.org](http://www.eei.org)**.



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