

## **Ebola Virus Disease Preparedness: Occupational Safety and Health Considerations for a Non-Healthcare Workplaces**

By Connie T. Chuang, MD, MPA, MPH

As you are well aware, there is currently an Ebola outbreak in three countries in West Africa, specifically Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Given the heightened entry screening at several U.S. international airports, the risk of a layperson in the United States having contact with Ebola-infected people outside of the three West Africa countries continues to be very low. However, reporting of limited cases of Ebola in the U.S. has raised concerns among employers and employees of how to address any suspicion for Ebola at the workplace. For all employers that are covered by the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Act of 1970, the General Duty Clause states that employers have the responsibility to keep the workplace free of recognized hazards that can cause serious harm to workers. Therefore, prudent employers will take the necessary thoughts and actions to protect their U.S. workforce from Ebola. Here are some key actions for employers to consider:

***Conduct a Timely Workplace Risk Assessment.*** Currently, the vast majority of guidelines provided by federal and agency officials, including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are for healthcare workers and settings to manage and prepare for known or suspected Ebola. An occupational health professional can help conduct an appropriate workplace risk assessment including identifying types of work activities associated with higher risk for Ebola infection, reviewing existing workplace infection control, incident response and risk communication policies and procedures for possible revisions that specifically address concern and preparedness for Ebola.

***Involve Multiple Stakeholders To Evaluate Legal Impact.*** Guidance from legal and human resource professionals, and if applicable, union representatives should be sought before implementing any new policies or procedures, including employee leave policies, medical clearance prior to returning to work, and mandatory leave policies of employees that have returned from Guinea, Liberia or Sierra Leone. It is critical to assure that policies and procedures don't violate the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

***Educate Your Workforce about Ebola.*** Provide your workers information, instructions and training about Ebola including symptoms, how the virus spreads, preventive measures that can be taken, and what to do should a worker suspect Ebola infection in her/him or in another individual at the workplace. Employees, especially those that travel to and from Guinea, Liberia or Sierra Leone should be aware of the current CDC travel notices and U.S. airport entering and exiting screening activities. In addition, the CDC has provided guidance on self-monitoring and movement of individuals in the U.S. depending on their exposure risk to Ebola, but individuals need to follow their individual state department of health's procedures as they may vary from state-to-state throughout the U.S.

***Continue to Monitor Federal and Official Agency Updates.*** The current Ebola outbreak in West Africa and cases reported outside of West Africa continues to be rapidly evolving. Therefore, it is important to routinely monitor multiple federal and official agency sources for the latest information and guidance to

protect the U.S. workforce. Important sources include the World Health Organization (WHO), CDC, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

### **Summary**

Employers should be proactive in creating appropriate policies, procedures and up-to-date communications to protect their U.S. workforce by keeping them adequately informed to confront any potential exposure to Ebola. Involving multiple professionals including legal, human resource and occupational health experts should help assure employers effectively navigate health, safety, business operations and legal issues surrounding Ebola infection preparedness.