

# Planning for Coronavirus: A Necessary Business Exercise

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*Here Martin R. Siegel, an attorney in our Environment & Energy Industry Group and former lawyer with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, points out the importance of advance preparation in mitigating business losses resulting from the looming coronavirus. He also holds a masters degree in public health from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.*

With quarantines already in place in China and other countries, the coronavirus is impacting wide swaths of the business world.

But as scientists race to find more effective treatments, to develop a vaccine and to better understand the novel coronavirus, we don't yet know how extensive the impact on American business will be. That makes this the most opportune time to plan for what your business or school should do if and when the virus gains strength in the country.

The 2019 novel coronavirus, now officially designated as "COVID-19," is already impacting the United States. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Robert Redfield told CNN last week, "We don't know a lot about this virus. This virus is probably with us beyond this season, beyond this year, and I think eventually the virus will find a foothold and we will get community-based transmission." As of February 20, there were 34 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the United States. Worldwide, there have been 2,250 deaths attributable to COVID-19, with roughly 77,270 cases.

Health care institutions will bear the brunt of the impacts associated with COVID-19. Hospitals, clinics and doctors' offices will need to plan not only how to treat what could be an onslaught of patients but also how to protect their employees, who themselves are potential victims of the disease. Impacts of COVID-19 will not be limited to the health care industry, however. Addressing the COVID-19 pandemic has already had a major disruptive impact. China has quarantined entire major cities and has imposed strict travel restrictions. Schools and businesses have been closed indefinitely.

Businesses large and small, schools and local government in this country will be forced to confront COVID-19 infections. Not only will these entities have to deal with actual infections, they will have to cope with the fear that invariably accompanies outbreaks of novel diseases.

The first and foremost concern of all employers should be the health and welfare of their employees and customers. Employers should stay informed and follow the advice of federal, state and local health officials. It is not too early, however, for businesses, schools and local governments to assess the practical and legal impacts that COVID-19 could have on their operations. There are a multitude of issues these entities should be thinking about now, including:

- Protecting their employees and customers, such as how to deal with employees exhibiting symptoms barred from the workplace, how much individual health information can be shared with employees and how to implement measures in a non-discriminatory manner
- Planning for business disruptions, caused either by quarantines or by high employee absenteeism associated with COVID-19 infections or disruptions in business supply chains
- For schools, how to deal with the public, address absenteeism of students and staff and consider how to cope with possible extended closures.

Failure to plan for how to cope with this outbreak is planning to fail. Plans made under duress in the midst of a crisis are routinely destined to fall short. COVID-19 infections and measures taken to control the outbreak will impact the ability of businesses and schools to meet many contractual or regulatory obligations they have. It is essential for these entities to include their lawyers in their planning processes. Attorneys across Barley Snyder's various practice groups are well positioned and prepared to assist clients in crafting strategies to cope with this looming crisis.

If you have questions on how your business should plan to respond to a coronavirus outbreak in the United States, please [contact me](#).

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