

# Pandemic plan an antidote to business disaster

*Tony Wong, Business Reporter*

Cheryl Gray knew she had a problem on her hands when cleaning staff in one of the buildings she was responsible for started showing up to work with masks.

It was the summer of 2003 and severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, had hit Canada's largest city. By the end of the outbreak there were 443 probable cases, with 44 deaths. Tenants in her Toronto buildings were clamouring for information. Was it even safe to touch the elevator buttons?

Gray, a senior vice-president at Canadian property manager and developer Bentall Capital, knew she had to be prepared if there was a next time. "There was a lot of angst amongst tenants and we really didn't have a clear game plan on what to do," Gray said.

What Gray did was create what some describe as the gold standard of pandemic planning for commercial buildings in North America.

Gray's obscure manual is getting more attention today after long lines for H1N1 flu vaccination shots in Ontario created a heightened sense of urgency for Canadian businesses. About 2.5 million people have been vaccinated in three weeks, with 198 deaths across the country.

Apart from the health implications, the virus can have severe consequences on the economy if commercial and retail operations close.

Written in the wake of the SARS epidemic, the manual is considered the go-to document in pandemic preparedness, written on the front lines by property managers like Gray who were at the epicentre of the SARS outbreak.

"We were caught by surprise with SARS, and Cheryl took the initiative to reach out to the industry so we could collectively come up with a game plan," said Diana Osler-Zortea, president of the Building Owners and Managers Association of Canada, which represents commercial real estate landlords.

"We really needed to figure out how you continue to service everyone when all your workers are sick. How would your business continue in the event of an emergency?"

At the time, Gray was responsible for managing 20 million square feet of properties in eastern Canada, mostly in Toronto. After the SARS outbreak, she got in touch with other members of

BOMA, a group whose members include major landlords such as Redcliffe Realty, Brookfield Properties and Oxford Properties, and formed a group that met monthly for 18 months to prepare the 95-page document now used by building managers worldwide.

The committee used input from not just real estate experts, but legal, insurance and medical experts as well. Toronto microbiologist Dr. Donald Low is also a consultant.

Ralph Dunham, managing director of risk consultancy Marsh Canada Ltd., said he uses the guide as a good starting point for clients.

"Not only is it a gold standard in the North American real estate industry, but it is valuable to other non-real estate organizations," he said.

"Each company is different, but the principles of preparedness are the same."

The guide looks at basic issues such as how to maintain contact with tenants and employees, preparing for the possibility of closure, travel policies, education and even rent defaults by tenants in the wake of a pandemic.

It discusses whether there is even a legal obligation for owners and building managers to have a pandemic plan. It argues employers have a duty to do this because legislation requires that they maintain a safe workplace.

"We tried to look at everything that could happen," said Gray. "If the cleaning company has a 40 per cent absenteeism rate, how are you going to cope with cleaning the premises effectively? Another example might be that some people may not want to take public transit during an outbreak, so they drive in. How do you respond to the need for extra parking spaces?"

Over the past year the guide has been fine-tuned with more input from stakeholders. Gray says it is necessarily a work in progress as building managers learn from the real world.

"When I finished working on the first manual, I was hoping it would have some value one day. I just didn't think it would be this soon," said Gray.

"People thought, well, that's interesting, but I guess it didn't have the kind of relevance and immediacy it has now."