

Experts: Flu victims should miss work despite lean staffs, lost pay

September 23 2009, By Suzanne Ziegler

It's common sense: Stay home from work if you have the H1N1 flu virus. But the reality of making that happen is daunting for already-lean businesses in Minnesota as they grapple with just how flexible they can be with sick leave. And while some employees can work from home or have a bank of sick time, many -- particularly those on the front lines in food or retail -- are afraid to call in sick for fear they'll lose their jobs or are hesitant to lose a day's pay.

With the number of flu cases expected to peak within the next five weeks to seven weeks and send absenteeism rates soaring, experts at a national conference in Minneapolis on Tuesday recommended that companies do what they can to make sure sick [workers](#) stay home. Suggestions include loosening sick-leave policies or allowing workers to use time off that they haven't yet accrued.

Some companies already have taken that a step further. Medtronic Inc. is giving all its U.S. employees, including hourly workers, three extra paid sick days because of H1N1. The Fridley-based medical-device manufacturer said its decision was based on concern that workers would still come in despite being sick.

"We were getting concerns from particularly the hourly side that if they'd already used up their sick time, well then what?" said Tanya Raso, Medtronic's director of corporate risk and business continuity. "And managers were feeling some of the pressure of: 'I'm going to send this person home and potentially they're going to miss their car payment as a

result.' This will help alleviate concerns on both ends."

Raso said she realizes that some abuse might take place but that the company is relying on the honor code.

Best Buy is telling its managers to make sure employees know it's OK to take sick time. It's also telling managers to tell workers to go home if they appear to be sick. If a worker who doesn't have sick time is sent home during a shift, managers are encouraged to pay the remainder of that day's shift.

Target and other businesses are waiting to see just how serious the pandemic is before they solidify personnel plans.

"We're prepared to react and be compassionate depending on the extent of the epidemic," said Darrell Amberson, president and part-owner of Lehman's Garage Inc., which employs just under 100 people in Minneapolis and area suburbs.

For now, he plans to shift people among Lehman's six locations as needed if the flu hits. If it gets worse, he's considering changing the company's sick-leave policy.

Technicians and other hourly workers earn vacation time but not sick time, but Amberson said it's unlikely a sick employee would drag himself in if he had the flu just to save a vacation day. "I'd like to think that most of our people are pretty conscientious, and we're small enough that we have a relatively close-knit group," he said. "Someone would say, 'Stay home, take it easy and we'll cover for you. It will be OK. It's not worth making other people sick or yourself worse to tough it out.'"

New Horizon Academy, which has 7,000 kids and 1,400 workers in 60 child-care centers in Minnesota, is taking precautions in all of its centers,

even telling parents to wash their hands before they go into a classroom. Most of the workers in the centers are paid hourly and accrue paid time off (PTO) but not sick time.

The Plymouth, Minn.-based company is considering allowing workers to use PTO hours they haven't yet accrued if they need to stay home because of H1N1, said Chad Dunkley, chief operating officer.

It also has beefed up its list of substitutes by about two dozen in case the flu takes a toll on workers, he said.

At the conference, called "Keeping the World Working During the H1N1 Pandemic," experts advised businesses to come up with a plan now, if they haven't already. And the first priority should be keeping people home without fear of losing their jobs.

"The simple measure of simply staying home is really, really critical and cannot be overemphasized, and people need to take this seriously," state epidemiologist Ruth Lynfield said in an interview at the conference, which was organized by the University of Minnesota's Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy. "Employers need to facilitate this."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that workers stay home until at least 24 hours after they are free of fever and that businesses should expect them to be out for three to five days. If someone seems sick, ask them to go home promptly. Prepare to be flexible if workers have children who become sick or whose school is closed. And businesses with policies requiring doctor's notes for sick time need to do away with that, at least temporarily.

"During this outbreak, doctors are going to be really busy and won't have the time to do this kind of paperwork," Lisa Koonin, a member of the

CDC's H1N1 Flu Response Team, said during a session called "Ensuring Sick People Stay Home."

At that session, questions revolved around just how far employers can go when delving into an employee's health and still stay within the boundaries of federal workplace and privacy laws. Can they ask if a worker has influenza-like symptoms? Yes. Can they ask a sick person to go home? Yes. Can they force a sick worker to go home? Well, that's a gray area. But the common-sense answer is that they should, given that the sick person is jeopardizing the health of other workers.

Pressed about the burden the sick-leave recommendations place on companies, Koonin called it a shared responsibility between the government and the employer. "Most employers have some flexibility," she said, suggesting that they look at letting workers share a pool of unused time or dip into time they haven't accrued yet.

While the experts admitted that they don't know how serious the pandemic will become, they know that H1N1 is targeting children and the middle-aged, unlike seasonal influenza, which targets the elderly. That means it will be hitting workers and their children the hardest, all the more reason for companies to be prepared.

"It's not clear yet if it's not a big deal, being blown out of proportion vs. something that could be catastrophic," said Julie Gerberding, former director of the CDC, who was a keynote speaker.

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Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: Experts: Flu victims should miss work despite lean staffs, lost pay (2009, September 23) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-09-experts-flu-victims-staffs-lost.html>

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