

# Not Business as Usual



## Prevention in the Workplace Requires Planning

Perhaps it's a matter of "crying wolf," but among area businesses there does not seem to be a lot of "on the street" conversation about the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic.

"It's been pretty quiet on that front," says Joseph Bevilaqua, Chief Executive Officer of the Merrimack Valley Chamber of Commerce, one business leader who works with companies throughout the Merrimack Valley. "I remember there was a lot of activity a couple of years ago with the avian flu which turned out to have little impact."

Yet from a public health standpoint, getting businesses on board with preparation is an important priority. Companies are a "point of spread", in the parlance of public health officials, when a pandemic begins to erupt.

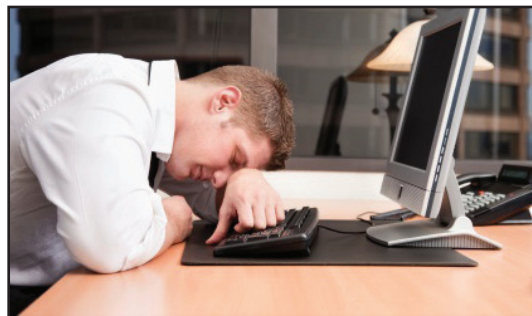
Policies best suited to reducing the spread of a pandemic influenza may seem to run counter to spirit of business operation in normal times: insisting that sick workers stay home, accommodating employees whose children are ill or whose daycare has been disrupted, and allowing staffers whose duties can be performed from home to telecommute.

Modifying long-standing business procedures can make a real difference during a public health emergency.

An example of a company rule can be counterproductive is the widespread policy requiring employees to provide a doctor's note as proof of illness. Such requirements distract medical providers, when they can least afford additional demands upon their time.

Dr. Stephen Beaudoin, an internist in Pentucket Medical's Newburyport office, recalls a case last spring, during the hectic "Swine Flu" outbreak, of patient begging for an appointment to be tested, in order to satisfy his employer's policy.

"I knew he had the flu, *he* knew he had the flu, but we had to go through with a test, because his employer was demanding it," he said. "When you're in the midst of a busy flu season, these kinds of exercises are a distraction from providing care to people who actually need it."



At the national level, H1N1 preparation has become a top priority of the Small Business Administration, the Department of Homeland Security and the US Chamber of Commerce.

The US chamber has developed guidelines for businesses, intended to minimize the impact. In a 16-page volume titled, "*It's Not Flu as Usual: An H1N1 Business Preparedness Guide*," the largest American business federation presented scenarios in which more than 10 percent of staff are too sick to come to work on any given day over the course of several months to a year.

"Absenteeism will be the central issue that businesses wrestle with during this pandemic," said Ann Beauchesne, who

heads the chamber's national security and emergency preparedness program.

The chamber acknowledged that influenza rates and absenteeism are difficult to predict but said business owners and corporate executives need to be aware of how bad the situation could become.

A downloadable version of the chamber's guide is available at <http://www.uschamber.com>

Among steps businesses should consider to prepare for the 2009 H1N1 Influenza:

- Examine and modify company policies that might put further strains on scarce health resources
- Promote health behaviors and hygiene: hand washing and respiratory precautions
- Social distancing, keep a six foot distance between employees
- Use email and conference calls as opposed to meetings
- Consider reassigning high-risk employees, like pregnant workers, to reduce their exposure
- Reassure employees that you want them to stay out until they are completely recovered i.e., one day *after* symptoms have ceased.
- Conduct emergency communication planning