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Benefit Services

Government Agencies Issue Fresh Flu Pandemic Guidance August 26, 2009

Two federal agencies have issued fresh guidance about what employers can do if there is a serious influenza outbreak.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued guidelines employers can follow to build a preparedness and action plan in a flu outbreak.

However, experts say fear of a pandemic may have waned and employers may have slipped into a false sense of security. Experts also note the H1N1 influenza virus could wreak havoc on employers if they're not prepared.

According to a World Health Organization update last week, more than 182,000 confirmed cases of pandemic flu have occurred in 177 countries and territories. Nearly 1,800 deaths have been reported as a result of the flu, the vast majority in the Americas.

Michael Keating, Atlanta-based director of Navigant Consulting Inc., said employers are aware of a potential flu outbreak, but some have not taken the simple step of forming a team to help outline how a company would operate should its workforce be hit by employee illness.

Chicago-based Navigant recently launched a survey of employers that focuses on risk management and human resources departments checking their preparedness in the event of a flu outbreak.

“Interest has kind of atrophied since late April when the outbreak first happened,” Keating said. “There isn’t a lot of new guidance out there, but what the CDC is advocating is [for employers] to prepare to be flexible.”

In its guidelines, the CDC asks employers to work with employees to implement plans

that can reduce the spread of flu, while keeping their business functioning during a slumping economy.

The CDC also advises employers to encourage employees to receive a vaccination for seasonal flu as well as the H1N1 virus when that vaccine becomes available.

Keating and the CDC encourage employees with flulike symptoms to stay home. Further, they encourage employers to remain flexible in allowing employees to stay home if they are ill without fear of losing their jobs.

“One of the most important things that employers can do is to make sure their human resources and leave policies are flexible and follow public health guidance,” HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said in a statement. “If employees are sick, they need to be encouraged to stay home.”

Keating said some employees will abuse this flexibility, but also said employers can put policies in place to ensure employees are actually taking time off because they are ill. He mentioned actions such as unpaid leave and negative vacation balances as two ways of doing this when workers have already used their available days.

“Not getting paid or using vacation is enough to keep most people honest, but it provides that their job is still there for them once they are healthy again so they don’t come to work sick in an effort to prevent the loss of their job,” Keating said.

He also recommends that employers get to know their local health officials and community leaders, who will communicate flu risk information in affected local areas. Another way employers can gauge the seriousness of a flu outbreak is monitoring school closings, he said.

Government agencies also encourage that other steps—such as stocking up on hand sanitizer, soap, tissue and other infection-prevention products—be done as early as possible, so they will be readily available during an outbreak when stores and distributors may not be able to keep up with demand.

Identifying key people within the company who maintain relationships with key clients and ensuring they are vaccinated and remain healthy is another step employers can take, Keating said.

“It’s a good idea to index the skills held by a few people in the organization,” Keating said.

“You have to plan how you’re going to fill those roles should those people become sick,

and there may not be time to cross-train someone. It's important to know where your vulnerabilities are and address them in advance.”

More information on influenza and how businesses can prepare for an outbreak is available at www.flu.gov.

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