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Companies gird for H1N1 invasion

Virus could hit small businesses hard

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Think you have the H1N1 flu? Call your doctor and stay home. That's what employers across Fairfield County are telling their workers as the flu season arrives.

"The best thing we can do is keep sick people away from well people. We're following the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) standards," said Sheryl Battles, spokeswoman for Stamford-based Pitney Bowes Inc. and a member of the company's crisis management team. "We've been preparing for a potential pandemic since the end of 2006."

The company, which employs 36,000 people in 130 countries, has been educating its global workers about how to combat the flu and react when it becomes apparent that cases of H1N1, also known as the swine flu, occur in the workplace. "We're looking at flexible work options. With technology, many employees will be able to work remotely," Battles said.

Major corporations like Pitney Bowes have the resources to address health issues such as H1N1, but smaller businesses may be at a disadvantage, said Christopher Bruhl, president and chief executive officer of the Business Council of Fairfield County, which has developed an online guide for businesses to address the issue.

The information, gleaned from the CDC, World Health Organization, state Department of Public Health, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Telecommute Connecticut and www.flu.gov, the federal government's flu portal, can be found through the Business Council's Web site, www.BusinessFairfield.com.

Bruhl said the council expects to distribute an e-mail to more than 3,000 members this week. "Large companies are up to speed and prepared. We're worried about the smaller companies because they're so concerned now about just staying in business," said Tanya Court, director of public policy and programs at the council, which hosted a conference call with 40 companies in the spring. "Talk with your employees, and prepare an emergency contact list."

Increasingly, companies are showing interest in learning more about H1N1 and how it can affect their employees, said David Lewis, president of OperationsInc., a Stamford human resources firm. He said that 25 to 30 companies participated in online seminars about the issue in the spring and early summer, but 100 participants logged on to one held Sept. 16. While there is an increase in interest, executives at many businesses are slow to take action, Lewis said.

"Most employers are treating it like the local weatherman -- until I see piles of snow outside, I'm not going closing the offices," he said. "This will spread more quickly and infect more people. It's already shown signs that it will be more virulent and more aggressive."

Operations with a number of employees in a confined area could be particularly susceptible, Lewis said, suggesting that it could quickly infect a company's customer service team. "The phone could be ringing off the hook one morning because everyone has the flu," he said. Management should be making arrangements now with temporary employment agencies to fill key positions on a short-term basis, he said.

People's United Bank, based in Bridgeport, has a plan to combat spread of the virus among its 4,700 employees. A physician consulted with the bank to develop the plan, which focuses on aspects such as keeping proper social distances and the use of masks and gloves.

"It covers how the bank would continue to provide service if an infectious disease should prevent people from coming to work," spokesman Brent Di Giorgio said.

Like Pitney Bowes, Norwalk-based Arch Chemicals is a global business with operations in the Southern Hemisphere, where H1N1 has been spreading during the winter. The company's efforts have kept the impact to a minimum, said Dr. Peggy Geimer, corporate medical director.

"Brazil had a fairly substantial outbreak. We have two plants in Brazil. We told people with the flu that they had to stay home. We kept communications lines open, sharing CDC and WHO information. It (reports of flu) was only a handful at each plant," she said.

Geimer said that Arch is using the same policy at its Northern Hemisphere operations, including in Norwalk, where it has 110 employees, and at its Cheshire research facility, which has nearly 60 employees and where one person has contracted H1N1.

Stamford-based Purdue Pharma has health clinics for employees at each of its locations, and the company said it is prepared for a busy fall and winter.

Purdue is offering seasonal flu shots and awaiting news from the state Department of Health regarding the availability of H1N1 vaccines, said Patty Heyl, senior director of environment, health and safety. The company has an intranet site to update employees, who also have access to a flu hot line, allowing them to communicate their concerns.

At Stew Leonard's, the Norwalk-based grocery chain, Stew's Flu Crew, a collection of company staff, has been disseminating information about guarding against H1N1 to its 2,500 employees. "We have to be careful about the panic aspect," said Stew Leonard Jr., president and chief executive officer, adding that the company is offering seasonal flu shots to its employees. "As soon as the H1N1 comes out, we're going to get everyone that." The chain has more than 100 hand-cleansing stations throughout each of its four stores.

Stew's employees who come down with H1N1 are required to stay home, and if they have no more vacation or sick time, they will be allowed to draw from their 2010 vacation and sick time. "We want to make it easy for them to stay home and still get paid," Leonard said.

In a survey of more than 1,400 organizations, the Pandemic Prevention Council, based in Washington D.C., determined that 71.7 percent of U.S. companies have business continuity plans, but more public sector organizations have H1N1 plans compared with the private sector.

"For organizations that could be hard-hit by the swine flu this fall and winter, contingency plans could be essential to their survival," Jon Desenberg, senior policy director at the PPC, said in a statement. "Developing programs to cross-train employees, creating telecommuting policies and revising sick leave allowances are just some of the recommended ways for employers to prepare."