

Swine flu poses risks and questions for business

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As Connecticut officials recorded the first death from swine flu, officials continued to warn of the potential for a renewed outbreak of the disease next fall that could burden businesses with high rates of absenteeism.

The Connecticut Senate gave businesses a major break this month, after sidestepping a vote on a bill approved in the state House of Representatives that would have mandated employers provide paid sick leave for employees.

With businesses still struggling to recover in the recession, the bill might have created an additional headache for employers this fall if a renewed outbreak of swine flu occurs as some fear.

In early June, the Department of Public Health announced that an elderly person in New Haven died of complications following a bout with swine flu, becoming the first known person in Connecticut to do so. Another two people were hospitalized, but later released.

As of last week, the state had confirmed more than 550 cases of swine flu in a month's time, including nearly 350 people in Fairfield County.

DPH stated that likely represented only a fraction of the number of people who fought off a mild bout of the disease without seeking medical attention.

As of early June, the Centers for Disease Control had yet to make a decision on whether to recommend vaccinations heading into the fall.

As of the first week of June, the Centers for Disease Control had tracked some 11,500 confirmed or suspected cases of swine flu nationally, with 7 percent of those victims getting hospitalized and a dozen people dying from complications of the disease.

The threat had some employers scrambling to review everything from flex-work arrangements and job-duty matrixes, to their insurance policies for business interruption to ensure they could

collect a claim if need be. A virulent pandemic could result in worker absentee rates of 40 percent or more, according to Stamford-based Gartner Inc., which advised businesses to "stress" test their technical and business systems against that scenario to ensure they can deal with any threat.



"You are dealing with a situation – and I understand it – where the first message is, 'We want to be there for our employees,'" said David Lewis, CEO of Stamford-based OperationsInc which consults on human-resources issues. "In the next breath it is, 'If we get in trouble, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.'"

Last month, the AFL-CIO and other unions lobbied the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to enforce protections for workers. OSHA, which has the power to levy fines for workplace safety violations, sent two officials before Congressional

committees last month to testify on steps the agency has taken to protect workers and the need for employers to maintain responsible safety procedures.

"If we are to expect our health care work force to come to work each day during a pandemic, then their employers have a responsibility to ensure they have the best protection, including appropriate respirators and other personal protective equipment," said Jordan Barab, acting assistant secretary at OSHA. "OSHA stands prepared to use its existing authority to aggressively enforce safe-work practices to ensure employees receive appropriate protection. Although OSHA has no specific standard on influenza exposure, in appropriate circumstances the agency will use the general-duty clause of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, which requires employers to provide employment free from recognized hazards."

Richard Besser, CDC's director of terrorism preparedness and emergency response, warned businesses and citizens to continue preparedness before the fall while speaking last week at the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists annual meeting in Buffalo, N.Y.

"My biggest concern is complacency, a sense that we dodged a bullet here," Besser said, as quoted by the Associated Press. "I don't think we can let our guard down."