



Swine Flu, What's An Employer to Do?

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There is a lot of concern about the potential for a significant outbreak of H1N1 influenza, also known as swine flu. The news is full of stories of people being quarantined upon returning from exotic locales or schools pleading with parents to keep kids home at the first sign of the flu. While there seems to be some debate as to how severe any illness accompanying H1N1 may be, it's clear the virus poses a significant health risk, and Southwest Washington employers have to face the prospect that a portion of their workforce could be incapacitated as a result. This is of particular concern for smaller businesses with fewer employees.

Have a Plan

Much of what human resources professionals do is generate guidelines for how people should interact in the workplace and to enforce these guidelines. Generating a plan for how to handle an H1N1 outbreak fulfills these functions. Beyond piece of mind, a plan will help you from an operations standpoint in case there is a significant outbreak. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention states that people who contract H1N1 should be prepared to "stay home for a week or so."

Identify Backup Staff

Irrespective of size, most businesses cannot carry out its primary functions without employees. While some workers will be sufficiently specialized so that you cannot replace them when they are absent, others can be replaced with temporary workers until regular employees return. Many companies reduced their workforce last year due to the recession. In the event of a labor shortage, consider temporarily recalling such workers. They know your workplace and can get up to speed quicker and cheaper than regular temporary employees.

Talk About It

At the end of the day, what matters most is that you think about the potential issues raised by the spread of H1N1 in your workplace. You do not want the first time that you address these issues to be when the virus is already present in your workplace. This could lead to rash decisions with detrimental operational consequences.

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