

Swine flu bout would cripple most businesses

By Bonna Johnson • THE TENNESSEAN • September 16, 2009

At [D1 Sports Training](#) in Cool Springs, facility managers can step in to do the job of a personal trainer. So can the operations managers.

The same goes for the concierge bankers at Nashville-based Avenue Bank, where one person can act as teller, loan officer or branch manager.

Without that kind of cross training, several other local businesses say they'd be hard-pressed to cope with unexpected and widespread employee absenteeism, if a severe swine flu outbreak were to hit their work forces.

Already operating with lean staffs because of the recession, employers may face added pressure as the H1N1 flu, coupled with cases of the seasonal flu, send more workers home with fevers and coughs. Others may also be stuck at home caring for sick children or minding them if their schools or day-care centers close.

A new study by the [Harvard School of Public Health](#) suggests that two-thirds of businesses could not maintain normal operations if half their employees were absent for two weeks because of the swine flu. Four of every five businesses could expect severe problems if half their workers were forced to miss a month.

"Nobody can predict what will actually happen," said [Colleen Conway-Welch](#), dean of [Vanderbilt University's School of Nursing](#) and a disaster management expert. "Everybody wants to be responsive, but nobody wants to jump off the cliff."

Employers will need to adapt policies week by week, if need be, she said.

"We are in the process of preparing parents in case we have to shut down," said Karen Stump, executive director at [Holly Street Day Care](#).

"We're letting parents know this is a real possibility, and they need to make plans for alternative care."

The East Nashville child-care center is warning families that siblings of sick children won't be admitted, and if too many children get sick or too many workers call in ill, the center won't be able to operate and will shut its doors temporarily.

"Yes, these are vulnerable times economically, but you don't want workers coming in sick and spreading the disease, and you don't want a child sick at home alone," Conway-Welch said.

This week, the [Department of Homeland Security](#) urged small businesses to devise contingency plans and offered [preparedness guides](#). Having even one or two employees out for a few days has the potential to hurt a company's operations, and sap the strength of local economies, officials said.

To make the flu threat even worse, a study out this week said that people may spread swine flu for a week or more after the symptoms first appear. That's in contrast with earlier messages from health officials, who have been telling people that avoiding contact with others for a day after their fever goes away should be good enough.

At Avenue Bank, Chief Operating Officer Kent Cleaver said he is confident his bank's five locations could operate with half their work force for a two-week period.

"If a customer walks in, any employee that greets them can handle any transaction," Cleaver said about the bank's emphasis on cross training.

Sick leave has flaws

Meanwhile, about half the staff of Franklin-based [Timberland Cabinetry Co.](#) also can work from home, handling customer calls and billing, said CEO and President Rod Henderson. Where things could get complicated, though, is keeping the cabinet-making company's assembly and distribution lines going when too many people are out sick.

"We can't afford to be shut down," Henderson said. "If we don't manufacture our product, there is no income."

Contingency plans at some offices include bringing in temporary helpers, employers said.

At D1 Sports Training, where fitness instructors and sports therapists whip athletes into shape, interns from area universities could fill in for sick trainers, and sports therapists could be brought in from other clinics managed by the same vendor to lend a hand, said Dan Murphy, chief operating officer at D1.

The Harvard study also spotlights shortcomings in sick-leave policies, finding that three-quarters of businesses offer paid sick leave for some employees, but only 35 percent offer paid leave for workers who need to care for sick family members or children when schools are closed.

Many Nashville CEOs said they would try to be flexible, although some said workers might end up having to use vacation days as their sick time runs out.

The Centers for Disease Control is asking companies to permit their workers to stay home if they're sick or if their children are sick without fear of losing their jobs. Larger companies have an advantage there because they typically have more resources to draw from, said Thomas Li-Ping Tang, professor of management at Middle Tennessee State University.

Some small-business owners here insist they'd be more nimble in adjusting their policies.

"I think smaller companies are going to be harder hit than larger companies, but larger companies, your Fortune 500 companies, can't adjust their (human resources) policies like we can," said Bob Klee, chief financial officer and co-founder of Internet-based [Hometown Quotes](#), a company that compares insurance rates.

Klee said the firm would be willing to adjust company policy so workers would still have time for vacations later in the year, if they used up all their paid time off battling swine flu.

Families need plans

Another issue for businesses is how hard to press workers to get immunized.

At [Baptist Hospital](#) and [Saint Thomas Hospital](#) in Nashville, all staff, including doctors and nurses, are encouraged but not required to be vaccinated, spokeswoman Kristi Gooden said. The same is true at [Vanderbilt University Medical Center](#), spokesman John Howser said.

Back at Holly Street Day Care, executive director Stump said workers who decline vaccinations wouldn't be permitted to care for infants.

Stump and Conway-Welch emphasized working families need to come up with a Plan A and a Plan B if their children end up sick or without day care. That could mean getting relatives to pitch in or forming a co-op with other parents.

"We do have resources in places, but we're not going to know if they're adequate until we get through this whole event," Conway-Welch said.

<http://www.tennessean.com/article/20090916/BUSINESS01/909160396/Swine+flu+bout+would+cripple+most+businesses>