“Thinking About H1N1 Preparedness”

The World Economic Forum earlier this year placed the adverse economic impact of an influenza pandemic at approximately $500 billion before the outbreak of the H1N1 Pandemic. According to USA.gov, the United States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands have reported 21,449 cases with 87 deaths as of 11:00 a.m., 6-19-09. New Jersey official tally was 603 cases and two deaths (899 on 6-26-09). By comparison, Governor Corzine announced the first five confirmed cases of H1N1 Influenza in New Jersey on April 30th.

Hopefully, relief is on the horizon. The Centers for Disease Control has provided virus “seeds” to industry so the manufacture of a vaccine can proceed as quickly as possible. Yet, the development of an effective vaccine and mass distribution is months away.

Today, Burton Asset Management (BAM) held its second national Rapid Action Pandemic Planning Webinar; the first was held last month. Kevin Burton, CEO, referenced a remark made by the new U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius about a vaccination campaign beginning in late September. The speed of the H1N1 spread was a point Mr. Burton emphasized since industry has been wrestling with the H1N1 issue for a little more than six weeks. Reported H1N1 cases have accelerated during this time.

Mr. Burton painted an emerging H1N1 picture for his audience…
- There are more infections than actual reports indicate
- While not considered deadly (1.9% rate of death), H1N1 is highly infectious
- The presence of H1N1 is extending well past the typical flu season
- Medical journals say H1N1 will mutate but experts do not know what form it will ultimately take
- Businesses must prepare now especially when faced with a workforce absence of 30% or more

He believes two factors in particular could impact the behavior of H1N1 this September: the return of students to school; and the conclusion of the summer vacation cycle for workers.

Mr. Burton questions whether government will or is able to step in and address of all the needs expressed by a plethora of entities…although government will attempt to protect critical infrastructure and key resources. Mr. Burton encouraged those attending the Webinar to “stress test” their organizations during August.

Private Sector efforts to insure sustainable operations in the face of high worker absenteeism, estimating potential cascading impacts and readiness to conduct internal succession planning are largely unknown at this point. If the past is any indicator of tomorrow, a survey reported at a 2007 Harvard Business School conference on pandemic planning found 88% of companies sampled seemed prepared to deal with a power disruption and 70% with a technological failure but only 13% had preparations for the kind of labor-force disruption inherent in a pandemic.

Now is the time to assess measures for limiting the spread of workplace outbreaks, monitoring employee health, stockpiling appropriate supplies, and aligning business continuity plans with current realities. In the meantime, health authorities are carefully watching the Southern Hemisphere for telltale clues of what autumn holds for North America when the flu season begins anew.

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