

Execs told to plan for flu disaster

Health experts urge prevention in workplace

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As if the high cost of health care and energy wasn't enough to worry about, top state and federal health experts yesterday urged business executives to plan for the unfathomable: a flu pandemic that could claim millions of lives, rob the economy of billions of dollars, and paralyze a large swath of the globe.

The New Jersey Chamber of Commerce and state and federal health officials hosted a sobering discussion at State Police headquarters in West Trenton that suggested employers develop their own response to a wide and prolonged exposure of a deadly flu.

"Not just for altruistic reasons; you need to plan to keep your business running," said David Gruber, the senior assistant health commissioner and chairman of the state

Pandemic Flu Plan Committee. "It's important you have a profitable and viable company at this time."

Employers were asked to think about stockpiling their own supply of anti-viral drugs, given that medical professionals, emergency first-responders and children typically get priority treatment. At a minimum, health officials said sanitizing gel dispensers and face masks were wise purchases, to cut down the spread of illness.

But the best way to stem the spread of the flu is to relax workplace absenteeism policies so people are not torn between the need to earn a paycheck and taking care of themselves or their families, Lisa Koonin, a senior adviser for the Influenza Coordination Unit for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Sick people should stay home. We have to change our way of thinking," Koonin said. "People with a household member who is sick should stay home, too." Employers can develop a plan allowing staggered work schedules and telecommuting in the event schools close and child care centers close.

"The time for businesses to prepare for a pandemic is now," said Matt Conlon of Cantel Medical, an infection control equipment manufacturer. "New Jersey companies must realize that when the pandemic threat level increases, manufacturers will not be able to keep up with the demand for protective face masks and other flu prevention products, leaving employers without access to these potentially life-saving resources."

