

# Federal officials urge employers to prepare for widespread swine flu outbreak

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3 Cabinet secretaries in a joint news conference warn that high rates of absenteeism could result and urge cross-training for key jobs. They emphasize cleanliness and sending home ill workers.

By Kimberly Geiger

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Reporting from Washington

Federal officials urged businesses and other employers today to prepare for a widespread outbreak of swine flu this fall that could result in high rates of sustained absenteeism and leave crucial posts vacant.

Employers should cross-train workers so that vital functions are covered and must take active steps to ensure that the H1N1 virus that causes the flu does not spread, officials said.

Such steps include aggressively cleaning work areas, encouraging hand-washing and sending employees home at the first hint of flu symptoms.

"We like to praise the Puritan work ethic," said Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, who appeared at a news conference with other top federal officials. But "common sense" would be a better response to the likely outbreak of the flu, he said.

At the same time, federal officials are not sure how bad the outbreak will be.

"In some areas, there may be a lot of flu; in other areas, very little," Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said.

Employers should consider curtailing face-to-face meetings and even limit company travel to prevent the possible spread of the disease, Locke said.

Federal officials are urging a "hands and home" approach -- keeping hands clean by washing and sanitizing them, and keeping ill workers at home.

"Be responsible and understanding for the absenteeism that needs to occur with this strain of the flu," said Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, joining Locke and Sebelius at the news conference today.

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