

Business Record

FEBRUARY 20, 2006

CENTRAL IOWA'S INDEPENDENT, LOCALLY OWNED BUSINESS WEEKLY

PRICE: \$1.50

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Trends & Issues

Contingency planning expert Regina Phelps conducted a risk management forum Feb. 15 that addressed how businesses should plan for an avian flu pandemic. It's estimated that 713,000 Iowans would become ill if avian flu reaches the pandemic stage, and that more than 6,200 would die.



Photo by Duane Tinkey

Pandemic plans encouraged for all businesses

By Joe Gardyasz

By the end of the seminar, shaking hands no longer seemed like such a good idea.

Not after hearing that a single person who has a particularly bad case of the avian flu could infect every one of the 75 people at the meeting merely by walking through the room.

Health experts worldwide have been calling a global pandemic of a deadly strain of avian flu an eventual certainty. Last Wednesday, that message was brought home during a business continuity seminar held at Holmes Murphy & Associates Inc. in West Des Moines.

Regina Phelps, president of Emergency Management & Safety Solutions Inc., is an internationally recognized expert in emergency management and contingency planning. She was contracted by the insurance brokerage to conduct the half-day seminar, which ended with a two-hour session detailing how businesses must plan for an avian flu pandemic.

"In most emergencies, you evacuate to somewhere else," Phelps told the group, which was made up of primarily of corporate risk management officials. "With a pandemic, the rules are totally different."

Planning for a pandemic must include broad thinking by businesses about how their communications, sup-

ply chains and workforces would be disrupted, as well as enforcing procedures such as hand-washing and restricting visitors during the height of the emergency, which experts say would result in an average 30 percent absenteeism.

Executives also need to think about whether employees would be equipped to work from home during a pandemic, and even about how to care for employees who may suddenly become seriously ill while at work, Phelps said.

"If you don't know how to text-message, learn," she said, noting that text messaging, voice over IP and instant messaging will become essential business tools because the telephone system would in all likelihood become overloaded during a pandemic.

Though the H5N1, or "bird flu," virus has not yet spread easily to people, two key factors that could trigger a pandemic are already present: little or no human immunity and the ability of the virus to replicate itself in humans.

Experts believe the United States may have as little as six weeks of warning from the time the virus begins spreading among human beings, and that the first 90 to 120 days will be the most deadly, followed by additional waves that could last from six weeks to six months each.

Such a pandemic is not unprecedented. In 1918, the Spanish flu, which scientists believe was also a bird flu that leaped from birds to people, killed an estimated 550,000 Americans in the span of 10 months. Worldwide, an estimated 50 million people died from it.

Phelps, a former nurse who advises primarily multinational corporations on how to prepare for avian flu, said the Fortune 500 companies "are on it; they're preparing."

"What I have seen in the past 120 days is a huge increase (in preparation) by the Fortune 500," she said. "They have finally gotten what it means, that if they have this serious illness with significant absenteeism, the huge impact to the bottom line, that they have to do something."

The extended time a pandemic could last is among the most important reasons to plan for it, Phelps said. Rather than planning for a 30-day disruption of business, a pandemic may result in 90 to 120 days of emergency operations, she said.

Another key consideration that will affect businesses: So far, 90 percent of the 148 cases reported as of early January affected people under 40. More than half the cases so far have been fatal.

Some of those attending the seminar said their companies have not yet taken

any serious steps to plan for a pandemic, but that the information gained in the seminar will be brought to their organizations' executives.

"I think they'll take it seriously," said Tom Vanderlinden, director of safety at Wolf Construction in West Des Moines. "I think the fact that they offered this opportunity to me shows that they are open to learning about these things."

Jeff Howard, a senior business contingency planner with Meredith Corp., said his company is still in the early stages of planning.

"We have to do a lot of research," he said. "There hasn't been an active effort, but it's in our plans to do that."

Before a plan is disseminated to employees, it will have to be well thought-out, Howard added. "You don't want to scare people. You draw a fine line between educating people and scaring them."

More information on avian flu and business contingency planning for a pandemic may be found at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site, www.cdc.gov/flu/avian, and at www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/pdf/businesschecklist.pdf. To monitor the spread of the H5N1 virus online, businesses can register at www.promedmail.org. □