

Letter to Penn State employees related to influenza

DATE: August 10, 2009
FROM: Graham B. Spanier
TO: All Employees
SUBJECT: Seasonal and H1N1 Influenza Information

While you may not be seeing much in the news now about the H1N1 (also called swine flu) virus, we want to provide important information to you about this virus and the impact we expect it will have at Penn State this fall.

University Health Services and Occupational Medicine are closely tracking the information provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and the Pennsylvania Department of Health (Pa DOH) and recently met with the Pa DOH officials so as to be able to provide you with the most up-to-date information available. On June 11, 2009, the WHO declared that H1N1 is causing a pandemic, or worldwide outbreak.

Public health officials predict that the H1N1 virus will return in the early fall with H1N1 influenza cases occurring as early as late September or early October in the United States. Individuals between 5 and 25 years of age are much more likely to contract the H1N1 virus. College campuses such as Penn State are likely to see high numbers of cases among students.

Although you may be familiar with the seasonal flu, the H1N1 virus is a different strain of influenza. It is possible to contract both the seasonal flu and H1N1 flu since exposure to one does not give immunity to the other. Given the age of most employees at Penn State, it is much more likely that an employee will contract seasonal flu than H1N1. Of course, the school age children of employees will be susceptible to both H1N1 and seasonal flu.

Because this is a disease that is occurring widely and is highly contagious, public health recommendations are aimed not at containment, but rather at mitigation, or reducing the burden of disease and minimizing its spread. The most effective strategies for disease mitigation (against both flu strains) are personal prevention through hand-washing and cough/cold etiquette, other non-pharmacological interventions (NPIs), and obtaining the seasonal flu shot. The most important NPI currently recommended is the exclusion of ill individuals from public, school, and group activities.

Given the contagious nature of the illness and the self-isolation protocols, it is prudent to prepare for the possibility of significant absences during much of the fall semester and

possibly into spring semester. The following information has been prepared to assist employees and supervisors during this flu season.

All Employees

- In order to minimize your and your family's exposure, take advantage of the seasonal flu vaccine provided free of charge through the Penn State Office of Human Resources Health Matters program. Additional information, including registration instructions, can be found at www.ohr.psu.edu/healthmatters/flu. Also, review the CDC's 'everyday preventive actions' list which is included on the Penn State Office of Human Resources website located at www.ohr.psu.edu/h1n1.
- A Frequently Asked Questions webpage has been developed and will be regularly updated at www.ohr.psu.edu/h1n1.
- As always, the University's Employee Assistance Program will be available as a resource for employees seeking professional counseling. For more information call 866-749-1735 or go to www.ohr.psu.edu/healthmatters.
- The Employee Special Assistance Fund can provide financial support for temporary circumstances, where income is curtailed. See <http://www.ohr.psu.edu/Forms/FundStatement.pdf> for details.

Supervisors

In the event that the H1N1 influenza affects Penn State as expected, it is imperative that supervisors and managers exercise judgment and discretion in applying appropriate policies and guidelines to unique situations and to seek guidance when appropriate. Toward this end, please review the following information, which is intended to assist you in ensuring that all necessary job duties are performed while making reasonable efforts to enable employees to care for themselves and ill family members and also to safeguard the health of your employees.

- Given the loyalty of our employees, some will want to come to work no matter what. Therefore, review with your staff that in balancing public health and work duties, public health considerations must carry the greatest weight.
- Do not require employees reporting flu-like symptoms to submit a healthcare provider's certification; this includes those absences that may be covered by FMLA.

- Identify vital functions, i.e., those that are needed for the continuation of necessary services. In doing so, be mindful that the people currently performing these functions may not be readily available. Therefore, back-up designations and cross-training efforts should be in place. Inform employees that their attendance may be necessary as long as they are in good health.
- Permit employees to use as many sick family days as necessary to care for ill family members who are experiencing flu-like symptoms.
- Permit employees who are absent due to the flu who have expended all accumulated paid time off to use future sick and vacation hours prior to accrual. Normally, the expectation is that this time will be accounted for by the end of the fiscal year.
- Limit or cancel routine meetings and/or meetings that are not vital to the continuity of services and operations. For group meetings typically used to disburse work orders, critical information, or vital updates, consider alternatives to group meetings such as telecommunications, web-based updates, etc.
- Telecommuting can be a useful tool as a means of social distancing and limiting the number of employees who are entering the workforce. The general parameters of telecommuting are contained in HRG02, *Alternate Work Arrangements*. As noted in HRG02, not all employees and not all jobs are suited to telecommuting. If a supervisor considers telecommuting as a means of social distancing, certain operational issues such as computer resources, security measures, communications, etc., need to be reviewed. In addition, the supervisor needs to explain that this arrangement is not a permanent telecommuting arrangement, that it is intended to last for a limited period of time. Prior to implementation, the supervisor should discuss specific details with her/his Human Resources Representative or Director of Business Services.

If guidance on the H1N1 influenza from federal and state agencies changes, additional information will be communicated to the University community at that time. If you have any questions, please contact your Human Resources Representative or Director of Business Services.