

Study finds considerable worker concern over flu

BY CHUCK GREEN
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

David MacKen is determined to ensure nothing robs his firm of productivity. That includes the flu.

That's why several years ago, MacKen, CFO of **Ellassen Group**, a technology, consulting and staffing services firm in Wakefield, initiated a program to bring in nurses from the **Visiting Nurses Association** to administer flu shots to employees.

"We've had great turnout," MacKen said. "If you look at our investment, which is \$25 per person, if we can prevent just one person from getting the flu, we've covered our investment in full. We don't have a lot of sick time."

A study released in October by the **Harvard School of Public Health** indicated a significant worry among workers that prolonged absence from work due to an outbreak of pandemic flu will lead to financial problems.

Nearly half of those who responded to the survey, 48 percent, said they would face financial problems if they were out between 7 and 10 days with the flu. Further, just 19 percent of those surveyed were aware of any plan at their workplace to respond to a serious outbreak of pandemic flu.

"These findings are a wake-up call for business, that employees have serious financial concerns and are unclear about the workplace plans and policies for dealing with pandemic flu," said **Robert Blendon**, professor of health policy and political analysis at HSPH.

It's also a source of concern for state Rep. **Peter Koutoujian**, D-Waltham, co-chairman of the Joint Committee on Public Health. "There's a perception people aren't interested in learning how to protect themselves in case of the flu pandemic," said Koutoujian, who believes the business community is "one of the natural sort of conduits for education" on how to prevent the flu.

In early December, he will make a presentation to the Newton/Needham and Waltham/Weston chambers of commerce on how businesses can protect themselves and their employees in case of a pandemic. He also will distribute a pamphlet published by health delivery organization **Trust for America's Health** on protecting the public from a pandemic.

This is important, said Koutoujian, who thinks while it's the responsibility of both the business community and government to provide citizens tools to combat the flu, neither entity has effectively done so. "There hasn't been much education of the general public."

It's no minor fight: The **World Health Organization** estimates that half of all employees could be out of commission from the flu, contributing to the **World Bank's** estimate that the global econo-

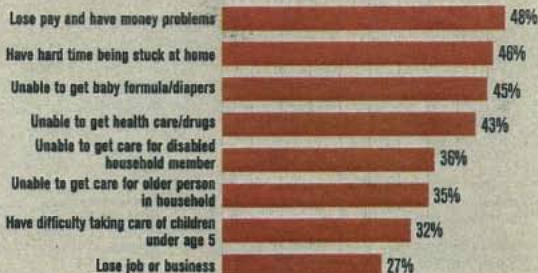
my would take a \$800 billion hit.

Bay State response

Because of Massachusetts' status in terms of biotech, **Philip Gordon**, managing partner of Boston-based **Gordon Law Group**, which specializes in employment law, called the Bay State a

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LIKELIHOOD OF PROBLEMS WORKERS SAY THEY'LL FACE



Source: Harvard School of Public Health



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"fascinating place" in terms of response to the flu.

On the one hand, he said, "Our deep biotech resources position Massachusetts as a national leader in developing the treatment and response to a flu epidemic, a potential economic boom. But many of us have to wonder if we are like the cobbler whose children have no shoes," Gordon said.

Is Massachusetts ready for an outbreak?

"I don't know," he said. "Do we have enough facilities, beds, ventilators, food and water? Employees want prevention systems, like flu shots, but they also want to know that a larger plan is in place in case of an outbreak — a working disaster plan."

Gordon said that while companies are key touch points to reach people, there's a limit to what employers can do on their own.

"This must be a holistic effort with our state. While we can't expect most employers to administer flu shots or treat the sick, we can ask them to arrange for on-site immunization programs with health care officials and to post their community's disaster plan. We can also encourage them to develop and implement wellness policies and guidelines. It's prudent planning, and everyone has a stake in it," he said.

MacKen, who also oversees human resources, believes his company is waging a worthy effort. "I think all businesses should do what we're doing, because it's working." He also hopes to avoid what he called "presenteeism" — when employees come to work sick. "It puts a crimp in productivity and the quality of work."

However, he agrees companies can't do it alone. "I think there needs to be more education, whether it comes at the state, federal or local level."