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Making plans for a pandemic

Businesses prepare for a possibly crippling outbreak of flu
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Minnesota businesses are stepping up plans to prepare for the unthinkable: a pandemic flu that could flatten the economy and take the lives of thousands of people.

In one highly visible move, the **Minnesota Chamber of Commerce** has booked **Mike Osterholm**, former state epidemiologist, to lay out the facts on a possible pandemic from 9 a.m. to noon on Nov. 29 at the **Sheraton Bloomington Hotel**.

Osterholm is director of the **University of Minnesota Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy**, which is co-sponsoring the gathering. The chamber is the state's largest business organization.

Meanwhile, the year-old **Minnesota Information Sharing and Analysis Center** is ramping up its efforts to help businesses prepare for a possible pandemic. The center is a business preparedness group chaired by **Chris Terzich**, the Minneapolis-based incident manager for the **Wells Fargo** banking empire.

The center, which is working with state and federal homeland security agencies, has organized two groups. One has participants from 25 of the state's largest and most critical private employers. The other includes representatives from those companies and about 75 more. It is also building up a Web site (www.mnisac.org).

"I liken this to wearing a seat belt," Terzich says. "Rarely do we get in a car and think there will be an accident. We just buckle up. We need to understand the threat that faces us. Everything we come up with, we intend to share."

Here's the risk:

New cases of the human H5N1 virus, better known as bird flu, are being identified fairly often now in Asia. Wild migratory birds, which are difficult to monitor and capture, are carrying the disease through some Asian lands.

This strain of flu is much more dangerous than the more routine outbreaks of flu in recent years.

Epidemiologists believe that bird flu inevitably will spread to more humans in Asia and then to humans in Europe and the Western Hemisphere.

Nobody knows how soon this will happen, where it will strike most intensely or how widespread it will be.



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But many experts fear the impact could be worse this time than the deadly pandemics in 1918, 1957 and 1968.

Globalization is part of the reason for the concern.

The **World Health Organization** notes that many more people and goods are moving from one country to another on trans-oceanic flights than a generation ago. That boosts the risk of spreading the disease more rapidly and broadly.

Border closings could limit travel, but that would curtail trade and thus trim economic growth.

Osterholm also notes that trends in managing inventory and outsourcing, which have helped so many companies become more efficient in recent decades, would work against efforts to curtail the spread of bird flu.

"Our global, just-in-time economy hurts us," Osterholm says.

That's because generally, companies have less inventory and tighter supply lines now than they once did. That limits their "surge capacity" — their ability to ramp up quickly to produce disease-control products such as surgical masks or vaccines.

Osterholm points to a report on the economic impact of a pandemic, published last month by **Sherry Cooper**, an economist for the **Harris Bank** in Chicago.

She estimates that pandemic flu could kill more than half a million Americans, hospitalize 2 million more and cost the U.S. economy from \$70 billion to \$167 billion.

Even so, Terzich, Osterholm and many others emphasize that more preparation will reduce the threat.

Keeping businesses up and running during a pandemic would be critical, Terzich says. That can be done, he says, by setting up plans for more employees to work from the safety of their homes — something that can be done much more easily than before thanks to the rise of the Internet and related computer technologies.

Osterholm has been sounding warnings for some time about the likelihood of a flu pandemic, but only this fall have his admonitions commanded widespread attention. Much of the concern has come since **President Bush** last month launched a national push to prepare for a possible flu epidemic.

For reservations for the "Avian Flu: Get the Facts" event, contact Carole Keller at 651-292-4676 or ckeller@mnchamber.com. There is a charge.

<http://www.twincities.com/mld/pioneerpress/13147368.htm>