



Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc.
The original outplacement company



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For Immediate Release

Flu Season Kicks Off with Increased Cases Nationwide

THIS SEASON COULD COST EMPLOYERS \$17 BILLION

CHICAGO, January 10, 2019 – Flu season is officially here, as high instances of flu-like illnesses have been recorded in New York City and 19 states as of December 29th, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). While it is difficult for the CDC to predict flu severity, Challenger estimates absences due to illness could cost employers over \$17 billion in lost productivity this season. To limit this cost, workplaces nationwide must start preparing for the possibility of flu-related absences and take precautions to stymie infections, according to one workplace authority.

“As last year’s highly severe flu affected people across the country, the nation’s employers would be wise to start discussing prevention measures with their workforces. Encourage workers to wash their hands often and stock soap at all shared sinks, remind workers to get their flu shots, and tell sick workers to stay home,” said Andrew Challenger, Vice President of global outplacement and executive coaching firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc.

Last year’s flu season sickened nearly 49 million people, 32.5 million of whom were over the age of 25, according to the CDC’s age breakdown of flu infections for the 2017-18 season. Last season was the worst since 2009, when that year’s H1N1 strain sickened an estimated 60.8 million people, with more than 40 million of those affected over the age of 18.

Challenger predicts 20 million workers could take four eight-hour days away from work due to the flu. Using the current employment-population ratio of 60.6 percent, and the average hourly wage of \$27.48, the cost to employers could hit \$17,587,200,000 over the course of the season.

“This is lower than the \$21 billion in lost productivity Challenger predicted last season, as we have yet to experience the number of illnesses seen in the 2017-18 season,” said Challenger.

“Even if this season is less severe, which is difficult to say at this point, the impact of losing workers during the flu season is considerable, especially for smaller and mid-size firms that may not have the resources to cover absences without disrupting services to clients and customers,” added Challenger.

The CDC recently implemented surveillance programs to monitor cases of flu due to the severity of the 2017-18 season. In addition to the 49 million people sickened, 960,000 were hospitalized, and 79,000 deaths were due to flu symptoms. As of the end of December 2018, Influenza-like illness (ILI) is at 4.1 percent, up from the national baseline at 2.2 percent. For comparison, last year’s numbers reached near-pandemic levels at 7.7 percent.

Due to the high number of flu cases and deaths last year, it is important to protect yourself by getting the flu shot.

In addition to recommending workers get their flu shots, employers should consider expanding telecommuting and remote work opportunities if they begin to see the virus spread.

“In the ongoing war for talent, many employers have already expanded work-from-home opportunities to attract and retain workers. This is a good use of those opportunities, as it will help keep any infection from spreading,” said Challenger.

“While workers may think they are doing the right thing and helping their teams by coming into work when they are sick, they are only likely to spread their illness, potentially further disrupting normal operations,” he added.

Challenger offered some other tips employers might consider to help prevent the spread of illness, as the current flu season is now in full swing:

- **Encourage getting a vaccine** early and provide the information on where to get one nearby. It is never too late to protect yourself, but the earlier you receive the shot, the better.
- **Increase the number of shifts.** This will reduce the amount of people working in the office at one time.
- **Limit meetings.** If there is no need to gather large groups of workers in a confined space, then do not do it. Conduct meetings via conference calls or video conferencing.

- **Expand telecommuting.** Determine who can work from home or another location. This will keep people off of public transportation and out of the office.
- **Allow sick workers to stay home** without fear of losing their jobs.
- **Institute flexible leave policies** to allow parents to care for an sick child or one who is home due to school closures.
- **Provide no-touch trash cans,** hand-washing stations, soap, and hand sanitizer.
- **Encourage employees to wash their hands frequently,** avoid handshakes, and take other hygienic precautions, such as disinfecting workplace surfaces, like phones and computers.