

News Release



For Immediate Release

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Lack of Paid Sick Days Allowed H1N1 to Spread in the Workplace

A new Briefing Paper entitled *Sick at Work: Infected Employees in the Workplace During the H1N1 Pandemic*, released by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, finds that while almost 26 million employed Americans age 18 and over may have been infected with the H1N1 flu in 2009, nearly 8 million employees took no time off work while infected. Relying on data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) on rates of illness and work attendance during the months of September through November, 2009, the study suggests that an alarming number of employees attended work while sick, and this pattern was especially prevalent in industries with low paid sick days coverage. The findings suggest that a lack of paid sick days allowed H1N1 to spread in the workplace.

"Work attendance by infected employees is a public health issue due to contagion," says Robert Drago, Ph.D., Professor of Labor Studies and Women's Studies, Pennsylvania State University and co-author of the Briefing Paper. "Employees who attended work while infected with H1N1 are estimated to have caused the infection of as many as 7 million co-workers."

The United States is one of the few developed nations without universal paid sick days. The vast majority of public sector employees receive paid sick days, but two out of five private sector employees have no access to paid sick days, leaving the nation ill-prepared for outbreaks of contagious illness.

"The data suggest that only two-thirds of private sector employees took time away from work when infected with H1N1, despite advice to stay home. Workers without paid sick days must choose whether to go to work sick or lose pay, a choice that many can't afford to make," notes Kevin Miller, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate at IWPR and co-author of the Briefing Paper.

Absence due to illness during the H1N1 pandemic reached its peak in October. The drop in absence rates between October and November was twice as steep in the public sector as it was in the private sector, suggesting that presenteeism – attending work while ill – among private sector employees without paid sick days may have extended the duration of the outbreak in that sector.

The Briefing Paper can be found here: <http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/B284sickatwork.pdf>

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