

## OUR VIEW

**BUSINESSES MUST HELP LIMIT FLU SPREAD**

Our flu season-with-a-twist has brought more attention to public health than anything in recent years. There are few children or adults who haven't heard the messages: Cover your cough, wash your hands often, and stay home when you're sick.

Most everyone wants to do their part to help limit the spread of both the seasonal flu and the H1N1 novel strain of flu. And while more people are tucking their mouth into their sleeve when they cough and are being a bit more obsessive about sanitizing their hands, many face a dilemma when it comes to the most important message: staying home when sick.

For starters, there is the work ethic drilled into Midwesterners that generates a sense of guilt for staying home unless they are deathly ill. And there is a more practical problem for many: Their employer may offer too little or no paid sick leave.

And many employers require a doctor's note if an employee is out more than a couple of days in a row. That flies directly in the face of national and local health officials' recommendations that people with flu — who aren't suffering serious complications — should not go to clinics or the hospital because it will spread the illness more and most people recover on their own at home.

An even bigger problem is the lack of paid sick days for many Americans.

According to the National Partnership for Women and Families, a Washington, D.C.,-based advocacy group, 48 percent of the U.S. private-sector work force can't take paid leave without advance notice.

The retail sector is particularly prone to providing little or no sick leave — an important issue in a city like Mankato that has a huge retail sector.

Even the Homeland Security office has waded in with recommendations for businesses to handle the flu season, including "flexible, non-punitive, and well-communicated" policies on sick leave.

Several states and cities have passed laws, or are considering legislation, that require businesses to provide paid sick days. It's an idea that gets push-back from business groups that say such mandates add a financial burden on small businesses.

Adding government sick-leave requirements on small businesses is not the preferred route. But unless more business owners step up and do the right things for their employees, their customers and the public at large, the pressure for legislation will grow.

Businesses need to revisit their policies on requiring doctors' notes and on the amount of paid sick leave they provide.