

Employer Responsibility in the Time of Coronavirus: A Joint Perspective

Boston Fed's Rosengren and MGH's Biddinger say
risking inconvenience now can reduce impact later



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Our latest information
on COVID-19





(A perspective from Dr. Paul Biddinger, Massachusetts General Hospital Endowed Chair in Emergency Preparedness and director of the MGH Center for Disaster Medicine, and Eric Rosengren, Ph.D., president and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.)

Many are asking us about the potential of the COVID-19 virus to impact the health of people and the health of the economy we all participate in.

No one can see the future perfectly, but it is probable that COVID-19 is in a state of community transmission, likely leading to a steady uptick in confirmed cases.

Although more than 80 percent of COVID-19 cases have mild illness, a smaller portion have more worrisome symptoms. If one quarter or more of the population ultimately acquires the virus, as seems well within the realm of possibility, the numbers therefore suggest that we will still face a very significant challenge. Medical services could be under significant stress providing care to that volume of COVID-19 patients with serious illness.

The tactics that can dent a pandemic are, to be sure, somewhat disruptive. And inconvenient. But they are the right thing to do. And the time is now.

We're talking about things like cancelling events that involve gatherings. And companies instituting work-from-home approaches for all who can. And, meanwhile, creatively supporting the workers who keep our organizations up and running, who cannot work from home. And doing what we can to tide over workers and businesses for whom demand may dry up for a while.

These steps may be difficult, and take some adjustment. But they might, over the coming days and weeks, mitigate the spread of the virus, and its economic impact. And that is well worth it. The inconveniences could forestall much worse options.

We also need people to consider utilizing the healthcare system in public-spirited ways, such as practicing self-care if your symptoms are mild and if the hospitals are becoming overwhelmed. People should also leave the supply of medical equipment, like masks, to the professionals who desperately need them.

Emergency medicine requires preparation, agility, and action. Sometimes it involves triage and accepting difficult realities. Economic policymaking requires a careful assessment of conditions, thinking hard about forecasts and possible outcomes, and the ways that actions now will have influence, with lags.

These are all relevant for the COVID-19 crisis.

We encourage New Englanders to embrace this challenge – sacrificing some convenience and normalcy now, in order to avoid much worse outcomes.

Employers have a special responsibility and opportunity, given the impact of their policies on the possible direction of the virus. Employers in regions with significant outbreaks frequently waited too long to take action, waiting for other companies' actions or delayed responses from governmental organizations. That should not be the case in New England.

We encourage employers to:

- Be proactive, acting out of an abundance of caution, even without full certainty, because steps we take now can prevent worse outcomes.
- Take tangible steps, particularly work-from-home approaches, restrictions on business travel, and avoiding large meetings.
- Prioritize safety and illness prevention as the best way to blunt the effects of the crisis and hasten the return to more normal times and less economic volatility.

In sum, we all need to look beyond the immediate timeframe and the narrowest horizons. Supporting our employees, dealing constructively with customers and clients, and using forbearance with those most affected by the virus or its economic repercussions are ways all of us can help support the region's health outcomes and economic resilience.

With this orientation, New England's employers and employees, and medical providers and medical clients, will all do better – sooner – than they otherwise would.

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