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South Florida companies go virtual in response to coronavirus

As the number of local COVID-19 cases rise, some South Florida companies are preparing for business as usual.

Virtually, of course.

Residents of Miami-Dade, Palm Beach and Broward counties, including Miami Mayor Francis Suarez, have been infected with the novel coronavirus, prompting businesses to limit person-to-person contact when feasible.

Employees at Davie-based **Bankers Healthcare Group** began working remotely on Friday to avoid any potential exposure to coronavirus, said co-founder Eric Castro. The health care lending company, which has about 600 employees across its South Florida and Syracuse, New York offices, is conducting all customer transactions via phone or internet and has suspended all work-related travel.

"We've been preparing for this transition for more than a month, checking and testing our systems to ensure we could continue to do business as usual," Castro said. "We don't anticipate any challenges or disruption to our business, and are confident we will not lose productivity."

Heath Eskalyo, principal partner and CFO at law firm **Kelley Kronenberg**, said the firm has held "at least six or seven" meetings on coronavirus preparation in recent weeks. The Fort Lauderdale-based firm has a data center supported by a seven-person IT department that allows staff to work securely outside of the office, and staff computers are equipped with video conferencing and call-forwarding applications. The latter connects calls placed to an office line directly to an employee's cell phone.

"We've invested heavily for a scenario like this, although we imagined it would be used in the event of a Category 5 hurricane, not a pandemic," he said.

That also extends to trial preparation. The firm's mock court room is equipped with multiple screens, allowing attorneys to conduct virtual trials via a secure online portal. Clients and support staff can sign on from their respective locations to practice opening statements and witness cross-examinations.

In light of recent [boat show postponements](#), Opa-Locka's Invincible Boats aims to use video walkthroughs to conduct "virtual boat shows" for customers who still want to shop.

"We understand people should not attend large gatherings to reduce the spread of the outbreak. But we also understand that our customers still want to sport-fish and are in the market for boats, so we are bringing the benefits of boat shows to them," said Invincible Boats CEO John Dorton.

Invincible Boats will continue to operate out of its Opa-Locka facility, but will limit visitors, modify its shipping and receiving procedures and frequently disinfect workspaces to protect employees from coronavirus exposure, Dorton said.

A growing number of workers may want to work remotely as U.S. coronavirus cases increase. But in Florida, businesses are not legally obligated to comply unless an employee has a disability or pre-existing condition that makes them vulnerable to the disease, said Aaron Tandy, a partner at Miami law firm Pathman Lewis. In that case, it's possible the employee could ask for that accommodation under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

"The ADA requires employers to accommodate workers so they can perform essential functions for their job," he said. "So if they can perform those functions remotely, it could apply. But if the person is an office assistant who needs to be on-site to perform work duties, it wouldn't apply."