

CDC Is Depending on Employers to Encourage Worker Vaccinations

By Allen Smith, J.D.

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Vaccination is an important tool in controlling the pandemic, say public health leaders, who are asking employers to encourage and make it easy for workers to get vaccinated. Speaking Feb. 25 during a webcast for members of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) officials explained what employers can do to promote efforts to vaccinate employees.

Dr. Nancy Messonnier, director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases and lead for the CDC's efforts on COVID-19 vaccines, said, "It's going to take all of us working together to use the vaccines in the best way possible." She noted that HR "is an important link in this."

The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) has prioritized certain groups—starting with people most at risk of contracting COVID-19 and experiencing serious illness, including older individuals and front-line workers—to receive initial doses of the vaccine because supply is limited.

Many states have opened vaccines to those age 65 and older and front-line workers such as teachers, first responders and grocery store employees. The CDC is working continuously with states to determine how to overcome challenges in vaccine administration, said Messonnier, who added that it was expected that there would be differences from state to state.

Messonnier emphasized the importance of safety and equity with the vaccines. "These vaccines are safe and effective, but that won't matter if people do not take them," she said. "It's essential people have confidence in the vaccination program, including trust in the vaccines, vaccinator and the system that produced" the vaccines. She said the CDC is working with communities to build trust in the midst of a pandemic, especially in communities of color that have been disproportionately impacted.

Workers Who Are Eligible for Vaccination

Health care staff and residents of long-term-care facilities are in Phase 1a of groups prioritized by ACIP. Next are front-line essential workers and people age 75 and older in Phase 1b. Included in Phase 1c are people ages 65 to 74, people ages 16 to 64 with high-risk conditions and essential workers who were not included in Phase 1b. Phase 2 covers all people age 16 and older who are not in Phase 1 and who are recommended for vaccination.

While ACIP made recommendations, jurisdictions have the final say over the order in which people receive the vaccine, said Dr. Margaret Kitt, rear admiral (retired), U.S. Public Health Service, and lead for the Essential Workers Team on the CDC's Vaccine Task Force. The initiations of phases will overlap, she added.

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COVID-19 Vaccination Resources

(www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/COVID-19-Vaccination-Resources.aspx)

Front-line essential workers are workers who are in sectors essential to the functioning of society and are at substantially higher risk of exposure to COVID-19, Kitt noted. Many of these essential workers didn't have the luxury of working remotely during the pandemic, said SHRM President and Chief Executive Officer Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP.

There are approximately 30 million front-line essential workers, including:

- First responders, such as firefighters and police officers.
- Educators, including teachers, support staff and day care workers.
- Food and agricultural workers.
- Manufacturing workers.
- Corrections officers.
- U.S. Postal Service workers.
- Public transit workers.
- Grocery store workers.

There are approximately 57 million other essential workers in:

- Transportation and logistics.
- Food service.
- Shelter and housing, including construction.
- Finance.
- IT and communication.
- Energy.
- Media.
- Legal.
- Public safety, including engineers.
- Water and wastewater.

Special challenges that arise in vaccinating front-line essential workers include:

- Their large numbers.
- Concerns about vaccine safety among some workers.
- Absences from work due to post-vaccination side effects.

Kitt noted that there is a new CDC smartphone-based monitoring program for COVID-19 vaccine safety called V-safe. V-safe:

- Uses text messaging and Web surveys to check in with vaccine recipients after vaccination.
- Enables participants to report any side effects or health problems after COVID-19 vaccination.
- Helps the CDC call vaccine recipients to follow up on reports of significant health impact.

The CDC and U.S. Food and Drug Administration also co-manage the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (<http://vaers.hhs.gov/>), which provides an online form for reporting a reaction to a vaccination.

Workplace Vaccination Program

Employers considering implementing a workplace COVID-19 vaccination program should contact the health department in their jurisdiction for guidance, Kitt said.

The planning process should include input from management, human resources, employees and labor representatives.

Other important preliminary steps include:

- Obtaining senior management support.
- Identifying a vaccine coordinator.
- Enlisting expertise from local public health authorities, occupational health providers and pharmacies.

Kitt recommended offering the vaccination at no charge and during work hours, as well as providing flexible paid leave for workers who experience post-vaccination symptoms.

Encouraging Employees to Get Vaccinated

Even if a business can't offer COVID-19 vaccinations onsite, it can encourage employees to seek COVID-19 vaccination and inform them about where they can get the vaccine, she said.

Kitt urged employers to:

- Be flexible. Establish policies that allow employees to take paid leave in order to seek COVID-19 vaccination. Support transportation to offsite vaccination clinics.
- Use promotional posters and fliers to advertise locations offering COVID-19 vaccinations.
- Post articles in company communications—such as newsletters, the intranet, e-mails and portals—about the importance of COVID-19 vaccination and where to get the vaccine in the community.

Employers also "need to message the importance of masks, social distancing and hand-washing to continue to reduce transmissions and protect our communities," Messonnier said.

Kitt noted that the CDC has a communication toolkit (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/toolkits/essential-workers.html>) for essential workers that includes key messages, a slide deck, frequently asked questions, posters and fliers, newsletter content, letters to members, and social media content.

Messonnier said this is a historic time but added that "our work is far from over." There will be challenges, and the CDC will need to work with employers to overcome obstacles.

SHRM members can access the webcast on demand

(www.shrm.org/LearningAndCareer/learning/webcasts/Pages/0221vaccineupdate.aspx?%20) as of Feb. 26.

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