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Allegheny County government employees must be vaccinated by Dec. 1

90.5 WESA | By [Chris Potter](#)

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Gene J. Puskar / AP

Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald is requiring county workers to provide proof of their COVID-19 vaccination to their managers by Dec.1, a ratcheting-up of the public sector's efforts to combat a virus that has killed more than 2,000 county residents.

"The health and safety of the county workforce, and the health and safety of the members of the public with whom they interact, are integral parts of the services provided to residents," said the county in a statement sent at midday Wednesday. "[C]ounty employees must take all available steps to protect themselves and avoid spreading COVID-19 to their co-workers and members of the public."

Employees will have to show they have received either the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine, or both doses of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines. The new requirement applies only to county employees under Fitzgerald's purview: A county spokeswoman put the number around 5,000 employees in all, about 75 percent of which the county says are already vaccinated.

Those who work for the court system, or independently elected county officers such as sheriff or county treasurer, are not affected by the order. But County Controller Chelsa Wagner issued a statement saying, "I thank County Executive Fitzgerald for his leadership in standardizing this science-based, highly effective and reasonable measure for our workers."



A spokesman for Wagner, Lou Takacs, said that while she did not have a vaccine requirement for her staff, "I would anticipate that we'll follow the mandate that was announced today. [Wagner] believes it's an absolutely reasonable and needed measure."

But it was not immediately clear what impact union contracts may have on the mandate. Brad Korinski, who serves as solicitor to Wagner's office, said that "the general principle is that if you're going to impose obligations on unionized employees, you have to bargain for those obligations." The county has over a dozen bargaining units to negotiate with, he said, and while some contracts might include provisions that permit imposing health requirements, others may not. "They could say that has to be bargained. So it's complicated."

Fitzgerald previously has told reporters that collective bargaining rights can make imposing vaccine mandates "complicated." And the mandate will likely be a subject of further discussion with unions.

"We want the workplace to be safe, but this is a divisive issue," said Al Smith, a business agent whose union local, SEIU 668, represents over 800 county workers. He said roughly 80 percent of county workers, including his own members, were vaccinated, but some were strongly opposed to taking the vaccine.

Smith said much would depend on how the county crafted health and religious exemptions for workers, whether it would provide incentives for those who got vaccinated.

"We and the other unions are trying to figure out how quickly we can talk about this," said Smith, who said he thought discussions with county officials could take place next week.

Smith said that based on similar initiatives undertaken elsewhere, the county probably had reason to think it was on solid legal ground. "They did their homework," he said. "It's been a slow build-up: First it was you have to wear masks, and then it was you have to be tested if you don't get the shot."

Smith said that bargaining could reduce resistance to the mandate, but that, "By the time the dust clears, you could see 6 or 9 percent [of workers] who are hardliners, and



The county is offering a carrot as well: Workers who are vaccinated but contract a “breakthrough” case or are ordered to quarantine will receive an extra 10 days of paid sick leave from the county.

The new policy extends a requirement established in August, in which new employees were required to be vaccinated as a condition of their employment. The county says 700 workers were vaccinated after that policy was established.

At least five Allegheny County residents between the ages of 25 and 49 have died this month from COVID-19. County health department director Dr. Debra Bogen says while the odds of a young person dying from COVID are low, it still occurs.

"Why take the chance?" Bogen said. "The vaccines are effective at preventing serious illness, and they're free to us. Getting vaccinated saves lives, and keeps hospital beds open for others who need them."

This story has been updated to include comments from Dr. Debra Bogen.

Tags

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Chris Potter

Chris Potter is WESA's government and accountability editor, overseeing a team of reporters who cover local, state, and federal government. He previously worked for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and Pittsburgh City Paper. He enjoys long walks on the beach and writing about himself in the third person.

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Kate Giammarise

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