

# VA will mandate vaccines for its health workers in Oregon

By AMELIA TEMPLETON, KATE DAVIDSON and ROB MANNING

Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced it will require COVID-19 vaccinations for its front-line health care employees, including doctors, nurses and dentists.

Employees will have eight weeks to be fully vaccinated and can get the shot for free at any VA facility.

It makes the VA the first health care system in Oregon to require the vaccination; state law generally prevents such mandates for health care workers.

Nationwide, many health care systems are making COVID-19 vaccines mandatory for their workforces, as vaccination rates have stalled and the delta variant is leading to yet another surge in COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations.

Oregon is the only state in the nation that prohibits employers from requiring health care workers to be vaccinated.

“Virtually any employer in Oregon can require employees to be vaccinated, but hospitals are prohibited from doing so,” said Michael Cox, vice presi-



Alan Sylvestre/Oregon Public Broadcasting

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced it will require COVID-19 vaccinations for its front-line health care employees, including those who work at the Portland VA Medical Center shown here. It makes the VA the first health care system in Oregon to require the vaccination; state law generally prevents such mandates for health care workers.

dent of public affairs for the Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems. “We’re urging state policymakers to lift the prohibition.”

Of about 120,000 licensed health workers statewide, 70% are vaccinated, according to data collected by state licensing boards.

The VA operates medical centers in Portland, Roseburg and White City, as well as 20 smaller health clinics scattered across the state.

Separately, Oregon’s

state veterans agency, the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs, runs two nursing homes that suffered deadly outbreaks during the pandemic. In March 2020, a veterans home in Lebanon had 38 people test positive for the virus, and nine people die. In October, an outbreak at a home in The Dalles affected 52 people and killed four — and that nursing home reported a new outbreak, infecting seven people, just this month. But as state, rather than federal facilities, it’s not clear whether

they will be directly affected by the new federal mandate.

The national mandate followed the recent deaths from COVID-19 of four unvaccinated VA employees, and an outbreak at a VA law enforcement training center.

“We’re mandating vaccines for Title 38 employees because it’s the best way to keep veterans safe, especially as the delta variant spreads across the country,” Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Dennis McDonough said in

a prepared statement. Medical groups — including the American Hospital Association, American Nurses Association, and American College of Physicians — issued a joint statement Monday, July 26, urging health care employers to require vaccination.

They called it the logical fulfillment of their responsibility to put the health of patients and long-term care residents first.

In Oregon, a state law bars most employers from requiring that health care workers get vaccinations, including the COVID-19 shot. But that prohibition doesn’t apply to vaccinations required by federal or state law, rule or regulation.

Two Oregon experts in employment law said the new federal requirement would probably trump that state law, if tested in court.

Paula Barran, founding

partner at the labor and employment firm Barran Liebman LLP, said the VA would have made its policy using authority granted to it by federal law.

“There is a very good likelihood that the federal law and the federal requirement would supersede Oregon state law,” she said.

Barran said, to her knowledge, Oregon’s law prohibiting the mandatory vaccination of health care workers has never been tested. Melissa Healy, a partner in the labor and employment group at Stoel Rives LLP in Portland, said the same.

And on federal land, Healy said, federal rules apply.

“The VA is federal property and we’ve seen precedent of federal institutions being able to have heightened requirements, even when they aren’t consistent with state law,” she said.

## Voting split aligns with vaccination rates

BY AIMEE GREEN

The Oregonian

SALEM — What’s true across the nation appears to be true in Oregon: If you’re a Republican, you’re less likely to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

The Oregonian looked at the county-by-county statistics of Oregonians inoculated against the coronavirus and saw a clear correlation: The 10 counties with the lowest percentages of residents vaccinated all voted — by a landslide — for Donald Trump in the last presidential election. That’s Lake, Malheur, Umatilla, Grant, Harney, Gilliam, Morrow, Union, Douglas and Baker counties.

Eight of the 10 counties with the highest vaccination rates voted overwhelmingly for Joseph Biden. That’s Washington, Hood River, Multnomah, Benton, Lincoln, Deschutes, Lane and Clackamas.

Polk and Tillamook — where Trump beat Biden by slim margins of less than 2 percentage points — also made Oregon’s



Murdock



Williams

top 10 list of most-immunized counties.

Another way to look at it? Compare the most-Republican county in the state — Lake — with the most-Democratic — Multnomah. Eight out of 10 voters in Lake County voted for Trump in November 2020, and 35% of residents 16 and older in the county had received at least one shot of COVID-19 vaccine as of early July.

Conversely, nearly 8 out of 10 voters in Multnomah County chose Biden, and 73% of residents 16 and older — more than double the figure in Lake County — had received at least one jab.

Asked about Lake County’s low inoculation rate, James Williams, chairman of the Lake County Commission, bristled at the correlation between voting and vaccinations.

“If you are looking to attack or degrade the majority (or any part) of Lake County’s population, based around their political affiliation and/or their medical choices,” Williams wrote in an email, “I would say that it not only shows a shameful personal bias on your part, but possibly the need to find a new profession.”

Meanwhile, George Murdock, chair of the Umatilla County Commission, said he’s a Republican and got vaccinated on the first day he was eligible. “Mind-boggling” is how he describes the Republican-Democrat divide.

“It just doesn’t make any sense to me,” Murdock said. “There’s absolutely no reason for it to be polarized between political parties.” Umatilla County, where 64% voted for Trump, has the third lowest vaccination rate in the state with just over 41% of residents 16 and older having received at least one shot.

Murdock, 78, is vocal about his vaccination status and the story of his daughter, 46, who is still

a COVID-19 long-hauler seven months after she came down with the virus.

In Oregon, it’s also worth noting that the counties with the highest rates of vaccine hesitancy or resistance are generally the smallest and most rural in the state. Some observers say that might contribute to lower vaccination rates: Residents don’t perceive COVID-19 as a significant threat.

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