

# State employee unions win COVID vaccine reprieve

Some workers will have 6 more weeks to get vaccine

By **SAM STITES**  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Two of Oregon’s most influential unions have bargained with the state to allow employees of the state executive branch more time to comply with Gov. Kate Brown’s mandate, which requires them to be vaccinated by Monday, Oct. 18, or risk losing their job.

According to Liz Merah, press secretary for Brown, the governor has agreed to a process which will allow employees represented



Kristyna Wentz-Graff/Oregon Public Broadcasting, File  
**Annalisa Birt, left, talks with Gov. Kate Brown after Birt received a COVID-19 vaccination at a drive-thru vaccination clinic at Portland International Airport, April 9, 2021.**

by SEIU Local 503 and AFSCME Council 75 who have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine by Oct. 18 to complete their immunization by Nov. 30.

The agreements with two of the state’s largest

public employee unions will provide an extra six weeks for just over 26,800 workers to comply with the mandate.

“This is a more productive path than someone not getting vaccinated at all

and leaving state service,” Merah said in an email Oct. 13.

An addendum to the statewide policy issued Oct. 1 will give the same grace period to an additional 7,156 state employees who are unrepresented by a union or are considered management and executive service.

That means a majority of the approximately 43,000 state workers who fall under Brown’s mandate will be granted more time to complete their vaccination requirement. In the meantime, those who aren’t fully inoculated will be allowed to work remotely or use paid leave time as a stopgap while they get vaccinated.

According to Ben Morris, communications

director for SEIU Local 503, the union’s intent through this bargaining process was to ensure the state listened to the concerns of frontline workers who feel that, until now, they haven’t been a part of the conversation.

“One of our biggest issues going into negotiations was making sure there was a clear process in place for people who were not fully vaccinated by Oct. 18, those who are most impacted by this mandate,” Morris told OPB. “The goal of this mandate was to get as many people vaccinated as possible. The grace period encourages that because people can start the process at the last minute.”

Morris said that state

employees represented by SEIU — which includes workers within divisions such as the Department of Human Services, Department of Transportation, Department of Justice and State Parks, among others — have varying opinions on and degrees of comfort with the vaccine.

According to Morris, SEIU leadership has fielded concern regarding side effects of receiving the shot, a lack of fear over getting the virus and even the spread of misinformation as reasons for hesitancy.

“State employees as a group aren’t any different than the general population when it comes to their views about the vaccine,” he said.

## State senator to make rare independent bid for governor

Betsy Johnson wants to be a ‘centrist option between extremes

By **GARY A. WARNER** and **ERICK BENGEL**  
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Sen. Betsy Johnson, a moderate Democrat from Scappoose, announced Thursday she is running for governor in 2022 as an independent.

Johnson, a member of the Oregon Legislature since 2001, said in an email announcement that she wanted to be a centrist option between the extremes of a “leftwing liberal” and a “rightwing Trump apologist.”

“Oregonians are ready to move to the middle



where sensible solutions are found,” Johnson said.

The governor’s office will be open in 2022 as Gov.

Kate Brown, a Democrat, is barred from running due to term limits.

Johnson would bypass the May primary and go directly on the November general election ballot by submitting valid signatures equivalent to 1% of the total votes cast in the last election for governor.

For 2022, that target is 23,744. Because signatures often turn out to be invalid, most campaigns aim for a buffer of at least 25% more than needed.

If successful, Johnson would face the winners of the major party primaries.

Top state Democrats

who have announced they are running for governor include House Speaker Tina Kotek of Portland, and Treasurer Tobias Read. Yamhill County Commissioner Casey Kulla and former Independent Party candidate for governor Patrick Starnes of Brownsville are also seeking the Democratic nomination.

Johnson’s announcement came on the same day the New York Times reported columnist Nicholas Kristof resigned from the newspaper to focus on his decision whether to run as a Democrat for governor in Oregon.

Kristof has not formally announced his bid, but took a key step Tuesday when he registered a campaign finance committee with the Oregon Secretary of State’s Office that would allow him to raise and spend funds.

## ODA braces for potential staffing shortage due to vaccine mandate

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**  
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon Department of Agriculture faces a potential staffing shortage that could impact the scope of services the department provides to the state’s farming community.

Over the past year, COVID-related disruptions, including budget cuts early in the pandemic, impacted the department’s labor force. Seasonal and part-time positions have been the hardest to fill.

Now, with Oregon Gov. Kate Brown’s vaccine mandate for state government employees set to go into effect Oct. 18, ODA leaders are bracing for a potential further loss of workers.

“There are workforce shortages in the ag sector and for us as a state agency that are impacting those

services that we’re providing,” Alexis Taylor, director of ODA, told state agriculture department leaders at a recent National Association of State Departments of Agriculture event.

Taylor said employees’ response to the vaccine mandate adds “another layer on the work staff shortage that we’re trying to work through in the state of Oregon.” Taylor said some staff members for various reasons don’t want to get vaccinated, which is “becoming a challenge in some of our programs.”

How many staff might ODA lose? The agency declined to make predictions, instead telling the Capital Press that “at this time, it is unclear what the vaccine mandate will do to ODA staffing levels.”

ODA leadership, staff

and stakeholders have been in conversations “preparing for possible drops in staffing and potential impact to services,” said Andrea Cantu-Schomus, spokeswoman for ODA.

Whatever happens, she said, “ODA will do its very best to maintain services that Oregonians expect.”

ODA’s leaders say they expect the department will be able to maintain its existing core staffing levels for essential services but are putting in place “contingency plans” in case the agency has areas with service gaps. Several staff have already volunteered to help cover gaps as needed.

ODA declined to respond to a Capital Press request for numbers on how understaffed the department is or what percentage of advertised positions has gone unfilled.

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