

Gov. Brown mandates masks indoors, state employee COVID-19 vaccination



GOV. BROWN

BY RACHEL ALEXANDER
For the Keizertimes

Masks are making a comeback in Keizer, Salem and across Oregon.

Gov. Kate Brown announced Tuesday afternoon that Oregonians will again be required to wear masks indoors as the state sees a surge in new Covid infections and hospitalizations.

The mask mandate will go into effect on Friday, Aug. 13.

State employees working for the executive branch must also be vaccinated against Covid on or before Oct. 18, or six weeks after a Covid vaccine receives full approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, whichever is later, the governor said in a news release.

President Joe Biden has said full FDA approval is expected in the fall.

The executive branch includes all state agency employees, as well as employees of boards, commissions and other departments that report to the governor or another statewide elected official.

The policy will have an outsized

impact in Salem, where about 20,000 state employees live, according to the city's most recent annual financial report. That's nearly one-quarter of Salem's workforce.

As of Monday, 91 people in the Willamette Valley region were hospitalized with Covid, up from 46 one week ago, according to the Oregon Health Authority. That number is approaching the peak of 108 hospitalizations the region recorded in early December. It includes data from Marion, Polk, Linn, Benton, Yamhill and Lincoln counties.

Brown's announcement is the latest statewide mandate intended to curb that growth. On Aug. 4, she said Oregon's health care workers should prepare for regular Covid tests if they're unwilling to get vaccinated against the virus. The week before, Brown announced masks would be required for students, employees and visitors in all K-12 Oregon schools in the fall, regardless of vaccination status.

Brown acted after Oregon Health & Science University released a statement Tuesday calling for "immediate action" to reduce the number of new Covid cases. The hospital predicted a shortage of 400-500 staffed hospital beds around the state by Labor Day if new infections continue at the projected pace.

"It's a shocking number and one that was repeatedly checked against other available data and the effects of the current surge observed in other states," the statement said. "Oregon is in a difficult position because we have the fewest available hospital beds per capita than anywhere else in the United

States. Hospitals are also simultaneously experiencing severe staff burnout and workforce shortages."

She cited the dire predictions in her news release Tuesday, Aug. 10.

"There are two keys to saving lives. Vaccination is the best way to protect yourself and your family against severe illness, hospitalization, and death. And, by wearing masks, all of us—vaccinated and unvaccinated—can help ensure that a hospital bed staffed by health professionals is available for our loved ones in their time of need. If we all do our part, we can beat COVID-19 once and for all, keep our economy open and thriving, and return our kids to the classroom with minimal disruptions in a few weeks," Brown said in a statement.

The new directives are a reversal from her earlier stance that pandemic restrictions would be left under local control following her lifting of most restrictions on July 1. Local jurisdictions have shown little appetite to enact mandates as new Covid infections and hospitalizations have climbed in recent weeks.

Commissioners in both Marion and Polk said they weren't considering indoor mask mandates on Aug. 6, saying it's up to people to make their own choices about their health.

Brown's statement Tuesday acknowledged the mask mandate would not be popular, but said it was necessary to slow the spread of the more infectious Delta variant of the virus.

"The latest science is clear: although unvaccinated individuals are more likely to contract the disease, both vaccinated and unvaccinated people can

spread the Delta variant. Masks are a simple and effective way to make sure you are not unknowingly infecting your friends, family members, neighbors, and colleagues," Brown said in a statement. "After a year and a half of this pandemic, I know Oregonians are tired of health and safety restrictions. This new mask requirement will not last forever, but it is a measure that can save lives right now. It will help to protect all of us, including people who are immunocompromised, and our children under 12 who are not yet eligible to get vaccinated. Masks are a simple and effective tool that will keep our schools, businesses, and communities open."

Brown said the vaccination requirement would apply to all state agency employees, as well as those working for the Oregon State Treasury, Oregon Secretary of State's Office, Oregon Bureau of Labor & Industries and the Oregon Department of Justice.

Employees will be required to show proof of vaccination by the October deadline.

"Individuals unable to be vaccinated due to disability or sincerely held religious belief may be able to qualify for an exception, as required by state and federal law. State of Oregon employees will not have the option of weekly testing instead of showing proof of vaccination," Brown's statement said.

The rule won't apply to legislative or judicial branch employees.

Oregon's Department of Administrative Services does not have data on how many state employees are currently vaccinated against Covid, spokeswoman Andrea Chiappella said.

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