

Days after union files complaint, county grants two weeks leave for employees with COVID

By **JOEY CAPPELETTI**
Of the *KEIZERTIMES*

At a Sept. 7 meeting, the Marion County Board of Commissioners voted to approve up to two weeks of paid leave for county employees required to isolate or quarantine due to COVID.

Prior to the order, employees have been required since Jan 1, 2021 to use their own accrued time in the event they became sick with COVID according to Trish Straw, who works in the county health department.

Time that many didn't have, Straw said.

"We had school closures, we had COVID. A lot of people exhausted all of their protected time, family leave and all of their accrued leaves; sick time, vacation comp time, personal leave. They don't have any time," said Straw, who is also the president of the Marion County employee union.

In the event that someone did become sick with no accrued time remaining, the consequences could be severe.

"People are getting sick and they're having to take leave without pay. They got sick and the county was encouraging a medical termination or separation, just adding of course to the staffing crisis," said Straw, who is also the president of the Marion County employee union.

Straw said employees felt devalued, and were even told "if they don't like the



Photo courtesy Marion County

way things are at the county, go find a new job."

The county commissioners' order at the Wednesday, Sept. 7 meeting now gives two weeks of leave time to all Marion County employees who have received written direction from the local public health authority administrator to isolate or quarantine.

The order will also retroactively reimburse employees back to July 1 that had previously used their own accrued time

to isolate or quarantine due to COVID. It requires, however, that the written direction to quarantine came from the county. Straw said most people won't qualify for back pay because of this provision.

"The county was sending employees to their doctors for quarantine, not the county. So for them to say, 'Oh, if you had a note from epidemiology of infectious control, then we're going to go ahead and pay you.' Well, they weren't even directing them to infectious control," Straw said.

Straw said the union, which represents 1,000 Marion County employees, has been trying for months to get the county to approve a two-week paid leave. The board of commissioners' decision on Sept. 7 came only five days after the union had filed an unfair labor practice complaint against the county.

Marion County spokesman Chad Ball, who replied in place of Commissioner Danielle Bethell, said the order was not made in response to the union's complaint and was made before the union's complaint was even filed.

Ball said the board wanted to ensure "each employee felt safe, both emotionally and financially."

Straw said the county's retroactive order doesn't go far enough to address union concerns.

The union's complaint, which was filed to the state's Employment Relations Board on Sept. 3, says that on June 10,

2021, the county announced that all employees would be required to return to work in-person no later than July 19.

The county's announcement, according to both Straw and the complaint, came without notice or discussion with the union — which the union says goes against a collective bargaining agreement.

"What we're saying is there needs to be policies and procedures in place for the safety and health of everyone that works for the county," Straw said. "We cannot serve the public if we're sick. We cannot serve the public if everyone's stressed out. We can't serve the public if we're sick and taking it home to our families."

The union filed a demand to bargain and subsequently had two meetings with the county in August, which the county referred to as "listening sessions."

The complaint says that a county spokesperson emailed the Union on Aug. 13 "to thank representatives for their recent participation 'in the listening sessions' with management, but announced that the County was rejecting all of the Union's recent health and safety proposals."

The complaint is still open and Straw said the union just wants to bargain with the county so that policies and procedures are in place going forward.

Ball said the county doesn't comment on open complaints.

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