

Brown weighs vaccine mandate for state workers

BY SARA CLINE

Associated Press/
Report for America

PORTLAND — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown is “examining” whether to require that state workers get vaccinated, as the highly transmissible delta variant continues to spread across the state and COVID-19 cases spike.

Elsewhere, in California and New York, officials announced state employees will be required to be vaccinated or undergo weekly tests for COVID-19. In addition, the Department of Veterans Affairs on Monday became the first federal agency to require vaccinations, for its health workers.

“We are examining the actions taken this week by

California, New York City and the VA, and determining what further actions can be taken in Oregon,” Brown’s deputy communications director Charles Boyle wrote in an email on Wednesday.

As cases continue to increase across the country, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced updated masking guidelines on Tuesday, recommending that people — vaccinated or not — return to wearing masks indoors in parts of the U.S. where the delta variant is rampant.

The CDC also recommended masks for all teachers, staff, students and visitors inside of schools, regardless of vaccination status.

The Oregon Department of Education has not immediately required the state’s public schools to adopt indoor mask mandates, and it remains unclear whether it will do so at all.

“The Oregon Department of Education, Oregon Health Authority and governor’s office are reviewing the CDC’s guidance,” said Marc Siegel, a spokesperson for state’s top education agency. “Any update would come only after thorough review and consultation.”

Under current guidelines from the state’s department of education, individual districts can decide whether to require students, staff and faculty to wear masks inside school buildings.

Portland mayor calls for vaccine, COVID-19 testing mandates

Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler said Wednesday he will push to require municipal workers to get vaccinated or submit to weekly coronavirus tests, a move that would reverse the city’s policy against such mandates issued only days ago.

Surging COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations nationwide have already prompted the state of California, some large companies and cities such as New York City and Los Angeles to create vaccine or testing requirements for employees.

Meanwhile, Oregon health officials recom-

mended Tuesday that everyone should return to wearing a mask when in a public, indoor space after hospitalizations caused by the virus increased 25% in a single day and new daily cases topped 1,000.

Wheeler said he does not believe he has the same legal authority as mayors in other U.S. cities to independently impose public health mandates on city workers. That, he said, would require City Council approval.

— The Oregonian



Jill Toyoshiba/AP file

A sign on the door of a hair salon informs patrons that masks are required to be in the business in Kansas City, Missouri.

Masks

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On Wednesday, some said they were struggling just to wrap their heads around the CDC’s message. Susan Schmaeling, who owns a public relations company and lives in Houston, said she rejoiced when she got the single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine in March. Now, she doesn’t know what to think.

“I’m vaccinated and I’m supposed to put a mask on to be in a bookstore or wherever? What is the CDC telling us now, that the vaccines don’t work?” she said. “I haven’t had COVID and I don’t want to have COVID, so I’ll wear a mask. But it’s absurd.”

While the CDC recommended vaccinated people wear face masks indoors in parts of the U.S. where the coronavirus is surging, the Oregon Health Authority recommended universal mask use in public indoor settings throughout the state.

Experts have warned for weeks that a broad return to masking may be necessary to rein in delta, which CDC director Rochelle Walensky said is “one of the most infectious respiratory viruses we know of.” Facing a spike in cases, Los Angeles County became the first major metropolitan area to reinstate indoor mask requirements when officials brought back the rules in mid-July. St. Louis followed suit last week, while Kansas City, Missouri, and Savannah, Georgia, reinstated their mask mandates after the CDC’s announcement. Other cities and states are holding off for now, instead issuing voluntary recommendations.

“We need to wear masks indoors to control the spread of the variant,” Scott Ratzan, a public health expert at the City University of New York, said in an email. “As masking recommendations do not seem to work as well as mask mandates, the cities (and county in L.A.) are making the prudent decision to reinstate mandates ASAP.”

But the shifting advice from federal health officials may have hindered some of those efforts, Ratzan added.

“Unfortunately, the CDC has fumbled on the masking communication — from messaging to the policy recommendations,” he said. “This has made it a challenge for health officials and policymakers to get people to remask — or make it a norm to mask while the coronavirus delta variant (and likely other variants) continue to spread.”

Walensky acknowledged this week that the decision to issue the new guidance was a painstaking one. Barely two months had passed since the agency said vaccinated individuals didn’t need to wear masks in most settings. But with delta raging, the new guidance was necessary, she said.

“It is not a welcome piece of news that masking is going to be a part of people’s lives who have already been vaccinated,” Walensky said. “This new guidance weighs heavily on me.”

While the vaccines are highly effective at preventing severe illness and death, vaccinated people can still contract coronavirus in what is known as a breakthrough infection. Walensky said people who have these infections from the delta variant might have as much viral load as an unvaccinated person, suggesting they may be able to spread it to others.

In Nevada, the state’s Democratic governor, Steve Sisolak, brought back the state’s mandate just hours after the announcement from the CDC. Starting Friday, the state will require face coverings be worn indoors in public in counties with “substantial or high transmission.” Twelve of Nevada’s 17 counties — including Clark, home to Las Vegas — fit that criteria, the state said.

The Nevada Gaming Control Board reinforced the new mandate, telling casinos and other businesses it issues licenses to in a notice that it would “continue to ensure that the best practices are used in the mitigation of COVID-19.” The board reminded casinos and

other licensees that they were required to have signs about where masks need to be worn.

In compliance with the mandate, MGM Resorts, the largest operator on the Las Vegas Strip, said it would require “all guests and visitors” to wear masks indoors in public areas starting Friday, a spokesman said in an email. MGM requires its employees to either be vaccinated or be tested regularly, the spokesman said.

Workers in Las Vegas, and throughout Clark County, had already been required to wear masks since the county enacted a mandate earlier this month, which excluded patrons.

There’s widespread agreement among infectious-disease experts that masking slows the spread of the virus by stopping droplets carrying virus particles from traveling through the air and infecting others. It’s especially important indoors, where poor ventilation and gathering in close quarters can facilitate the spread of the virus.

“Masks are the best policy we have in the face of COVID. No one wants to close businesses or schools this fall,” Julia Raifman, a health policy expert at Boston University.

But significant segments of the public remain skeptical. In Miami-Dade County, where the mayor on Wednesday revived indoor mask requirements at county facilities, Natalia Gonzalez, 28, said she doesn’t think the mandate should extend to restaurants, bars and stores.

“It’s unnecessary,” she said. “I think it should be a personal choice.”

Rasheed Powell, who works at a Miami pop art store, said he recently stopped wearing his mask at work. Now he’s waiting to see if his bosses require them again. But even in light of the delta variant, he’s tiring of what he said were mixed signals from officials.

“When I heard about the delta strain, it didn’t shake me up any more than other news about COVID,” said Powell, 36. “I feel they are fearmongering us all the time. It’s like they want to push an agenda.”

In Los Angeles, the first major city to bring back its indoor mask mandate, Bellanira Reyes said she doesn’t like wearing face coverings but will follow the city’s guidelines if it means keeping people safe. She’s aware of the threat from the delta variant and worries about the virus spiking again.

“It’s uncomfortable the mask, really uncomfortable. But it’s something that protects us,” the 34-year-old mother of three said. “I don’t want to wear it, especially when it’s too hot, but it’s OK.”

Marcus Chavez 24, of Los Angeles, said he too intends

Wave

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The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as the states of California and New York, have issued requirements that workers be either vaccinated or face weekly testing for the virus. President Joe Biden was expected Thursday to announce similar requirements for all federal employees.

Gov. Kate Brown’s office over the past two days has said it was studying actions elsewhere and consulting with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Late Tuesday, the Oregon Health Authority suggested residents in all counties wear masks in public spaces indoors. But underlined that it was not a directive.

Oregon’s latest rise in cases comes less than a month after a celebratory announcement that nearly all pandemic restrictions on business and social activities in the state would be lifted on June 30. Brown had said she would remove the risk-level restrictions on all counties in the state, regardless of infection levels, if 70% of residents statewide had received at least one shot of vaccine.

While just short of the goal, Brown announced that she would give the green light to reopen the state in time for the “near normal” July 4th holiday sought by President Joe Biden.

The announcement also seemed to be a truce in the political wars over Brown’s emergency orders that had been in place since March 2020. OHA

would continue in an advisory role, help get vaccines to centers that wanted it, and compile records on the pandemic.

But county health officials would now be empowered to determine what was best for their communities. Any actions needed to curb the virus would be decided by county commissioners.

The blanket lifting of restrictions came despite a wildly different rate of infection and vaccinations across the state. Several counties in the Willamette Valley, Deschutes County and some northern coastal areas were above the 70% mark. A high vaccination rate in the three-county Portland metro area inflated the overall state numbers.

Elsewhere, vaccination rates were under 40%, especially in Eastern and Southwest Oregon. Many of the counties had small populations, but the list also included Umatilla County, which includes Pendleton, and Douglas County, which includes Roseburg. But as some independent epidemiologists had forecast, the lifting of restrictions on counties regardless of their individual infection and vaccination levels created a spike in new cases in areas where most residents were not vaccinated.

The result has been an explosion of cases.

Hospitals started to fill up, with at one point just 8 of 81 intensive care unit beds east of the Cascades unoccupied. The number of patients on ventilators in Oregon went from 16 on

July 21 to 40 Wednesday.

The length of the current spike isn’t yet known, but Oregon, which reported more than 1,000 new cases on Tuesday, had not reported over 1,000 cases in a day since a brief spike in April. While the current increase is still forming, Oregon had not averaged over 1,000 cases per day since Jan. 21.

Brown and state health officials have said that while the state does have ultimate authority over public health, for now it would continue the policy of local autonomy.

Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen said last week that the state did not want to make blanket directives on the “highly political” issue of mandatory vaccinations and other requirements.

The current Oregon Health Authority count shows that 68.6% of eligible adults over the age of 18 have had one shot of vaccine. The state percentage is actually somewhat higher because some federal programs aren’t captured by the state count.

The new goal was set of 80% vaccinations, or just over 2.72 million adults by Aug. 31. That is looking unlikely at current pace. The state needs just over 389,000 more shots to hit the mark.

To reach the goal, OHA says it would need to be inoculating 11,443 new people per day.

The latest 7-day average is 2,064.

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to follow the rules. He’s fully vaccinated, he said, but he understands the risks in crowded places.

“I’m not one to tell people what to do,” he said, “but I strongly suggest it so, just from a scientific point of view.”

In Salt Lake City, which lifted its mask mandate for vaccinated people in May, parents dropped their children off at a bustling summer day camp at Sugar House Park on Wednesday morning. Few wore masks as they streamed in and out.

Megan McGee, 34, said she’s strongly against the CDC’s new guidance on wearing masks indoors in public spaces, even though COVID-19 made her the sickest she’s ever been. McGee said she is not vaccinated.

“People don’t know who to listen to, or what’s good information,” said McGee, a special-education teacher.

Luther Creed, 72, was one of the few people who wore a mask as he brought his grandson to camp. A retired physician, Creed, 72, said he worries

about the virus continuing to mutate, and believes wearing a mask is critical — including this winter.

He agrees that the CDC has bungled its messaging around the vaccine. But the mindset of putting personal freedom ahead of the greater good will have consequences, the retired physician said.

“It’s all about ‘Me.’ It’s not about protecting your neighbor or your family members,” he said. “We’re going to pay a price.”

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