

Covid-19 Vaccine and Our Workforce

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Since December 2020, the availability of the COVID-19 vaccine has expanded rapidly – having been made available first to health care professionals, then in January 2021 to people age 65 and over. By May 2021 the vaccine has been made available (logistics notwithstanding) to most of our nation’s population age 16 and older.

Some people are firmly opposed to getting the vaccine, while for many of us (myself included) the opportunity to get vaccinated was greatly welcomed. Indeed, over 44% of the U.S. population has currently received at least the first dose, and the number is quickly increasing. Then there are those who are on the fence. The speed with which this vaccine was developed may give some people pause; however, in my opinion the vaccine’s rapid development is an amazing accomplishment resulting from our exponential advancements in science and medicine, along with the tireless efforts and cooperation of our nation’s top scientists, doctors and researchers. It is a very new vaccine developed because we are dealing with a very new disease that has had a catastrophic impact on our population.

Everything changes quickly in regard to this pandemic. By spring 2021 the big issue is no longer whether the COVID-19 vaccine is available; but rather whether the vaccine should be mandatory. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has taken the stance that while state and other laws will determine whether or not employers can require workers to be vaccinated, the employer cannot require the worker to provide any medical information as part of the proof of vaccination.

The controversies related to “vaccine passports” and whether employers can require mandatory worker vaccinations is just gaining momentum and will likely be kicked around in the state and federal courts for a long time. Most public or private sector employers cannot afford the time or expense to take on this type of legal battle, therefore they will try to adapt to whatever the current political mood dictates. Consequently, this may require ongoing writing and revising of workplace policies on vaccinations, masks and social distancing. Fasten your seatbelts – it may be a bumpy and confusing ride for the next few years.

In truth, what we can do as a nation is to continue to provide vaccine information and to vaccinate everyone who wants to be vaccinated. I encourage employers to facilitate access to factual vaccine information and accessibility for employees. As any safety and health professional knows, humans are heavily influenced by the actions of those around them. As we continue to steadfastly vaccinate persons of all ages who want to be vaccinated, many of those on the fence will likely decide to get vaccinated, and the issues of mandatory workplace vaccinations and vaccine passports may become more manageable.

References:

Vaccine tracker: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/coronavirus-covid-19/vaccine-tracker>

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/recommendations/essentialworker/workplace-vaccination-program.html#:~:text=Employer%20Vaccine%20Mandates%20and%20Proof%20of%20Vaccination&text=If%20an%20employer%20requires%20employees,as%20part%20of%20the%20proof>

CDC:

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/productiveaging/dataandstatistics.html#:~:text=The%20percentage%20of%20older%20workers,has%20likewise%20increased%20by%20117%25>.

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About the Author



Maria Mitchell, M.S., CSM is the former Manager of Risk Management and Safety for Miami-Dade County, Florida (population 2.8 million). She has over 30 years of experience establishing and administering comprehensive safety and health programs in the public sector. She is currently an elected official serving as Mayor for the City of Miami Springs. She entered public office in 2016 when she was elected Councilwoman for the city. Ms. Mitchell is an adjunct professor at both Barry University and Florida International University in Miami, Florida, where she teaches courses in the biological sciences, ecology, sustainability, safety and risk management. Ms. Mitchell is the chairperson of the National Safety Council's Government and Public Sector Division whose mission it is to provide a collaborative resource for public sector safety and health professionals. She is also a National Safety Council Delegate. Ms. Mitchell is a member of the State of Florida Department of Labor's Occupational Injury and Illness Coalition, funded by NIOSH, CDC and editor of the Coalition Journal. Ms. Mitchell serves on the American Industrial Hygiene Conference Committee, and the National League of Cities Energy, Environment and Natural Resources Committee. Ms. Mitchell has graduate and undergraduate degrees in Environmental Health Sciences from the University of Miami and University of Georgia.