

White House's Dr. Choucair: Mandates key to beating COVID-19

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The first wave of COVID-19 vaccine mandates for employees came from leaders at health care organizations and private employers, -and had the desired effect. The requirements moved the needle on getting more Americans immunized against a virus that has upended the lives of countless families and already killed more than 750,000 Americans.

“Take United Airlines, for example. Now there are over 99% of their employees vaccinated. Tyson Foods has over 96% of their employees vaccinated. They didn’t start there. They started in the mid-50s or high-50s, so we know vaccine requirements work,” Bechara Choucair, MD, said during a recent episode of “AMA COVID-19 Update.” He is the vaccinations coordinator on the White House COVID-19 Response Team.

What new federal requirements would do

The Biden administration in early November outlined two policies aimed at improving the nation’s vaccination rate. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued an emergency temporary standard (ETS) that requires businesses with 100 or more employees. The regulation would require that, by Jan. 4, each of those employees get vaccinated or take part in weekly COVID-19 testing and wear masks indoors if they remain unvaccinated. The rule applies to about 84 million workers.

Additionally, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services announced that health care workers at facilities that participate in Medicare and Medicaid programs must be fully vaccinated. The rule applies to nearly 17 million workers at about 76,000 facilities, including hospitals and long-term care facilities. Previously, the administration called for those in the federal workforce and contractors with the federal government to be fully vaccinated.

The goal, Dr. Choucair explained, is “to make sure that we’re getting as many people protected as possible and that begins by making sure that everyone who’s eligible is getting vaccinated.”

“Every time we have a shot in someone’s arm,” he added, “that’s one more person that’s protected. That’s one more family that’s safer and that’s one more community that’s taking one step closer for us to be able to put this pandemic behind us.”

With full Food and Drug Administration approval of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, the AMA supports greater use of vaccine mandates by public and private sector employers and other organizations for the populations recommended to receive vaccination by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices.

The AMA is fighting in court to urge federal courts to preserve the ETS (PDF) for COVID-19 vaccination and testing that OSHA issued.

The AMA also joined more than 60 other organizations representing physicians and others in health care in calling on the business community to support the new federal requirement that those working for companies with more than 100 employees be vaccinated for COVID.

“The available COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective, and the widespread use of these vaccines is the best way to keep COVID-19 from spreading within workplaces. The more workers who get vaccinated, the closer we are to slowing the spread of the virus and creating a safer environment for everyone,” said AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, MD. “Now is the time for the public and private sectors to come together, listen to the science, and mandate vaccination so we can defeat the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Boost to the economy

In addition to mandates resulting in more people getting vaccinated, projections from Goldman Sachs and others show that more vaccinations will also be good for the economy, Dr. Choucair said.

“A lot more people will feel more comfortable coming back into the workforce, knowing that they’ll be surrounded by people who are vaccinated,” he said.

Learn more on what doctors wish employers knew about COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

Physician’s role is essential

Dr. Choucair said physicians can help the nation put the pandemic to an end by sharing what science tells us and helping dispel the misinformation that is out there. Send information to patients by email, mail, fax or any other way you can make sure your patients are hearing from you directly, he said. Be active on social media and active in the local media: get quoted in the local paper, do local radio and TV interviews.

“All of those make a big, big difference,” Dr. Choucair said. “It’s unfortunate the amount of misinformation that’s out there. Physicians and their staff have a huge role to play to be able to help fight this misinformation. And we’re all in this together.”

Read about six ways doctors can use their voices to help science get heard.

Get the latest news on the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines and variants, and more reliable information directly from experts and physician leaders with the “AMA COVID-19 Update.” You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version.