

Maine sees jump in vaccinations among health care workers as deadline nears

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Meanwhile, signs are mixed about whether Maine's COVID-19 surge is easing.

Maine reported a jump in COVID-19 vaccinations among health care employees Wednesday as the vast majority of workers are complying with a state vaccination mandate before the Oct. 29 deadline.

Officials continued to defend the mandate after Central Maine Medical Center said it was curtailing some services because it is losing workers who refuse to be vaccinated.

VITAL SIGNS

New COVID-19 cases: 893 (over 4 days)

Total cases: 95,833

New cases, 7-day average: 382.9

New deaths: 7 (over 4 days)

Total deaths: 1,083

Hospitalizations: 168

Total critical care beds: 339

Available critical care beds: 42

Fully vaccinated: 888,802

Percentage of population: 66.12%

Meanwhile, the latest data released Wednesday on the COVID-19 pandemic in Maine included mixed signals about whether the delta variant surge is easing. The state reported 893 new cases of COVID-19 over a four-day period, indicating a drop in daily case rates. But it also reported seven additional deaths and a rise in hospitalizations, as well as an increase in the percent of tests coming back positive.

The 893 cases were from Saturday through Tuesday [because the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention](#) does not report case counts over the weekend, and the Indigenous Peoples' Day holiday further delayed reporting of cases.

The mandate imposed by Gov. Janet Mills requires health care workers to get immunized against COVID-19 or lose their jobs, a measure that has sparked controversy and concerns about staffing in hospitals, nursing homes and other health care facilities.

While Mills has turned down requests to delay the deadline or allow a testing option, Central Maine Healthcare in Lewiston is now working with the administration to try to alleviate staffing shortages. Assistance from the state could include possible deployment of the National Guard to help avert a

staffing crisis that would cause cutbacks in services, said Ann Kim, a Central Maine Healthcare spokeswoman.

Maine's other major hospital systems are not reporting significant staffing issues from the vaccination mandate, and immunization among health care workers has increased, according to data posted Wednesday by the Maine Department of Health and Human Services.

From August to the end of September, hospital vaccination rates increased from 85 percent to 92 percent, and in assisted-living facilities from 78 percent to 88 percent. Nursing homes saw a jump in employee vaccinations from 77 percent to 86 percent, the state reported.

'ENCOURAGED' BY TREND

Jeanne Lambrew, Maine's health and human services commissioner, said she's "encouraged" by the trend.

"Maine's health care workers are increasingly receiving these safe and effective vaccines, which will protect their health, their patients' lives, and our health care system as we continue to fight the dangerous and more transmissible delta variant," Lambrew said.

During a media briefing on Wednesday, Lambrew said it is possible to successfully implement a vaccination mandate, pointing to the 100 percent immunization rate at Millinocket Regional Hospital that was achieved in September.

"We should recognize it is possible to fully vaccinate health care workers against a communicable disease and not have critical staff shortages," Lambrew said.

Also on Wednesday, [a federal judge denied a preliminary injunction in a lawsuit by health care workers seeking a religious exemption](#) for the vaccination mandate. Maine eliminated religious and philosophic exemptions for schoolchildren and health care workers in 2019, a law that also survived a referendum attempt to repeal it in March 2020, just before the pandemic began in Maine.

Meanwhile, state COVID-19 trends continue to be mixed, with daily case rates declining, but hospitalizations inching upward.

Dr. Nirav Shah, director of the Maine CDC, said "it's too early to tell" whether positive COVID-19 trends will prevail. He said there are some "hopeful, early signs" the pandemic is headed in the right direction, but also that there are pockets of unvaccinated people that provide room for the virus to spread.

Cases have fallen nationally from a seven-day average of 175,000 per day in mid-September to about 90,000 currently, according to the New York Times COVID-19 tracker.

In Maine, the four-day case count represents a decline in average daily cases as the state no longer has a backlog of cases to work through. The seven-day average of daily new cases stood at 382.9 on Wednesday, compared to 589.3 a week ago and 444.1 a month ago.

HOSPITALIZATIONS, POSITIVITY RATE UP

On the other hand, hospitalizations and the positive test rate have risen slightly.

Maine reported 168 people were hospitalized with COVID-19 on Wednesday, with 60 in critical care and 29 on ventilators. All the numbers have risen slightly over the past week after falling from a peak of 235 patients in late September.

The rate of positive tests, called the positivity rate, also climbed from about 4.3 percent a week ago to 5.2 percent Wednesday. The rate is an indication of how aggressively the virus is spreading in the community.

In recent weeks, Maine CDC workers hadn't been able to process all of the test results coming in to weed out duplicate positive test results, causing a backlog that resulted in thousands of tests being processed several days or more than a week after they were initially reported to the state. Without the backlog, the reports are now more reflective of current trends.

Maine's infection rate is close to the national average, with Maine reporting 27.4 cases per 100,000 people – on a seven-day average – compared to the national average of 28, according to the Harvard Global Health Institute.

Since the pandemic began, Maine has reported 95,833 cases of COVID-19 and 1,083 deaths.

On the vaccination front, 888,802 people have received their final dose, representing 66.1 percent of the state's 1.3 million residents.

Meanwhile, officials with Central Maine Healthcare in Lewiston on Tuesday [asked the Mills administration to add a testing option](#) to the mandate that health care workers must be vaccinated against COVID-19. Steve Littleton, president and CEO of Central Maine Healthcare, said that with more than 200 staff leaving their jobs rather than getting vaccinated, it will result in Central Maine Medical Center cutting services, including neonatal intensive care, pediatric hospital admissions and trauma care.

But Mills rejected the idea, and none of the other major health care systems in the state – MaineHealth, Northern Light Health and MaineGeneral Medical Center – is requesting a testing option.

CHANGING THEIR MINDS

The hospitals are reporting that about 90 percent or more of their workers are vaccinated leading up to Friday, which is the last day that health care employees can get their shots and comply with an Oct. 29 deadline to be fully vaccinated. People who get the Johnson & Johnson shot on Friday will be fully immunized two weeks after the shot is given.

Paul Bolin, senior vice president and chief human resources officer for Northern Light Health, said in a conference call with reporters on Wednesday that 95.5 percent of the system's more than 12,000 employees are fully vaccinated, and he expects the percentage to increase.

"We are seeing people each day change their mind and make the decision to become vaccinated," Bolin said.

Bolin said Northern Light does not expect "any significant curtailments of our operations" after the mandate goes into effect. MaineHealth reported a 94 percent vaccination rate among its employees through Oct. 1.

Lambrew said spread of the virus in health care facilities has caused disruptions in the workforce, including "dozens" of COVID-19 outbreaks.

"The best thing we can do against that virus is vaccination," Lambrew said.
