

Worcester requiring booster shots for all city employees; return to virtual meetings, capacity limits

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WORCESTER — The city is updating its vaccination requirement for employees, limiting capacity of municipal buildings and turning to virtual options after a surge in COVID-19 cases brought on by the omicron variant.

As of Wednesday, Worcester has had 34,829 confirmed positive cases since the beginning of the pandemic.

"That represents an increase of 2,040 cases from last week and that number is not reflective of the folks testing positive with the at-home kits. So that number could be 50% to 100% higher," City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. said. "Our totals just from yesterday went up 923 cases in one day."

Augustus and other city officials outlined the latest COVID-19 changes during a news conference Wednesday morning inside the Worcester Public Library.

Effective Feb. 1, all city employees will need to be vaccinated against COVID-19, including booster shots within 14 days of becoming eligible. Those who are not boosted as per the requirement will have to provide a negative test weekly.

Worcester Public Schools will also be implementing this change, according to Augustus.

Municipal building capacities reduced

Jan. 1 through Jan. 31, public capacity inside all municipal buildings will be limited to 25%. The city will use building monitors to enforce this and the mask mandate.

Furthermore, all city boards and commission meetings will once again transition to a virtual format.

The Martin Luther King Jr. annual community breakfast, scheduled for Jan. 17 at Quinsigamond Community College, will be held virtually.

The Worcester Senior Center will be closed for in-person programming, but virtual programs will be available.

These policies could be extended beyond Jan. 31 if necessary, Augustus said.

Augustus also urged businesses to follow the city's lead and implement a vaccination requirement for their employees.

"We know what works — city employees increased vaccinated rates and we are catching asymptomatic cases through that weekly testing, so we're able to get them to isolate and prevent the further spread in the workplace," Augustus said.

Wear a mask, get tested

City officials asked the public to wear a mask, get vaccinated and boosted, and to test before and after any holiday gathering to limit the spread and keep people out of the hospital.

"In my 30 years working there, we have never been as busy at UMass as we have in the last month," Dr. Richard T. Ellison, UMass Memorial Health infectious disease expert, said. "We've had to open up surge spaces to take care of patients and we're trying to expand further locations in the hospital for next week.

People who have been vaccinated generally experience a milder illness due to the COVID-19 virus, including the highly contagious omicron variant, and do not need hospitalization. However, older individuals and people with medical

vulnerabilities such as heart disease, chronic lung disease or cancer are much more at risk.

Ellison said UMass has been using two oral antiviral drugs that were approved for treating COVID-19, as well as some monoclonal antibodies that could be useful for treatment. But the supply of these medications is extremely limited.

"You, as a private citizen here in Worcester County, have to really do a risk assessment of every activity that you plan on doing, whether it's within your pod and with your family who're hopefully all vaccinated," Dr. Michael P. Hirsh, city medical director, said. "If you're not vaccinated, you should be very, very wary of being out and about."

No venue vaccine mandates — yet

The city had had a masking policy for all indoor venues since September. As for a vaccine mandate for indoor events, Augustus said they're keeping their options open and nothing is off the table yet as they continue to monitor this surge.

City officials will conduct weekly press conferences to keep people updated on developments.

As for those testing positive, the city announced that they advise people to abide by the updated CDC guidelines.

"If you tested positive and you were never symptomatic, you can return to work at the end of those five days (of isolation) but have to continue to wear a mask for five days," Hirsh said.

For those who were symptomatic when they tested, they must isolate for five days and then be asymptomatic, without the aid of medications such as Tylenol or Advil, for at least 24 hours before they can return to work wearing a mask.

For parents of young children who aren't yet eligible for vaccination, Hirsh advised caution because although they may have asymptomatic cases, they can still spread it to others.

"There's really nothing that you can do other than be sensible about not letting them be out and about at children's zoos or events with lot of other children," Hirsh said. "It all comes down to everybody has to be helping all the other cohorts."