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More Companies Mandate COVID-19 Vaccines for Employees, but Is It Enough to Make a Difference?


Experts say that more vaccine mandates are needed to curb the pandemic and that offering increased testing or other mitigation measures instead doesn't go far enough.

By [Cecelia Smith-Schoenwalder](#)

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A Tyson Foods employee receives a COVID-19 vaccine dose in Wilkesboro, N.C., in February. The company has announced that its workers must be vaccinated by Oct. 1.  (MELISSA MELVIN/AP)

President Joe Biden last week made a [plea](#) to the private sector: With Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine approval from the Food and Drug Administration in hand, more companies should require their employees to get the shot. 

"Today I'm calling on more companies in the private sector to step up the vaccine requirements that will reach millions more people," Biden said. "If you're a business leader, a nonprofit leader, a state or local leader who has been waiting for full FDA approval to require vaccinations, I call on you now to do that and require it."

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Several companies moved forward with vaccine requirements this week, including CVS and Delta along with the New York City school system and the [Pentagon](#). And the nationwide

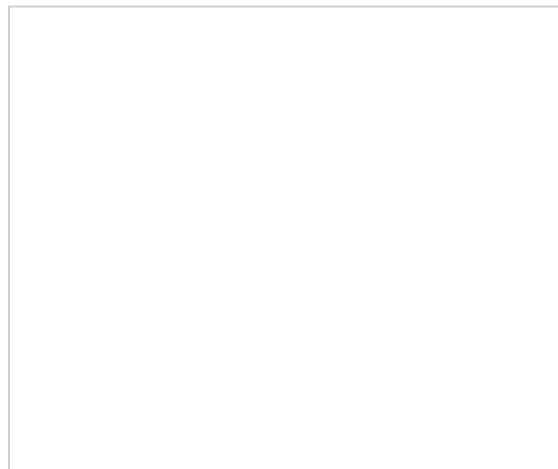
vaccination rate is ticking upward after seeing a massive drop since its peak in April.

But with just over 52% of the U.S. population fully vaccinated and coronavirus cases, deaths and hospitalizations on the rise, public health experts say the steps taken don't go far enough.

"Relying on individual institutions like we have relied on individual institutions, businesses and states to enforce a mask mandate, which we know is safe and effective and probably less intrusive than a vaccine, hasn't worked," says Sadiya Khan, an epidemiologist at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine

The American Medical Association last week said that vaccine incentives haven't "gotten us where we need to be" while calling for additional mandates.

"The simple fact is unless a significant percentage of our population is vaccinated against COVID-19 – we could be stuck fighting this virus for many more months or even years to come," AMA President Gerald Harmon said in a [statement](#). "Now is the time for the public and private sectors to come together, listen to the science, and mandate vaccination."



Biden's Cautious Requirement Approach

The president told companies to follow his example and "require your employees to get vaccinated or face strict requirements," referencing his [announcement](#) in July that federal workers will have to attest to their vaccination against the coronavirus or undergo several mitigation measures, including masking and regular testing.

While granting such a choice might limit pushback, experts say it also presents challenges.

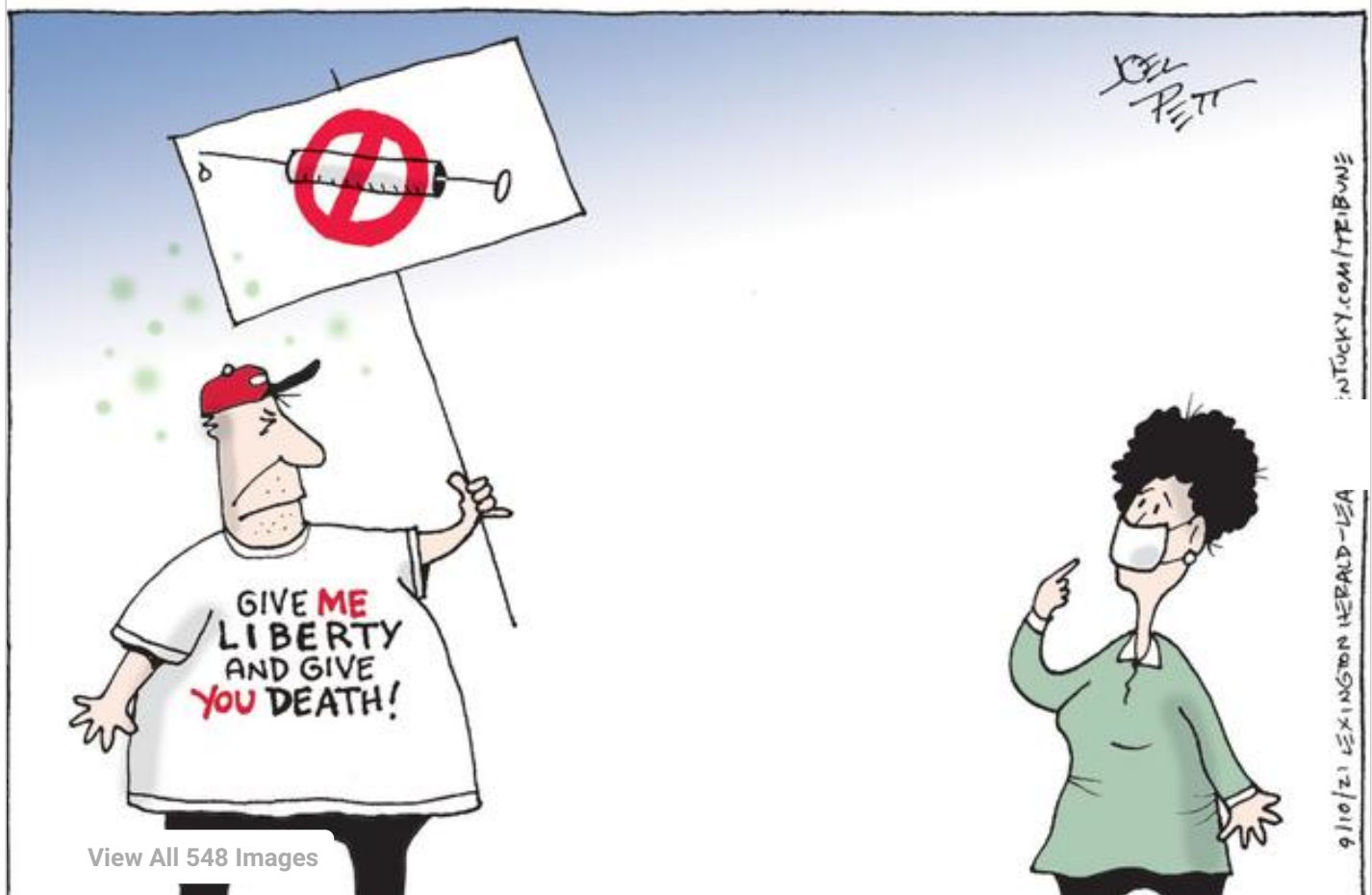
"There are always going to be some employees who are going to be opposed to the COVID-19 vaccine, and by providing testing as an alternative option, the employer is meeting the employee where he or she is," says Sharon Perley Masling, an employment lawyer who leads

the COVID-19 task force at global law firm Morgan Lewis. "That said, providing a testing option may not protect employee safety across the board, and there are significant logistical challenges that employers will need to consider."

Options like offering testing instead of vaccination continue "to delay the bigger issue" and should be considered temporary to allow more time for vaccine hesitancy issues to be addressed, according to Khan.

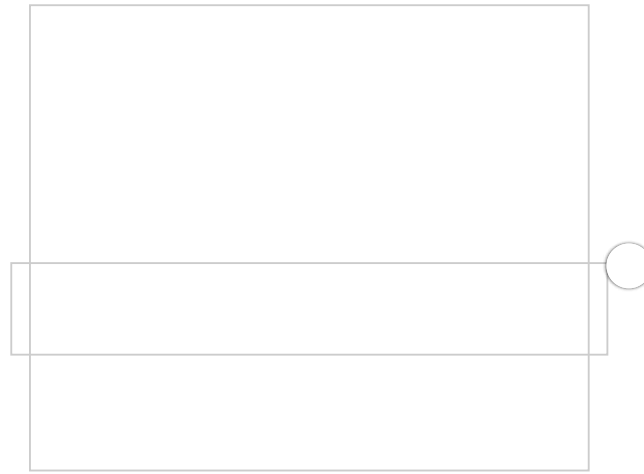
"I really respect the kind of cautious and stepwise approach that President Biden is taking and allowing people to come forward with their concerns, but I don't think it's enough to do weekly testing because we know that there will be new variants popping up constantly," Khan says.

Cartoons on the Coronavirus



She argues that the Biden administration should be laying the groundwork for a federal vaccine mandate.

"I remain very skeptical that without a national and broad requirement that we will continue to see very slow progress," Khan says.



Such a mandate would undoubtedly draw legal pushback from red states that have challenged Biden during the pandemic on various public health measures, including masks.

"What we're seeing with masks I think will be even worse with vaccines," Khan says.

Still, she says that the Biden administration should be working to address people's vaccine concerns ahead of implementing such a mandate

"We need to use every avenue we have at our disposal to make sure that we are able to reach and address any concerns people have as we put a mandate in place," Khan says.

Biden has shied away from the idea of implementing any sort of nationwide mandate, perhaps because of the fiercely political debate that would be expected – both on the streets and in the courts.

The federal government's power to implement a vaccine mandate appears limited, though the Public Health Service Act does allow health agencies to take necessary actions "to prevent the introduction, transmission, or spread of communicable diseases from foreign countries into the States or possessions, or from one State or possession into any other State or possession."

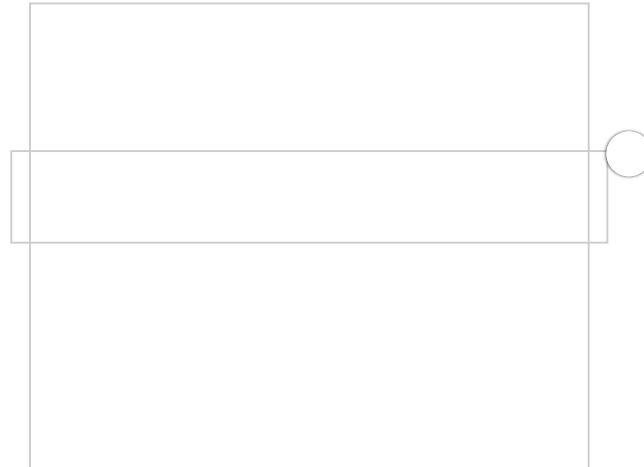
But a nationwide vaccine mandate has never been pursued, and so far, the Biden administration has indicated it does not want to be the first. The CDC director in July [tweeted](#) that "there will be no federal mandate" for the COVID-19 vaccines.

[**READ:** [Are COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates Legal?](#)]

Will Pfizer's FDA Approval Affect Vaccination Rates?

News that the FDA fully approved the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine might have prompted more companies to require vaccines, but did it also encourage Americans who were previously

hesitant to get the shot?



The short answer is that it remains to be seen whether full FDA approval will sway a significant number of the unvaccinated. And while some public health experts believe it will, others aren't as optimistic.

"I do think it will make a difference," Mark McClellan, director of the the Duke-Margolis Center for Health Policy and a former FDA commissioner, said in a press briefing last week. He added, though, that it might not be "a large number of people running out and getting a vaccine today."

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation [poll](#) in late June, 3 in 10 unvaccinated adults surveyed said they would be more likely to get vaccinated if one of the shots received full approval from the FDA.

And vaccination rates are ticking upward. On Sunday, over 400,000 people showed up to get their first COVID-19 dose, [according](#) to the White House.

Still, not everyone believes that full approval will translate into big turnout.

"I think it's very tough to imagine that this approval is going to dramatically change anything. I am very skeptical that it's going to change opinions for the majority of people," Khan says.

Masling says she does think more companies will move to require vaccines even though they had the [legal ground](#) to do so with the shots under emergency use authorization.

"I think with the announcement that the Pfizer vaccine is now fully approved, we expect to see many more employers move in the direction of vaccine mandates," Masling says.

Tags: coronavirus, public health, vaccines