

What President Biden's vaccine mandate means for employers

President Joe Biden's administration is **continuing its efforts** to curb the COVID-19 pandemic and the spread of the deadly COVID-19 Delta variant. Recently, the White House ordered all federal workers and contractors to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Now, the government is imposing a similar requirement on private employers. The move is estimated to affect over 80 million private sector workers.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has been tasked with drafting an emergency temporary standard (ETS) and will announce more specifics in the coming weeks. Soon, employers with 100 or more employees will need to adapt their vaccine policies to comply with these new rules.

This article discusses this latest vaccination mandate, including its scope and how it may affect employers.

Note: This is a developing issue. Information will be updated here and in subsequent resources as more details are released.



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Rule overview

Soon, employers with 100 or more employees (measured companywide, not by location) will need to enforce one of the following:

- ✓ *Require employees to get vaccinated against COVID-19.*
- ✓ *Require unvaccinated employees to produce evidence of a negative COVID-19 test result each week.*

This flexibility allows employers to choose how strictly they want to enforce a vaccine mandate. In other words, some employers may decide to make vaccination a condition of employment; others may only require a negative COVID-19 test status.

What's known about the upcoming rule

OSHA is tasked with drafting the new rule. As such, there will be few details available before OSHA publishes a definitive ETS. Meanwhile, the only pertinent information has come from short government briefings.

Here's what's known about the upcoming rule, keeping in mind these particulars may change in time:

- ✓ *The rule will only apply to employers with 100 or more employees, measured companywide.*
- ✓ *Employers will be able to decide if they want to adopt a strict, mandatory vaccination policy or allow testing as an alternative.*
- ✓ *Employers must provide paid leave to receive & recover from vaccinations.*
- ✓ *Remote employees not working in contact with others will be exempt from the ETS, unless they come into the workplace.*

Again, all aspects of this upcoming rule are subject to modification as OSHA continues to work on the details. The above information is provided to help employers understand how the government is proceeding in this area.

What's unknown about the upcoming rule

Much is still unknown about the upcoming vaccine requirement, and it will remain as such until OSHA publishes the ETS. Here are just some of the questions that remain to be answered:

- ? *When will enforcement of the ETS begin?*
- ? *What qualifies as proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test?*
- ? *Who must pay for weekly testing?*
- ? *What specific penalties will there be for noncompliance?*
- ? *Will the mandates apply to part-time workers?*
- ? *Will there be new guidance on how employers should handle accommodations for employees seeking an exemption?*
- ? *Must paid leave be provided for employees' COVID-19 testing, as it is for vaccinations?*

As the list illustrates, there are many unknown factors at this time. Employers will need to stay tuned for updates from OSHA as they come; however, employers can take action in the meantime.



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Expected enforcement timetable

The vaccination mandate will come in two primary waves:

- 1 An ETS with comprehensive details & actionable steps
- 2 A permanent OSHA standard with all aspects fleshed out

First, OSHA will publish its ETS that will include important details and enforcement guidelines. This is expected to come in the weeks ahead; however, an actual release date is uncertain. Once issued, the ETS will take immediate effect in states where federal OSHA has jurisdiction. In states where the federal government doesn't have jurisdiction over workplace safety, state agencies will have to either adopt the ETS or develop their own ETS within 30 days that is "at least as effective."

An ETS can only remain in effect for six months. After that time, it must be replaced by a permanent standard, which must undergo a formal rule-making process involving a notice-and-comment period to allow stakeholders to submit feedback. This process follows the usual procedure for adopting a permanent standard except that a final ruling should be made within six months from the date OSHA publishes the ETS in the Federal Register.

In summation, employers can expect the ETS sometime within the year, but its specifics may ultimately change as the standard is finalized.



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What employers can do now

While many details are still unknown, the primary vaccination or testing requirement is definite. As such, employers can at least prepare for this aspect of the mandate. Here are some actions employers can consider when preparing for the upcoming requirement:

- ✓ Determine whether COVID-19 vaccination will be required as a condition of employment or if weekly negative testing will be an alternative.
- ✓ Consider how to handle accommodation requests for those seeking vaccination exemptions.
- ✓ Start planning an employee communication campaign to educate workers about vaccine policy changes.
- ✓ Think about the systems needed to adequately track employee vaccination statuses & confidentially secure the data.
- ✓ Plan for potential staffing shortages or scheduling changes to afford employees time to get vaccinated.
- ✓ Consider whether partitions or adequately distanced workstations will be utilized.

This list is nonexhaustive, as certain considerations will be unique to individual employers.

Though the ETS will almost certainly face multiple legal challenges, employers shouldn't count on the rule being entirely struck down and should begin preparing to comply as soon as possible.

Conclusion

The specifics of this latest vaccine mandate are still being drafted, so its rules may seem like a distant concern; however, these requirements will take effect quickly once they're announced. Employers will need to act swiftly when the time comes to ensure compliance. Taking proactive steps now can help save employers from a scramble at the end of the year.

Reach out to Plante Moran Group Benefit Advisors to discuss how this new rule may affect your business. In the meantime, stay tuned for updates as this situation develops.

Please contact us with any questions.

Jennifer Doran
248-375-7354 | jennifer.doran@plantemoran.com

Brandon Earby
616-643-4193 | brandon.earby@plantemoran.com

Claudia Hermiz
248-375-7362 | claudia.hermiz@plantemoran.com

Kara Karaffa
248-375-7349 | kara.karaffa@plantemoran.com

Scott McLellan
248-375-7281 | scott.mclellan@plantemoran.com

Margie Sacha
248-375-7291 | margie.sacha@plantemoran.com

Sam Sajdak
248-375-7482 | sam.sajdak@plantemoran.com

Emily Scharnowski
616-643-4119 | emily.scharnowski@plantemoran.com

Marcus Swartz
248-375-7366 | marcus.swartz@plantemoran.com

Jonathon Trionfi
248-375-7475 | jonathon.trionfi@plantemoran.com