

Some hospitals hesitate on mandates; Amita, Northwestern high-profile exceptions to requiring vaccines for Illinois workers

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Body

A growing number of Illinois hospitals have announced COVID-19 vaccine mandates for their workers in recent weeks, but some of the Chicago area's highest-profile health systems remain missing from that list.

The prestigious Northwestern Medicine system and Amita Health, one of the largest systems in the state with 14 acute care hospitals, have yet to require vaccines for their workers. It's something that's starting to worry some patients.

Both Northwestern and Amita are monitoring the situation and could change course in the future, representatives of the systems said. But neither one is requiring vaccines for their workers now.

"We continue to encourage remaining unvaccinated staff to get vaccinated, answer their questions on the important role vaccines play in protecting themselves and their communities from COVID-19 and provide convenient opportunities to get vaccinated, but have not mandated the COVID-19 vaccine at this time," Northwestern spokesman Christopher King said in a statement.

More than three-fourths of Northwestern's employees are fully vaccinated, he said. Northwestern has 10 acute care hospitals in Illinois.

Amita also is "strongly encouraging" all its workers to get vaccinated and is "actively working" to make that possible, spokesman Tim Nelson said in a statement.

"The majority of our associates have been vaccinated and we are listening to those who haven't to hear their reasons for waiting, providing education and answering questions on what is known about the vaccine's safety and effectiveness," Nelson said.

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Both systems are still taking precautions to stop the spread of COVID-19, such as masking and social distancing, Nelson and King said.

Still, Northwestern and Amita are part of a shrinking group of local hospitals that have not imposed mandates.

Loyola Medicine, which has three Chicago-area hospitals, announced in early July that it would require the vaccines for its 9,523 employees and 500 affiliated community doctors.

In the following days and weeks, Rush, UI Health, University of Chicago Medicine, Advocate Aurora Health and Lurie Children's Hospital followed suit.

NorthShore University HealthSystem, which has six Chicago area hospitals, had not yet announced a mandate Thursday but plans to require vaccines "in the near future," NorthShore spokeswoman Carolyn Starks said in a statement.

It's disconcerting that Northwestern, which is a premier Chicago hospital, has not put a vaccine requirement in place, said one Northwestern cancer patient. The patient asked not to be named because she is still undergoing treatment at Northwestern.

She said she often comes into contact with as many as 10 to 15 different workers on any given day at the hospital, when she goes in for treatment or testing.

Because she's high risk, she's gotten into the habit of asking people around her if they're vaccinated. In recent weeks, three medical workers who interacted with her told her they were not vaccinated, she said.

"These things really matter to me as a cancer patient," she said. "I don't want to be exposed or around people who aren't vaccinated."

She said she doesn't even get together with unvaccinated family members indoors.

"One small misstep in my health could really send me in the wrong direction," she said. "I would hope the one safe place I could go to would be the hospital."

The hospitals that have implemented vaccine mandates have often cited the health and safety of their workers and patients as their motivation for doing so, as well as the spread of the highly contagious delta variant.

A number of medical groups have also come out in favor of mandatory shots for workers. More than 50 health care organizations, including the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Nursing Association, released a statement July 26 supporting vaccine mandates in health care. Many hospitals already require flu shots for workers each year.

There are a number of reasons why not all hospitals -- or employers -- have yet to put in place mandates, said Margo Wolf O'Donnell, co-chair of the labor and employment law group at law firm Benesch in Chicago.

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Some hospitals and employers may be holding off because they're concerned about losing employees who refused to roll up their sleeves, she said. Many industries are having trouble finding enough workers at the moment.

It's possible that some hospitals may not be instituting requirements because most of their workers are already fully vaccinated, she said. They may not want to deal with the administrative costs and difficulty of dealing with requests for accommodations for religious or medical reasons, she said.

Others may be waiting for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to fully approve the Pfizer vaccine, she said. Now, the vaccines are allowed under emergency use authorizations but have not yet gained full approval. Legally, employers don't have to wait until the vaccines are fully approved to require them, "but some employers may think that optically it will be easier and better for morale if they wait until that occurs," O'Donnell said.

It's possible that some health care providers and employers are just holding out a few more weeks, she said.

"I think, a month from now, the landscape may be quite different," she said. ct21 0011 210813 R S 0000000000 00003727

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Photo: Northwestern Memorial Hospital Feinberg Pavilion is shown on July 26. TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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