



New public health order mandates vaccines for long-term care, assisted living workers

Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry is introducing a new public health order requiring long-term care and assisted living workers to be fully vaccinated with a COVID-19 vaccine by October 12 as a condition of continued employment in the sector.

The new measure will be implemented using her broad powers under the public health emergency that was declared in March 2020.

Henry's decision has been driven in large part by an increasing number of facility outbreaks in recent weeks where unvaccinated workers have become infected with COVID-19.

In the interim, Henry will introduce a requirement for unvaccinated workers to remain masked and undergo regular testing for COVID-19.

Workers will also be required to disclose their vaccination status to their employer along with their Provincial Health Number. The latter will be used by public health officials to monitor overall vaccination rates by site. This requirement to disclose vaccination information will also apply to acute care workers.

COVID-19 vaccines have proven to be safe and effective in preventing infection or serious illness. In long-term care and assisting living homes in particular, these vaccines have been crucial in helping turn the corner after a devastating year.

HEU has actively encouraged members to get vaccinated, and an overwhelming majority have done so. Getting vaccinated is an act of solidarity with patients and residents, with co-workers and with those who are unable to get vaccinated for medical reasons.

The union has advocated for education and access as key to further improving vaccine uptake, and preferable to a mandatory vaccination policy. That has also been the position of our provincial government and public health officials until today's announcement.

The Provincial Health Officer has determined that mandatory vaccines are now required in the context of this public health emergency. The union will encourage our members to follow her direction as it has throughout the pandemic.

The policy must accommodate those workers who cannot receive the vaccine for medical reasons, or on grounds protected by human rights legislation such as religious

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beliefs. Government has committed to consulting with our union on the broader implications of a vaccine mandate on members' jobs.

The union has voiced its concern that this policy change has the potential to compound a serious staffing crisis that is undermining care and putting workers' health and welfare at risk.

In a recent poll of HEU members, 24 per cent said they were likely to leave health care over the next two years as a result of their experiences during the pandemic.

So while many health care workers will support this measure, it will be controversial and it may push some to leave their jobs altogether.

It is important that we acknowledge the courage and commitment of health care workers who have worked on the front lines of a devastating pandemic, and support and encourage them to remain in the health care workforce.

Vaccine clinics are being held frequently across the province. Workers must be provided with paid time to receive the vaccine if required.

Dr. Henry recently shortened the interval between first and second shots of the COVID-19 vaccine to 28 days so workers who want to meet the October deadline should ensure that they receive their first dose of the vaccine by early September.

The union will publish a Q & A on the policy as more details become available.

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