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COVID-19 vaccine requirement to end for 40,000 state of Oregon employees, governor's office says

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Oregon Gov. Kate Brown delivered her final "state of the state" address on Youtube Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022.



By [Aimee Green](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown will rescind an order that has required nearly 40,000 state employees to be fully vaccinated against [COVID-19](#) since [last fall](#), explaining that “extraordinary emergency” orders are no longer necessary as “we learn to live with this virus.”

That means newly hired executive branch employees won’t need to get vaccinated, existing executive branch employees won’t need to stay up to date on their vaccinations with boosters and the tiny portion of these employees who were fired for non-compliance might be eligible to reapply for their old jobs once again.

Brown’s initial vaccine requirement applied to executive branch employees who work in more than 70 state departments, boards and commissions, including correctional officers in the state’s prisons, child-welfare workers, Oregon State Police, Department of Transportation workers and staff at the Oregon Health Authority, the primary agency empowered with responding to the pandemic.

Last summer, Brown said the requirement was needed to make workplaces safe as the highly contagious delta variant spread rapidly across the state, eventually resulting in record hospitalizations and deaths. She added that “the only way we can stop the spread of COVID-19 for good is through vaccination.”

The governor will now let her vaccination mandate expire April 1, amid a growing push locally and nationally to return to normalcy and proceed unfettered by COVID-19 precautions, as omicron cases and hospitalizations plummet.

Brown’s office didn’t answer a list of questions posed by The Oregonian/OregonLive Tuesday, including whether the governor is concerned that ending the vaccination mandate will send the message that she no longer believes it’s critical to get as many people vaccinated as possible, including state employees.

“As we enter this new phase and learn to live with COVID-19, the Governor has been clear that we must still remain vigilant to protect each other from COVID-19,” spokesperson Liz Merah said in a general statement. “Ensuring access to COVID-19 vaccines, booster doses, and tests remains incredibly important, even as the extraordinary executive authorities she used at the beginning of the pandemic are no longer necessary.”

Brown’s decision doesn’t affect vaccination mandates instituted by other arms of government last fall. The mandates apply to hundreds of thousands of workers in the state. The Oregon Health Authority said it will continue to require vaccinations for health care workers and K-12 school employees, saying the requirements are “still needed.”

“This is important in protecting the workforce as well as patients and students in these settings,” agency spokesperson Rudy Owens said in an email. “Many individuals at higher risk for COVID-19 complications seek care in health care settings, and we all deserve to get care in settings with lower risk of being exposed to COVID-19. High vaccination rates, supported by vaccine requirements, help to limit impact of COVID-19 on schools and support consistent in-person instruction for all students across Oregon.”

The Oregon Judicial Department said it hasn’t yet made a decision about whether it’ll continue to require vaccinations [for 1,800 state employees and judges](#) in state courts.

Multnomah County, however, will let [its vaccination mandate](#) for county employees stand, said county spokesperson Kate Yeiser.

The underpinnings of Brown's decision to eliminate the vaccination requirement became public last week, when the Oregon Health Authority announced it would end indoor masking requirements in public places and schools in March and Brown simultaneously announced she would rescind her emergency declaration April 1 that authorizes a variety of powers.

But Brown made no mention that she was ending her vaccination mandate for state workers. The impact on vaccination requirements for state workers only became clear after The Oregonian/OregonLive pressed the governor's office for clarity. Merah confirmed Monday the requirement would end.

Nationally, requiring anyone to get vaccinated – whether it be for employment or to dine inside a restaurant or watch a movie indoors – is a polarizing issue. A series of mandates in localities have fallen in recent days. Of note, King County, which includes Seattle, ended its proof-of-vaccination requirement to enter restaurants and bars on Tuesday. New York City plans to drop a similar mandate by next week.

Oregon's neighbors – Washington and California – both say they plan to continue requiring vaccinations for health care workers, state employees and K-12 school employees. California also allows unvaccinated workers to stay employed as long as they are regularly tested for the virus.

Opponents of vaccination mandates say they infringe on individuals' rights to make personal medical decisions – in other words, to remain free of vaccine. Opponents also say they shouldn't be required to share their medical information with anyone. Supporters of mandates say they are an important tool in tamping down future waves of coronavirus, because fully vaccinated and boosted people are less likely to get infected and more likely to experience shorter bouts of illness if they do. Supporters also contend that the fully vaccinated and boosted are less likely to overwhelm hospitals because they often don't get sick enough to be admitted. They also are less likely to serve as incubators of the virus as it mutates.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 21 states had some sort of vaccination mandates in early February. Fourteen states have banned any sort of vaccination mandates.

Two bills in the Oregon Legislature this session seek to prohibit businesses from requiring proof of vaccination or prohibit vaccination as a condition of employment.

Brown's vaccine mandate did help increase vaccinations among state workers last year, officials say.

Only about 68% of workers were fully vaccinated when she announced the mandate in August. That grew to more than 85% by the time the mandate took effect in October.

But the mandate also offered what some contend was a large loophole: It allowed employees to remain unvaccinated if they swore it was against their sincere religious beliefs or got a doctor's note stating vaccination was dangerous for their health. Virtually every employee who asked for such an "exception" was granted one.

At last count, 99 state employees – or 0.2% – were fired for failing to comply with the mandate.

To see COVID-19 data and trends, visit <https://projects.oregonlive.com/coronavirus/>

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