



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on July 27, 2021

## First Federal COVID-19 Job Mandate Introduced by Department of Veterans Affairs

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced on Monday that it will require its 115,000 healthcare workers to be vaccinated against COVID-19 within the next two months, becoming the first federal agency to introduce such a forceful measure.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough said in a [statement](#) the move was made to protect the staff and veterans from the “Delta” variant that is spreading across America:

We’re mandating vaccines for Title 38 employees because it’s the best way to keep veterans safe, especially as the delta variant spreads across the country. Whenever a veteran or VA employee sets foot in a VA facility, they deserve to know that we have done everything in our power to protect them from COVID-19. With this mandate, we can once again make — and keep — that fundamental promise.



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McDonough also mentioned the decision is supported by numerous medical organizations, including the [American Hospital Association](#), [America’s Essential Hospitals](#), the American Medical Association, and many other groups, which have issued a statement calling for mandatory COVID-19 jobs for all of the nation’s healthcare workers.

According to the VA statement, four unvaccinated employees have recently died because of COVID-19, three of whom were believed to have had a “Delta” strain. There has also been an outbreak among unvaccinated employees and trainees at a VA Law Enforcement Training Center, the third such outbreak during the pandemic, per the VA.

There have been 272,308 COVID-19 cases among employees, veterans, and others the VA monitors, and 12,609 deaths, according to [VA’s website](#). Also, 300,099 employees are fully vaccinated, which represents about 70 percent of the workforce.

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester (D-Mont.) [praised](#) VA’s decision to require vaccines for its employees. “I support Secretary McDonough taking action to proactively protect veterans and the dedicated frontline staff who provide their care,” he said Monday in a statement, adding that as the largest integrated healthcare system in the country, VA is not only tasked with caring for veterans, but also with ensuring the safety of its personnel that “selflessly puts themselves in harm’s way each and every day to serve them.”



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The *New York Times* [reported](#) that like many state and local governments, the VA recently struck a deal with its employee union to offer workers four hours of paid administrative leave if they proved that they had been fully vaccinated. “That was a meaningful step,” McDonough said. “But I think now given again what we are seeing as it relates to the trend lines in the disease, this is the next meaningful step.”

President Biden [confirmed](#) the new policy on Monday afternoon, in his typical bizarre manner: “You are such a pain in the neck. But I’m going to answer your question because we’ve known each other for so long,” he said to a journalist. “Yes, Veteran Affairs is going to, in fact, require that all docs working in facilities are going to have to be vaccinated,” said Biden, smiling. The president, however, didn’t answer a follow-up question about COVID-19 vaccine requirements for other federal employees.

During a briefing on Monday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki [said](#) there has not been a determination made about whether Biden will require members of the military or civilian federal employees to get vaccinated. Psaki reiterated that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), not President Biden, is responsible for setting the country’s COVID-related guidance, saying, “The president favors using the CDC as his North Star and what the health and medical experts are going to advise on how to save more lives and protect people.”

It was reported in June that the Department of Defense is [considering](#) mandating the COVID-19 shot once it receives a full FDA approval, which is expected to happen as soon as September.

The VA’s move came on a day when nearly 60 leading medical and healthcare organizations issued [a call](#) through the American Medical Association for healthcare facilities to require their workers to get vaccinated. In June, the nation’s largest healthcare union and some other groups [pledged](#) to oppose mandatory COVID-19 jabs. Also in June, a federal judge in Texas, in a first [ruling](#) concerning mandatory vaccination with a vaccine that so far has only received emergency use authorization, dismissed a lawsuit brought by employees of Houston Methodist Hospital who challenged the hospital’s coronavirus vaccination requirement.

The VA move is already facing opposition within its own ranks. Following the official announcement of the new policy, Oklahoma Department of Veterans Affairs officials [said](#) they still do not plan to require COVID-19 vaccinations of their healthcare workers, but “will continue to closely monitor state and federal long-term care guidelines” and possibly revise the vaccination policy “in the future.”

Meanwhile, healthcare workers in the country’s most populous city and most populous state now also face the option to get a job or get fired. It was [announced](#) last week that New York City public-health employees will be required to get the coronavirus vaccine or undergo weekly COVID-19 testing. The mandate was [extended](#) on Monday on all city workers. In California, Governor Gavin Newsom [declared](#) a similar policy for state and healthcare workers.



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