

Valued Community Partners in COVID-19 Response & Recovery

Updated June 10, 2021

“How Can I Help?”

As valued members of a community, businesses not only provide jobs and services but also local leadership. Early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, employers of all sizes began adapting to accommodate the changing needs of their employees and their families during lockdown. Some businesses offered extended family leave policies, educational support programs and stipends for tutoring or childcare, mental health support, and flexibility for employees to work remotely and/or during non-traditional hours. Now, as we move through COVID-19 vaccine rollout and plateauing demand, local business owners and other employers play critical roles in helping to fight against the pandemic by actively advocating for vaccination opportunities for their employees and communities, and by putting in place the supports needed for individuals to get vaccinated.

COVID-19 vaccines are an important tool for protecting individuals and ending the pandemic. While other essential prevention and protection activities including [community protection](#) efforts, [testing, contact tracing](#) and case investigation, and [supported isolation and quarantine](#) remain critical even now that we have the COVID-19 vaccine, vaccination is a safe, effective way to prevent transmission and sickness. Increasing vaccination rates will make other aspects of response more effective. To safely return to offices, restaurants, crowded working environments, and places of business en masse; fully reopen schools; and convene large gatherings of family and friends, we must achieve 70-90% vaccination rates among all segments of our population, not just a lucky few—and we must maintain them. This is of [particular importance for many essential and frontline workers](#), who are often underpaid, unable to socially distance, and have less access to vaccines and health care resources. If not, we will continue to see hotspots of infection surface and spread, possibly re-shuttering or reducing capacity for suffering businesses, driving new variants, and resulting in unnecessary infections and deaths.

As leaders within their communities, businesses can take action to slow the spread of COVID-19, protecting employees and clients, for the sake of maintaining their own operations and sustaining the livelihoods of their employees — ultimately saving lives and moving the needle toward normalcy.

Vaccine Uptake: Challenges & Limitations

While the U.S. has made measurable progress since the first release of vaccines in late 2020, we are still a long way off from achieving our vaccination goals. For many across the country, when vaccine eligibility expanded, it became easy to get a shot. Unfortunately, this is not true for everyone, especially those from communities that were already disproportionately impacted by COVID-19: communities of color, Indigenous communities, essential workers, migrant/farmworkers, non-English speakers, and low-income populations in particular. Many people from these groups and others face challenges in trying to get the vaccine. Barriers to access include:

- *Structural barriers* that limit access to, navigation of, and trust in the health care system
- *Informational barriers* that limit access to and understanding of key facts about vaccine safety, efficacy, availability, and scheduling/registration options
- *Logistical barriers* that limit options for scheduling, transportation, or adequate time to become vaccinated

How Employers Can Help

Employers can help address many of these barriers to vaccine access by adequately supporting their employees and can play several key roles in this effort.

1. Businesses should enable employees the opportunity to get vaccinated, implementing flexible policies and adequate time off to eliminate barriers to vaccine access.

Employers play a major role in allowing their employees flexible, adequate paid time off so employees do not need to choose between getting vaccinated and receiving a pay check. Employees should have access to time off not only to get vaccinated, but also to recover if they suffer from post-vaccine side effects. Studies have shown employees would be receptive to this strategy: [one in five \(21%\)](#) employed adults who have not gotten a vaccine say they would be more inclined to do so if their employer gave them paid time off to get vaccinated and recover from side effects. [The American Rescue Plan now includes a tax credit for small- to medium-sized employers](#) (under 500 employees) to reimburse for the cost of providing paid sick and family leave for employees due to COVID-19 or to receive or recover from COVID-19. In the interest of achieving high vaccination rates within the community, businesses should also consider offering flexible paid time off for employees to support vaccination efforts for family members such as elderly parents or children. They may also consider covering out-of-pocket expenses such as childcare, parking, transportation costs to vaccine sites, or offering rides for those in need to access off-site appointments. Offering flexible paid time off for vaccination is not only in the interest of employees, but also of employers in the long-term; indeed, vaccination can help businesses avoid closures or reduced capacity/production due to staff shortages as a result of infections, exposures, and quarantines.

2. Businesses may be able to partner with local health officials to host vaccination clinics for their employees or within their communities.

At this stage of rollout, we must meet people where they are, offering a convenient, trusted place to get vaccinated. On-site clinics also allow people to see others get vaccinated, which may persuade some who have previously been hesitant. Consider offering clinical services in the languages spoken by the target workforce or offering on-site interpretation services to ensure adequate understanding and comfort with the vaccination process.

In March 2021, the [CDC released new guidance](#) on setting up on-site temporary vaccination clinics for large-scale places of work with sufficient spaces. Planning should include input from management, HR, legal, employees, labor representatives, local health officials, and other relevant stakeholders. Suggested best practices include:

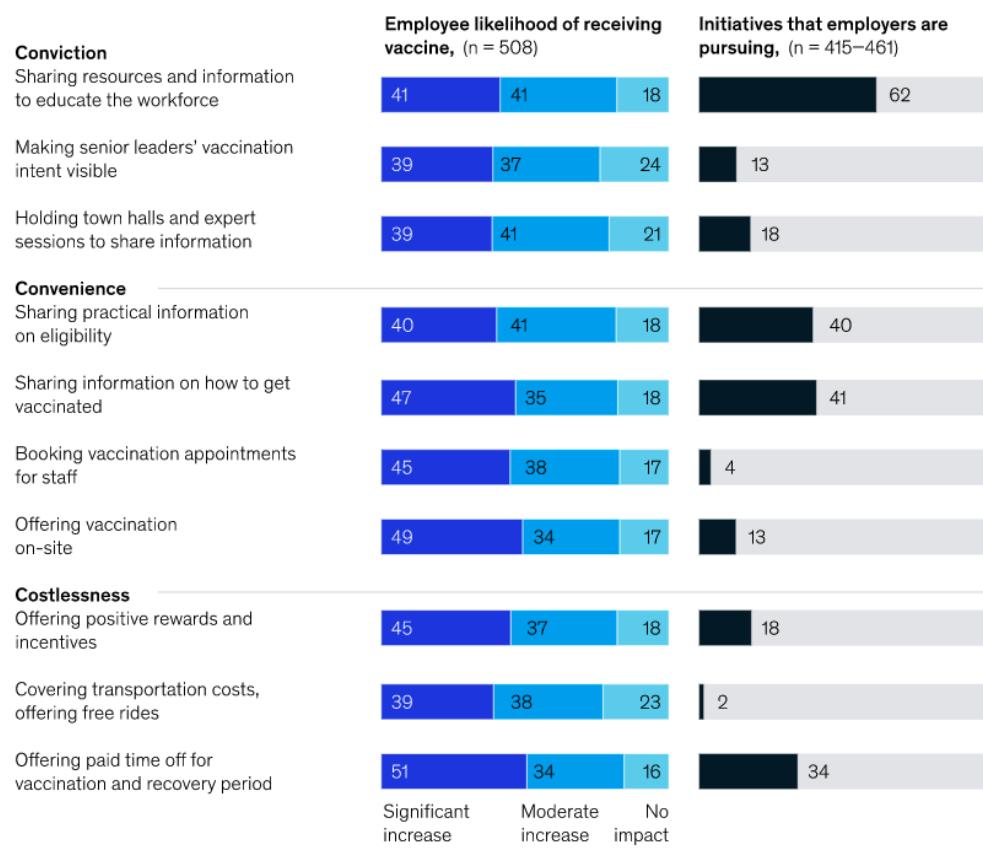
- Offer flexible, non-punitive sick leave options for employees with signs/symptoms/side effects after vaccination.
- Allow time for vaccine confidence to grow among employees. This can mean offering more than one opportunity for vaccination; mobile clinics, for instance, can return to a worksite multiple times on a rotating schedule to accommodate shift workers.
- Employers using community locations can provide supportive policies (paid leave, transportation support).
- Use trusted messengers who are respected with employee communities to assist.
- Workplace vaccination clinics must offer vaccination at no charge and during work hours. Access should be easy and for all people working at the workplace, regardless of their employment status.
- See [additional best practices from NIH](#).

3. As trusted sources of information within communities, businesses can leverage their stance as community pillars to promote clear, accurate information about vaccination.

While there is no single solution to address vaccine uptake, targeted messaging from [trusted messengers](#) is important to address hesitancy and refusal from certain groups. As they have a direct channel of communication to their employees, employers should work closely with local health officials to obtain and share accurate, honest information about COVID-19 vaccines. Businesses can consider partnering with respected internal figures who can serve as role models and share experiences/answer questions during [information-sharing town halls](#), [posting informational materials](#) in high-traffic areas of their facilities, or [sharing facts via email or home mailers](#). Information should be digestible, available in a variety of locally spoken languages with cultural and literacy sensitivities in mind, and communicated across multiple accessible channels. Information should also be provided on available support services and other resources. See more [information and materials in the PIH Vaccine Toolkit](#).

All employer actions matter—and employers could be doing more.

Impact of different US employer initiatives on employees' likelihood of receiving COVID-19 vaccination, %



Note: Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.

Source: McKinsey 2021 Consumer Health Insights Survey, March 21, 2021

Source: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/pharmaceuticals-and-medical-products/our-insights/getting-to-work-employers-role-in-covid-19-vaccination>

Employer Vaccination Support Examples

1) Tyson Foods offers free, on-site vaccination events that include family members of employees as well as others living in their homes. More than 44,000 Tyson Foods employees have been vaccinated so far at more than 100 on-site events or in nearby community facilities. If workers are vaccinated outside of their normal shift or through an external site, workers are compensated for up to four hours of regular pay. The company also provides education and resources related to the COVID-19 vaccine to team members in multiple languages spoken by workers.

2) Target provides up to four hours of paid time off (two for each vaccine dose) to hourly team members when they get vaccinated against COVID-19. All U.S. team members are also provided free Lyft rides (up to \$15 each way) to and from vaccine appointments, if needed. In April 2021, Target announced it is offering on-site vaccinations to more than 19,000 frontline store and distribution center workers in Minnesota at 17 designated locations.

3) Wawa, which has approximately 37,000 associates at the store level, is encouraging all customers and associates to get vaccinated. Associates are provided with \$300 incentive; informational postcards outlining the incentive are sent to associates' home addresses to bolster family involvement and encouragement. Wawa supports community efforts to vaccinate as many people as possible, including testing initiatives and pop-up vaccines clinics at the store level for both customers and associates. In an effort to encourage vaccine uptake among employees, the company is also hosting town-hall forums to answer questions, disseminate information, and address concerns.

4) Chobani and Dollar General are also offering paid time for employees to get vaccinated. Chobani covers up to six working hours; Dollar General offers four hours for employees who self-report receiving a vaccine dose.

5) Michelsen Farms, a major potato producer with packing and processing facilities in eastern Idaho, has hosted on-site employee vaccine clinics to alleviate scheduling, transportation, and language concerns for its workers.

Should You Require Employees to be Vaccinated?

Under the FDA Emergency Use Authorizations (EUAs) for COVID-19 vaccines, the decision to vaccinate is voluntary. However, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)—the federal agency that enforces workplace anti-discrimination laws—has concluded (twice, most recently in May 2021) that federal equal employment opportunity laws do not prevent an employer from mandating a COVID-19 vaccination for [their employees physically returning to work](#) subject to the reasonable accommodation provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Civil Rights Act of 1964. The EEOC has advised that companies strongly consider legal protections under privacy laws and other federal and state employment laws. For more information on the EEOC guidance: <https://www.eeoc.gov/coronavirus>

- Employers should consider not only state and local law in this area, but also [vaccine hesitancy and equity concerns](#) when considering vaccine mandates and should seek guidance from local health officials.
- Historical precedent does exist for employers to compel worker vaccinations. For example, many hospital systems require annual flu shots.
- Please refer to the [EEOC Employee Fact Sheet](#) outlining federal laws that protect against employment discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Those considering mandates should consider that access to the vaccine is not universal; certain groups face particular challenges and barriers to access. Companies should consider flexible leave policies, supportive accommodations, and on-site vaccination options as noted above to help alleviate this issue.

Additional Resources

- [Making it Easier for Employees & Workers to Get Vaccinated: A Checklist for Small Business Owners](#) (Health Action Alliance)
- [A Checklist for Rural Employers: Making it Easier for Employees & Workers to Get Vaccinated](#) (Health Action Alliance)
- [Employer COVID Resources](#) (Reimagine Mainstreet)
- [Guide to Vaccinating Migrant/Migratory and Seasonal Food and Agriculture Workers](#) (CDC)
- [Workers COVID-19 Vaccine Toolkit: Information for Employers and Employees](#) (CDC)

The ideas presented in this document reflect the latest public health thinking and scientific evidence as of June 2021. You are advised that the COVID-19 vaccine landscape remains highly fluid, and it is your responsibility to ensure that decisions are made based on the most up-to-date information available. Partners In Health does not provide medical advice, diagnosis or treatment in the United States. Always seek the advice of a physician or other qualified health care provider with any questions regarding a medical condition. The information, including but not limited to, text, graphics, images, links and other material contained in this document, are intended for general informational purposes only and should not be construed as legal or professional advice or a substitute for such advice.