

NJ employers can force most workers to get COVID vaccine, but will they?

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New Jersey employers are digging into their pockets to jump-start the state's vaccination program, but they are stopping short of using one tool at their disposal: making employees get the shot.

Among them are several banks that have taken big financial losses due to the pandemic and donated \$265,000 to hospitals to support vaccine distribution.

"We're going to encourage them all to (get vaccinated)," said Christopher Maher, chairman and chief executive officer of OceanFirst Financial Corp., a Toms River-based bank with 1,100 employees. "However, we do not anticipate requiring it."

How many got the shot?: NJ COVID vaccine sites in Monmouth, Ocean

A vaccine that can bring the pandemic and economic pain to an end is within sight, but Maher and other New Jersey business owners and executives are facing an ethical dilemma, wondering how far they should go to get their workforce inoculated.

The choice is being made as the New Jersey job market is reeling. The Garden State lost 7,700 jobs in December, bringing total job losses for 2020 to 336,400, the state said Thursday. The unemployment rate dropped from 10.2% to 7.6%, but only because thousands of workers gave up looking for work and dropped out of the labor force.

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"New Jersey as much or more than most other states really needs that vaccination process to go quickly and efficiently because it's going to be tough for the state's economy to bounce back until that happens," said Joel Naroff, an economist based in Holland, Pennsylvania.

Employers' role in health

From providing insurance to offering wellness programs, employers have an outsized role in their workers' health. It isn't uncommon to find them hosting blood drives or tacking on surcharges to smokers.

Now, some companies are becoming vaccine advocates.

Lidl, a supermarket chain with 12 stores in New Jersey, said recently it would offer \$200 in extra pay to workers who get the vaccine. It noted that eight out of 10 workers plan to get the shot.

Trader Joe's and Aldi, two other supermarket chains with dozens of New Jersey stores, said recently they would provide an extra two hours pay per dose to employees who get vaccinated.

Falling cases: New models predict NJ COVID cases, hospitalizations outlook with vaccine rollout

Other employers haven't resorted to those types of incentives.

The Toms River Regional School District, for example, is encouraging staff members with underlying health conditions to consult their doctors before getting the vaccine, said James Ricotta, assistant superintendent.

Marilyn Schlossbach, who owns five restaurants at the Jersey Shore, said she would provide information to employees about vaccines, but she was reluctant to go much further.

"I have a hard time opening that precedent," she said.

Legally, employers who mandate vaccines are within their bounds with two exceptions: They need to make reasonable accommodations for workers who object based on an underlying medical condition or religious beliefs, said John Sarno, president of the Employers Association of New Jersey, a trade group.

It wouldn't be the first time workers face a mandate. The state last year required health workers to receive the flu shot.

Potential 'game-changer': Hopes high for Johnson & Johnson COVID vaccine if authorized

COVID-19 may give employers a more compelling case to mandate a vaccine, said Joanne Ciulla, director of the Institute for Ethical Leadership at Rutgers Business School-Newark and New Brunswick.

The disease has killed more than 20,000 New Jerseyans, infected at least 580,000 and has sent the job market tumbling; New Jersey in December had 8% fewer jobs than it did a year ago, according to the state Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and no sector escaped unscathed.

The vaccine, public health officials have said, could be the state's best chance to finally end the pandemic, saving lives and restarting the economy.

'Encourage, but not require'

Still, employers who require workers to get vaccinated risk a backlash from hold-outs. And they could face a difficult decision on whether to fire employees who refuse to go along, experts said.

"Our general advice is that unless you have a legitimate health and safety reason then at least at the present time, it would be better to encourage, but not require," Sarno said.

OceanFirst seems to be following suit. The bank lost \$6 million during the third quarter in part because of the financial impact of COVID-19 on its loans and operations.

Competing for shots: New Jersey seniors struggle with online COVID vaccine system

And Maher faces no shortages of challenges, from low interest rates to employees who test positive for the disease.

The rocky outlook prompted OceanFirst, along with Manasquan Bank, Peapack-Gladstone Bank and Valley Bank, to contribute thousands of dollars to hospitals to help them expand vaccine delivery, clearing the way for the economy to come back online.

But Maher said he hesitates to make the vaccine mandatory, noting that regulators still are collecting data to see how well it works.

Instead, he said the company plans to make the vaccine free to employees. And Maher himself plans to get the vaccine when he's eligible, hoping to convince employees to join him.

"Given that (the vaccine) is highly effective and the risks seem to be minimal, we're very supportive of trying to get the economy and our community back going by getting as broad a

vaccination program out there as we can," Maher said.

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