

Oregon Requires Churches to Check Vaccination Status of Unmasked Members

The Oregon Health Authority released a new state requirement for churches, businesses and employers to check the status of individuals who say they have been vaccinated against COVID-19 and therefore wish to go unmasked.

This move comes less than two weeks after the latest update from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) which says that fully vaccinated individuals can forego mask-wearing in “any setting” except where required by state or local law.

The Oregon policy states “all businesses, employers and faith institutions are required” to “continue to apply and enforce” mask-wearing and physical distancing, except in cases where they have a policy for “checking for proof of vaccination status,” request proof of vaccination or review proof of vaccination prior to “entry or admission.”

“Businesses, employers and faith institutions who do not create such policies will maintain the same masking guidance listed below, regardless of an individual’s vaccination status,” the policy continues.

The law does allow for accommodations to be made for those with medical conditions but does not encourage the use of plastic face shields unless in the cases of interacting with a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual:

“OHA recommends face shields only be used on a limited basis, for example when talking to someone who is deaf or hard of hearing and needs to read lips to communicate.”

The health authority says the use of masks is “an empowering

way for each of us to protect our communities, our families and ourselves.”

When the state reaches a vaccination status for 70% of Oregon adults age 16 and over, Oregon’s health officer and epidemiologist Dean Sidelinger said the state will reevaluate the restrictions. Oregon has had one of the strictest mask enforcement laws since put into effect July 1, 2020.

The implementation of vaccine passports has become a hot-button topic, as states look for ways to open businesses safely and in accordance with evolving government ordinances.

Sidelinger continued in the *Oregonlive* interview, ““We hope that Oregonians will not lie or cheat and put others at risk by forging a vaccine record if they aren’t vaccinated,” Sidelinger said. “For a business that wants to serve their customers in a different way by allowing them to remove their masks if they’re fully vaccinated, or have their staff be able to remove their mask if they’re fully vaccinated, they need to institute a system where individuals can share their vaccination status,” he continued.

Many businesses balked this latest ordinance, saying the requirement of proof of vaccination is too much to put on the “essential workers” who have had to cope with all the changes in the last year of the pandemic.

Miles Eshaia, a spokesperson for UFCW Local 555, said, “Once again, the OHA has put essential employees in the position of enforcers of public policy without giving them the tools to protect themselves or the public. Telling essential employees to be the mask police and asking customers for their medical information puts them in harm’s way and is insulting after months of ignoring the needs and safety of the people who put food on our tables.”

Similarly, Rebecca Boyle, a manager at McMenamins Bagdad Theater & Pub, questioned how showing proof of vaccination

could violate HIPAA rights: the federal law that protects health information.

“You can’t even ask for someone’s papers for a service dog,” she said.

“I don’t want people to feel uncomfortable,” said Terry Smoke, owner of a local grocery store. “If you want to wear a mask, fine, but I’m done. It’s up to the customer. I trust them. If they ask if they need to be vaccinated [to go maskless], I say yes, but I’m going to believe people will be honest about it. That’s the only way we’re going to get through this.” {eo}

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