

United Airlines Welcomes Back Unvaccinated Employees—for Now

United Airlines will bring back employees who were placed on unpaid leave last year because they refused to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

The airline told employees in a memo Thursday that workers who avoided vaccination by claiming a medical or religious exemption will be allowed back starting March 28.

The company's vice president of human relations, Kirk Limacher, said in the memo that United was taking the step because it expects coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths to continue to drop over the next few weeks.

New reported cases of COVID-19 in the United States have dropped sharply since mid-January, when the highly contagious omicron variant began to wane.

"Of course, if another variant emerges or the COVID trends suddenly reverse course, we will reevaluate the appropriate safety protocols at that time," Limacher said.

Last year, CEO Scott Kirby pushed the mandate as a critical safety measure, and United became one of the most visible U.S. corporations to impose a vaccine requirement. The company said that about 97% of its 67,000 U.S. workers got the shots, and only about 200 were terminated.

More than 2,000 workers claimed a medical or religious exemption from vaccination. They were not fired, but were placed on unpaid leave, and several sued the Chicago-based company.

A United spokeswoman said Thursday that the company still

requires new employees to be vaccinated.

More than 950,000 Americans have died from COVID-19 since the pandemic started, but the rates of new cases, hospitalizations and deaths have fallen in the past two months. Through Monday, the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases in the U.S. fell 52% to about 42,000 over the previous two weeks, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. The average topped 800,000 daily cases in mid-January. {eo}

© 2022 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.