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AHS to require health workers to fully vaccinated for COVID-19 by Oct. 31

Currently, 431 people are hospitalized due to COVID — 30 more than Monday. Of those people, 106 are receiving intensive care

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Dr. Verna Yiu, president and CEO of Alberta Health Services. PHOTO BY DAVID BLOOM/POSTMEDIA

Alberta Health Services workers will be required to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 by Halloween or risk being put on an unpaid leave of absence.

AHS president and CEO Dr. Verna Yiu announced the mandatory vaccination policy Tuesday as the province recorded 920 new COVID cases and the number of people with the disease needing intensive care cracked three digits.

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“Health-care workers have an ethical and professional responsibility to protect others,” Yiu said.

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“Evidence overwhelmingly confirms that being fully immunized mitigates potential harm to patients and health-care workers.”

Currently, 431 people are hospitalized due to COVID — 30 more than Monday. Of those people, 106 are receiving intensive care.

The new health-worker vaccination policy applies to all employees of AHS, Alberta Precision Labs, Carewest, CapitalCare and Covenant Health. It will also cover members of medical and midwifery staff, students and volunteers.

Any employee who can't be vaccinated for a medical reason or due to a protected ground under the Alberta Human Rights Act will be accommodated.

Policies like this aren't unprecedented, Yiu added. Health staff are sometimes reassigned or restricted from working if they haven't received the yearly influenza shot. New AHS employees also must already present proof of vaccination against such diseases as measles and hepatitis B.



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Under the vaccination mandate, the latest an employee would be able to receive their second shot is Oct. 16, since it takes about two weeks to build antibodies.

Yiu said she's confident most health-care workers will want to get vaccinated. If someone refuses and doesn't have a valid exemption, AHS officials will meet with them to discuss it and "provide educational resources." But after that, the employee could be put on an unpaid leave of absence.

The agency doesn't currently know how many of its employees remain unvaccinated.

There are currently 11,660 active COVID cases across Alberta, and the provincewide test positivity Tuesday reached 12.3 per cent. The AHS Calgary zone currently has the lowest test positivity rate at 7.5 per cent, while in the South zone that number is nearly 23 per cent, and fully one-third of COVID tests in the North zone are coming up positive.

Parts of the North zone have the lowest vaccination rates in Alberta. Overall, just 45 per cent of those eligible there have received both shots, and in the High Level area in the far northwest, just 14 per cent of eligible residents are fully immunized.

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Yiu said AHS is also seeing “significant capacity challenges” in hospitals, and the health system can only take so much. Recently, non-urgent surgeries in Edmonton and Grande Prairie had to be postponed, and available beds were reduced in some health facilities.

“We do have the ability to open additional ICU and acute-care beds, and we are doing that as quickly as we can. The biggest challenge right now is staffing those beds appropriately,” she said.

Yiu urged people to get vaccinated as soon as possible, if they haven’t already.

“It’s really going to take everybody’s effort to make sure that we bring this tide under control.”

Opposition NDP health critic David Shepherd said Tuesday the current COVID-19 situation is not stable and not sustainable. He once again questioned where Premier Jason Kenney was and when he will address the fourth wave.

Kenney hasn’t faced questions from the media since Aug. 9, Health Minister Tyler Shandro has not had an availability since July 28, and chief medical officer of health Dr. Deena Hinshaw gave her last in-person update on Aug. 13.

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When Finance Minister Travis Toews was asked how he would respond to those who believe the government has abdicated responsibility during the fourth wave, he denied government leaders have been absent, pointing to daily Twitter updates from Hinshaw.

“Our goal is to not overwhelm our health-care system in this province. The good news is that we have a great majority of eligible Albertans who’ve stepped up for vaccinations,” said Toews at an unrelated announcement.

Council committee to discuss COVID-19 Friday

Calgary city council will convene its emergency management committee Friday as concerns grow about COVID’s fourth wave.

Coun. Gian-Carlo Carra, who chairs the committee, confirmed Tuesday he called the meeting for a conversation on “what options should be considered for the safety of Calgarians.”

The meeting, set for Friday at 1 p.m., comes after several councillors have called in recent weeks for a special meeting of council to discuss what the city can do about rising COVID numbers, including possibly restoring mandatory mask rules in indoor public spaces. But a decision on whether to bring the bylaw back can't be made at the committee — a vote at a full council meeting would have to take place.

Council's next meeting isn't until Sept. 13, but a special meeting can be called at any time.

Calgary Emergency Management Agency Chief Sue Henry will be at Friday's committee, as well as other senior city officials.

Carra said a variety of issues will be up for discussion, including whether the city should call another state of local emergency.

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— Gian-Carlo Carra (@gccarra) August 31, 2021

“We’re going to be discussing where the numbers are, we’re going to be discussing what we can do about it as a city ... how to handle civic employees who maybe don’t want to get vaccinated. All those things.”

Masks are currently required in city-owned facilities and on public transit across the province. On Monday, Edmonton city council opted to [bring back more stringent rules requiring face coverings](#) in any publicly accessible indoor spaces, including retail stores and entertainment venues.

Mayor Naheed Nenshi repeated comments Tuesday that without the province implementing a robust testing and tracing system, a municipal mask mandate isn’t as effective as it could be.

But he expressed concern about where the numbers are headed.

“We do need to move quickly. The projections with the doubling happening really fast are, we’re at about 1,000 cases a day now. It would be quite likely that two weeks from now it would be doubled — 2,000 cases or more a day. So the time to move is now.”

Coun. Jeff Davison issued a statement that his “expectation” that the province would address rising COVID numbers hasn’t been met, and he’s interested in discussing the city response Friday.

“Provincial action would be much more effective at addressing this situation, but in the absence of a response, it’s up to the City to act now,” he said.

— *With files from Stephanie Babych and Anna Junker*

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