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Employers could boost COVID-19 vaccination through education, incentives

Employers could help boost COVID-19 vaccination through educating workers, removing barriers to getting shots and offering incentives, a state health official said Wednesday.

Dr. Jonathan Meiman, chief medical officer and state epidemiologist for environmental and occupational health at the Department of Health Services, said that employers have found significant levels of vaccine hesitancy among their workers.

About 64 percent of 859 employers surveyed by DHS and Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation say more than 80 percent of their workforce is willing to get vaccinated. Around 22 percent expect less than 60 percent of their workforce is willing to get inoculated.

Largely, that's due to concerns about vaccine safety, Meiman said. Meiman called employers "trusted messengers" that could assuage those concerns.

Businesses could help encourage vaccination by putting in place short-term paid leave to allow employees to get vaccinated during the work day, he said.

They could also let people to take a day off if needed to deal with side effects and run vaccination drives once there's enough supply, Meiman added.

And he said offering incentives could boost the number of people getting shots.

"It really does protect your workforce, it really does help prevent disruptions in operations and it definitely protects workers quite well," Meiman said of vaccination at a Wednesday virtual event hosted by the Business Health Care Group and The Alliance.

Lindsey Davis, partner at Quarles and Brady in the labor and employment practice group, said employers can mandate vaccination, but they need to develop an exemption process for those who have medical conditions or religious beliefs. They also need to consider accommodations to let those employees work remotely or in the physical workplace without posing a threat to others.

Davis said employer-encouraged vaccination programs are a “middle ground” and emerging as the most popular option.

“Instead of requiring vaccine, employers do what they can to encourage or incentivize the most number of employees to receive the vaccine, and you can do that through a variety of carrots and sticks,” Davis said.

Jim Sheeran, director of corporate benefits at Molson Coors Beverage Company, said they are not mandating vaccination in part because the vaccine is authorized for emergency use and not readily available. They are encouraging it though.

They are not providing special pay for people getting the vaccine on company time and don’t want to provide incentives to get the vaccine, like wellness program incentives or extra vacation days.

“We talked about gift cards or more free beer, but could not come up quite frankly with an incentive that we thought that would work across all of our operations that would be equally viewed positively,” he said.

They’re working to share information about the vaccine with information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and how to register for getting a shot.

Their on-site clinic vendors are working to acquire the vaccine, and the company is amending its COVID-19 leave and pay policy to accommodate potential side effects from the vaccine.

Dr. Margaret Hennessy, medical director of Ascension Medical Group Wisconsin and physician leader on the Ascension Wisconsin COVID-19 Vaccine Operational Planning Team, said that symptoms from getting a shot could last a day or two.

The biggest side effect is arm pain, although some have felt tired, had muscle aches or developed a fever.

“I had the chills after my second dose,” Hennessy said. “It lasted for a day, and then that was it. But I was very excited because that was my immune system telling me it’s doing a good job.”

She suggested scheduling shots for when workers have time off in anticipation of having some side effects. And she said employers could break workers into units, like having half a floor get the vaccine one week and the rest the next week.

Stephanie Schauer, immunization program manager at the DHS Division of Public Health, said side effects are normal. More people are reporting side effects after the second dose or if they had the disease, she said.

Schauer said the vaccines were tested in large clinical trials to ensure safety and efficacy, with thousands of people of different ages, ethnicities and medical conditions participating.