COVID-19 VACCINATION HESITANCY WITHIN THE CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE WORKFORCE

The Risk to the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce

COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy within the critical infrastructure workforce represents a risk to our National Critical Functions and critical infrastructure companies and operations. Employers of workers within the critical infrastructure sectors are essential to reducing vaccine hesitancy within their workforce by becoming messengers of accurate, reliable, and timely information. This CISA Insight provides an overview of COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy and steps that critical infrastructure owners and operators can take to reduce the risk and encourage vaccine acceptance across their critical sectors' workforce.

Background

The World Health Organization defines vaccine hesitancy as a "delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccines despite availability of vaccination services." Recent reports show a high percentage of healthcare workers, frontline essential workers, and other critical infrastructure workforces are hesitant or outright refuse to receive a vaccine for the virus that causes COVID-19.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended states prioritize these critical infrastructure workforce populations in Phase 1a, 1b, and 1c of the vaccination effort. Phase 1a and 1b populations are priorities because they are public facing, support the functionality of the critical infrastructure, and the U.S. National Critical Functions, and the overall fight against COVID-19. COVID-19 outbreaks among critical infrastructure workforces can cause serious disruptions to the daily functions of these industry sectors.

Risks of Low Vaccination Rates

According to the CDC, a low percentage of overall population vaccination will limit the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccination program. Experts estimate that at least 70 percent of the population will need to be immune to the virus, to stop community spread and develop "herd immunity." In addition, hesitancy by frontline critical infrastructure workers is compounded by the fact that not only is there a high risk of exposure to COVID-19, but they are also essential to ensuring the functionality of communities and safeguarding public health.

Risk Mitigation

To reduce the risks of low vaccination rates, it is important employers become messengers of accurate and reliable information within their workplaces and across their industries. According to the CDC, employing some or all these measures may help to increase vaccine acceptance:

- Have workplace leadership take the COVID-19 vaccine, capture their experience using video or photo, and share the experience with their staff.
- Train interested staff to become COVID-19 vaccination ambassadors who will speak confidently and honestly, relaying personal stories about the vaccine to fellow coworkers and answer any of their concerns
- Employ all available communication tools when promoting the COVID-19 vaccine to staff including social media, internal communication channels, and posters or signs around the workplace.
- Set a virtual townhall where leadership, respected local medical experts, and staff share about their COVID19 vaccine experience, other vaccine facts,

and answer audience questions. Use experts to communicate to your staff and constituents when talking about the COVID-19 vaccine. Ensure that these experts present factual information about the vaccine, including risks.

- Some employers give employees paid time off to get the vaccine and offer paid sick leave for employees who have significant reactions to the vaccine.
- While waiting to become vaccine-eligible, continue using all non-medical intervention methods to protect against the COVID-19 virus and all variants by social distancing, frequent handwashing, and the use of masks. Encourage these practices within your staff and implement policies where needed.

While COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy within the critical infrastructure workforce represents a risk to our National Critical Functions and critical infrastructure companies and operations, CISA recognizes that this critical infrastructure workforce can also serve as a key stakeholder in encouraging the rest of the population to get vaccinated and help the return to everyday life. If vaccine acceptance is low across these populations, others within a community may also be reluctant to accept the vaccine when it becomes available to them. Employers of frontline essential workers have an opportunity to encourage and lead their critical infrastructure workforce in COVID-19 vaccine acceptance. Building and sustaining public trust and confidence in immunization systems is essential and the critical infrastructure workforce can play a vital role.

For additional resources see the CDC's Essential Workers COVID-19 Vaccine Toolkit. This toolkit provides multiple communications templates and promotional products to help employers effectively communicate clear and credible information to their critical infrastructure workforce about the vaccine.

CISA's Role as the Nation's Risk Advisor

As the nation's risk advisor, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) leads the nation's efforts to ensure the cybersecurity, physical security, and resilience of our critical infrastructure. CISA works with partners across government and industry to defend against today's

threats and collaborates to build more secure and resilient infrastructure for the future.

For more information or to seek additional help, please visit the CISA COVID-19 Resource Page or contact us at Central@CISA.DHS.GOV.

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