

COVID-19 Business Guidance for the Road Ahead - VT ACCD

News Release Date
12-17-2021

COVID-19 Guidance for the Road Ahead A Message from Secretary Kurrle of the VT Agency of Commerce and Community Development

MEMORANDUM

TO: Vermont Business Community

FROM: Lindsay Kurrle, Secretary, Agency of Commerce and Community Development

RE: COVID Updates & Guidance

DATE: December 16, 2021

Nearly two years ago, as COVID-19 made its way into our State, we asked you, the business community, to suspend all non-essential operations. You stepped up in a big way to adopt new operational protocols, as the State worked to learn more about and respond to this new virus. No one knew how long this pandemic would go on for, or if federal relief dollars would be made available to help businesses stay afloat and paychecks delivered to employees and their families. Even with all that uncertainty before us, you stepped up.

As a former business owner, I understand what an extraordinary ask that was and how hard the last 20 months have been on everyone – socially, emotionally, and financially. But you did it. You rose above fear and frustration and acted without knowing when you would open your doors again.

Your sacrifices helped suppress COVID-19 and saved the lives of vulnerable neighbors while we worked to safely reopen the economy and get an overwhelming majority of Vermonters vaccinated. Thank you for all you have done for our state.

With the arrival of another holiday season, we are all still working hard to continue to move forward and toward the collective goal of finally put this pandemic behind us. And we get closer every day.

Even with the tremendous progress we have made, our hospital system is strained from COVID-19 patients, plus higher demand due to care that was deferred in earlier phases of the pandemic, and persistent mental health and substance abuse crises that stretch back to well before the pandemic. This is why I am reaching out to you today.

This is a time of year spent gathering with loved ones, friends, and co-workers to celebrate. To relieve the extraordinary pressure on our hospitals and healthcare workers, now more than ever we need to be thoughtful and caring in our daily interactions with others. While there are unknowns, here are some things we are certain about:

The unvaccinated are driving much of the problem with high case counts and hospitalizations. Just 5% of Vermont adults have not yet received at least one dose of vaccine, but they make up more than 70% of hospitalizations and close to 80% of ICU admissions.

Your employees are likely to gather with family and friends over the next two weeks increasing chances for continued spread of COVID-19, including cases among the workforce and children who only just recently became eligible for vaccination. Should we see an influx of positive test results, it could impact your ability to operate.

Cases among vaccinated people may start to increase, as vaccine efficacy begins to decline around the six-month mark. This makes boosters a very important tool to keep people protected and reduce the disruption positive cases create.

Vaccine and testing appointments are readily available statewide through a variety of sources and outlets and the supply of rapid antigen tests available to consumers is steadily increasing nationwide.

Given that the next few weeks are likely to be challenging, we have another ask of the business community. In addition to your current COVID-19 mitigation measures, we encourage you to take the following additional steps over the next several months to help keep Vermont moving forward:

Encourage your employees to get vaccinated and boosted. Vaccines are the best tool for preventing COVID-19 hospitalizations. Encouraging the vaccinated to get their booster shot six months after their initial vaccination is also crucial. Encourage them to do this as soon as possible. Finding a vaccine clinic is easy and there are thousands of available timeslots across the state every day. A few state-run clinics take walk-ins. You can find the full list and interactive map here: <https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19/vaccine/getting-covid-19-vaccine>

Review all workplace safety protocols. Please review all protocols for mitigating all workplace injuries and the spread of all infection, including COVID-19, with the goal of reducing hospital visits of all types. As a community, we need to make an extra effort to reduce demand on the healthcare system. There are tools available to you through the Department of Labor and VOSHA to help you provide a safe and healthy workplace.

Enhance COVID-19 mitigation with “Vaccine or Test & Mask” Requirements. We recommend implementing a policy of asking employees to provide proof of full vaccination (and booster shots when eligible). The advantage to your business is that fully vaccinated employees do not need to quarantine if they are identified as a close contact of someone who is infected. For

employees who choose not to be vaccinated, we recommend that you require proof of a negative COVID-19 test once per week (twice weekly if rapid test is used, taken 24 hours apart) and require them to always wear a mask indoors, except when eating and drinking. As an employer, the State of Vermont has had great success increasing vaccination and booster rates, as well as mitigating cases and the disruptions from close contact quarantines by implementing a similar policy.

Certain public facing businesses should consider proof of vaccination or negative test policies for customers. Keeping in mind that only about 5% of the eligible adult population remains unvaccinated, (many of them in the 20- to 40-year-old age bands), bars, restaurants, social clubs and special event/performance venues should consider asking customers and event attendees over the age 5 to provide proof of full vaccination, or a negative (rapid antigen or PCR) test within 24-hours. This policy is already in place at some businesses in Vermont and can substantially increase vaccination rates and reduce community spread of COVID-19. It also provides customers and employees with greater peace of mind.

We want to continue to be your partner in these efforts. We are working closely with President Biden's administration and the National Institute of Health to enhance access to rapid testing resources. The Agency of Education's (AOE) "Test to Stay" program is keeping more kids in school even when identified as a close contact and the Governor has directed AOE to expand this program to children who are exposed outside of school so that fewer kids miss days and there is less disruption for households. And we are collaborating with the Agency of Human Services to develop more pop-up vaccine booster clinics.

In addition, Governor Scott has directed the Agency of Commerce and Community Development to host a webinar to further discuss the above recommendations and give businesses an opportunity to ask officials from the Agency of Human Services, Department of Health, Department of Labor, and Agency of the Administration about implementing ways to reduce COVID-19 disruption, slow the spread, and how you can extend your reach beyond employees to help customers, clients and your communities as we move forward.

The webinar will be held on Monday, December 20th from 3pm to 4pm. For details and a link to the webinar visit the ACCD COVID-19 Recovery Resource Center.

I am sure you, like me, look forward to when COVID-19 is a distant memory. The reality is, as we advance on the path from pandemic to endemic management of this virus, we know that the holiday season and winter weeks ahead are likely to be challenging. Please join me in redoubling efforts to slow the spread, which will allow all of us to keep our doors wide open and the hospital system from being overwhelmed.

Thank you again for all you do for Vermont and Vermonters. I look forward to seeing you in an upcoming webinar, meeting or event.

Lindsay Kurrle, Secretary

Agency of Commerce and Community Development