COVID-19 Vaccination Hesitancy within the Critical Infrastructure Workforce

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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." Reports from the beginning of 2021 showed a high percentage of healthcare workers, frontline essential workers, and other critical infrastructure workforces were hesitant or outright refused to receive a vaccine for the virus that causes COVID-19. COVID-19 outbreaks among critical infrastructure workforces can cause serious disruptions to the daily functions of these industry sectors. This CISA Insight is being updated with information from the July 2021 iteration of the *KFF COVID-19 Monitor* which compares participants' changes in vaccine attitudes from January to June 2021 and the reasons for these changes and other COVID-19 vaccination news from the summer of 2021.

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. At the beginning of 2021, experts estimated that at least 70 percent of the population would need to be immune to the virus, to stop community spread and develop "herd immunity", but as of August that percentage is now estimated to be higher, around 80 percent or more, due to several variants in circulation.

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 safe-guarding 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 emphasizing the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine.
- 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 COVID-19 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.
- Some employers give employees paid time off for them or their family members to get the vaccine and offer paid sick leave for employees who have significant reactions to the vaccine.
- Due to COVID-19 variants circulating within the population, CDC encourages all individuals to continue using non-medical intervention methods in substantial and high transmission areas such as mask wearing indoors to protect against the COVID-19 virus. Encourage these practices within your staff and implement policies where needed.

In addition to the measures above, it is important to keep in mind the specifics of the messaging used to communicate about the COVID-19 vaccine to staff members. The recent iteration of the *KFF COVID-19 Monitor*, that compares participants' vaccine attitudes from January to June 2021, found that people changed their attitude and received their first vaccine shot did so because they saw family and friends safely receive the vaccine and heard pro-vaccine messages from people they trust. By hearing about the safety of the vaccine rather than the dangers of getting COVID-19, these personalized community-based efforts proved to be most effective in convincing the hesitant KFF poll participants to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

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 IN STRENGTHENING NATIONAL RESILIENCE

Through CISA's efforts to understand and advise on cyber and physical risks to the nation's critical infrastructure, we help partners strengthen their own capabilities. We connect our stakeholders in industry and government to each other and to resources, analyses, and tools to help them build their own cyber, communications, and physical security and resilience, in turn strengthening national resilience.

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