

NJ Chamber makes COVID vaccinations mandatory

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The New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, worried that the delta variant of the COVID-19 virus will derail the state's economy, will require its employees to get the vaccine, its top executive said Tuesday.

Thomas Bracken said the chamber also would require members attending in-person events to show proof of a vaccine or a recent negative COVID test.

"We realize that increasing vaccinations is the key to keeping the delta variant under control, which has direct effect on the safety of every citizen in New Jersey and the health of our economy," said Bracken, the chamber's president and chief executive officer, said.

The chamber, one of the state's biggest business advocates, joined a relatively small but growing number of private-sector employers to require workers to get the COVID vaccine.

The decision comes amid an increasing number of

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hospitalizations in New Jersey that health experts say is largely made up of unvaccinated residents.

Analysts say the delta variant is forcing employers to reconsider how far they want to go to require their workers get the shot.

"They really want to create a safe environment and get the economy moving again," said Stephen Massey, managing director of Health Action Alliance, a coalition of business and health groups trying to increase vaccinations. "As they weigh and wrestle with (how best to get there), I suspect that more and more companies are going to opt for requirements."

The chamber has about 25 employees and more than 1,000 member companies. Its mandate will be put to the test in Livingston at its next event on Sept. 14, a celebration of diversity that will be co-hosted by the African-American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey.

Bracken said he hopes the move will convince other private employers to follow suit.

New Jersey has seen an uptick in COVID cases during the past month because of the delta variant, a strain considered more contagious than the initial virus. But the state's rate of vaccinations, viewed by health experts as the best protection against the disease, has stalled.

The Garden State has vaccinated about 60% of the population, a figure that includes children under the age of 12, who aren't eligible. In Monmouth County, 54.4% of the population is vaccinated. In Ocean County, 42.4% is vaccinated, according to a USA TODAY New Jersey database.

President Joe Biden and Gov. Phil Murphy this week said they expected more private employers to require employees to get the shot after the U.S. Food and Drug Administration this week gave full approval to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

While Murphy has mandated New Jersey hospital, nursing home and school employees get shots, the private sector has tip-toed around the issue.

New Brunswick-based Johnson & Johnson, which developed one of the COVID vaccines, said almost all of its U.S. employees need to be vaccinated by Oct. 4.

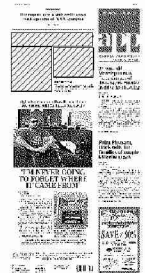
Other employers have taken patchwork approach.

- Walmart, McDonald's, Uber and Lyft are among the companies that have mandated vaccinations for office workers, but not workers on the front lines.

- Amazon in an advertisement seeking employees for its Monroe distribution center said it will offer \$100 bonuses to employees who are vaccinated.

- Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson has hosted vaccination clinics at its theme park both for employees and customers, a spokeswoman said, but it hasn't made the shot a requirement for workers.

Some business owners say they are



inching closer to mandatory vaccinations.

McLoone's Restaurants, which operates 10 restaurants in New Jersey with 900 employees, has yet to require vaccines in part because it doesn't want to lose workers, owner Tim McLoone said.

Instead, it is hosting vaccine clinics on site, which McLoone said has helped increase vaccination rates among employees to about 80%.

"We're making it as easy as possible to get vaccinated voluntarily," he said. "If it doesn't work out I feel like we'll most likely make it mandatory, and soon."

The federal government gives employers the right to mandate workers get the COVID vaccine as long as they make reasonable accommodations for workers who object based on health conditions or religious beliefs, attorneys said.

But some attorneys are advising employers to avoid a mandate, which would remove the threat of a lawsuit altogether.

It leaves employers to try to convince workers to get the shot voluntarily.

"What we're really talking about is changing people's opinions, and we know in this environment that's very hard to do," said Ari Burd, co-chair of the employment practice at Giordano, Halleran & Ciesla, a law firm based in Middletown.

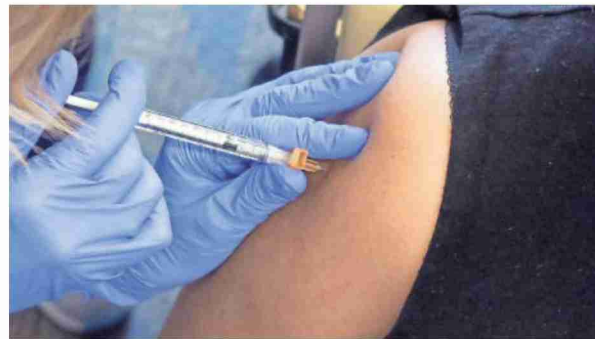
Bracken at the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce said he made the decision to mandate vaccines after talking to employees, and he didn't get any push-

back.

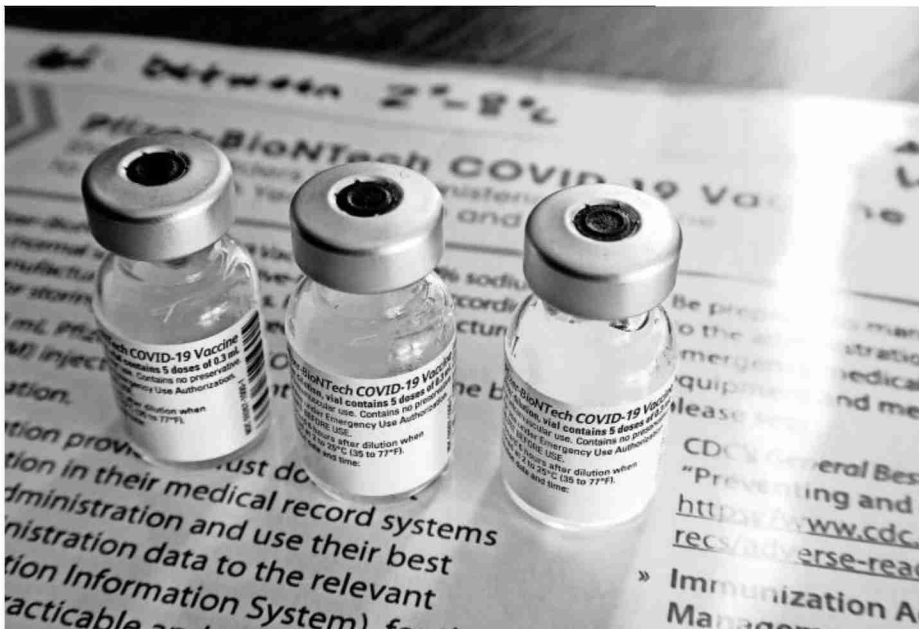
"It goes without saying that the key in New Jersey and any state in the country is increasing vaccinations, and anything anyone can do to promote that and increase the rate of vaccinations, that should be pursued," he said.

Michael L. Diamond is a business reporter who has been writing about the New Jersey economy and health care industry for more than 20 years. He can be reached at mdiamond@gannettnj.com.

New Jersey has seen an uptick in COVID cases during the past month due to the delta variant, a strain considered more contagious than the initial virus.



A nurse is injected with the COVID-19 vaccine at CentraState Medical Center. The New Jersey Chamber of Commerce is requiring its employees to get vaccinated. THOMAS P. COSTELLO/ASBURY PARK PRESS



Empty Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine vials are shown at CentraState Medical Center in Freehold Township. THOMAS P. COSTELLO/ASBURY PARK PRESS