

Oregon Vaccine Mandate Could Lead to Mass Exodus of Firefighters and Paramedics Across the State

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On August 19, Oregon Governor Kate Brown announced sweeping new mandates in response to the delta variant of COVID-19. The new order, administered by the Oregon Health Authority (OHA), mandates masks in [all indoor and outdoor settings, regardless of vaccination status](#). The mask mandate exempts the homeless, children under five years old, people engaged in competitive sports, and those delivering an outdoor speech or performance. The Democrat governor also [mandated COVID-19 vaccines](#) for all health care workers, along with teachers and staff in K-12 across the state. The mask mandate took effect on August 19. The vaccine mandate must be completed by October 18, or affected workers would face the prospect of termination.

Just two weeks prior, Brown had announced that school districts would retain local control over health care mandates, and health care workers would [maintain their personal choice](#) over the vaccine.

The mandate applies to paramedics and firefighters across Oregon and has caused a firestorm of controversy among rural fire departments. In Aurora, the fire chief said [he would rather lose his job](#) than require his employees to receive the vaccine:

The chief of the Aurora Fire District says he would sooner be fired than enforce the new [statewide mandate requiring health care workers](#) — including firefighters [sic] who also serve as front-line EMTs — to get vaccinated for Covid-19 by Oct. 18.

Chief Joshua Williams, who moved to the Aurora Fire District in May 2018 after a 12-year career in Depoe Bay, made his position clear in a two-page letter posted to [the Aurora Fire District’s social media Friday](#).

“This mandate is un-American, as our state government has been weaponized to the point where people are afraid to take a stand,” Williams said. “I will no longer sit silently on the sideline and watch this happen. I love my job, I love the fire service, and more importantly, I love the people that I work with and serve.”

“I will not abide by the governor’s mandate. Additionally, I will not enforce this mandate on any member of this fire district. In the old America, we used to have choices. Frankly, I do not recognize the country that I live in right now.”

Williams also noted that 25% or more of the firefighters in his district would also quit to avoid a vaccine mandate. He said this would devastate the ability of the Aurora Fire Department to respond to emergencies.

He’s not alone.

In Baker City, the firefighters’ union rep [testified to the city council](#) that 100% of the department would resign over the mandate. Baker City Mayor Kerry McQuisten, a Republican gubernatorial hopeful in 2022, told PJ Media: “We started yet another movement in Baker City this week to fight back legally. We had such a crowd come here that they were backed up to the back wall of council chambers and sitting on the floor in front of the rails. Out into the hall. And in front of the building.”

McQuisten described a full-on crisis in rural Oregon caused by the mandate. “This mandatory vaccination on healthcare workers has been extended to our fire department,” she said. “Plus [Brown] has added a \$500 a day fine for not just the employer but the manager who is in charge of the building. So fire chiefs everywhere.”

“There’s almost no way to stay in their positions unless all of their staff is forcibly vaccinated,” McQuisten added. “If it’s a rural volunteer fire department, they have zero motivation to stay and take that abuse. Kate Brown is actually making a move that cuts off ambulance services because they are handled by the fire department, not just fires.”

“We had nursing staff testify in droves,” she said. “They will walk. We will not have enough staff locally to handle anything at the hospital. I have heard from two Oregon Department of Forestry offices that they will be gutted. No response crews left for wildfires. And I could go on and on about the rest of the state departments. But it’s the small cities that are going to be destroyed. Comply with the mandate and lose all of our staff. Spend hundreds of thousands of dollars re-recruiting and training. Let people die. Or don’t comply and spend at least tens of thousands of dollars fighting it in court, and probably losing our city manager and fire chief anyway because they can’t be held personally responsible for fines. She’s killing us.”

According to McQuisten, Oregon Health Authority (OHA) has written new policies they claim override any other policy in place in local or regional jurisdictions: There are people who have attempted medical or religious exemptions, and been denied. (They have been re-termed “exceptions.”) “OHA has come out with their own form,” McQuisten said, “which they say overrides the policy of the forms existing with all other state agencies. So we literally have one state agency telling all the other state agencies and cities how they are going to operate.”

That’s on top of the large number of health care workers refusing the vaccine, [leaving staffing levels at Oregon hospitals at crisis levels](#).

Brown pushed back against the push-back, and doubled down on her mandates:

During this public health crisis, I have three goals: save lives, keep children in classrooms, and keep businesses open. We have two simple and effective tools to do that: masks and vaccines. We all have a personal responsibility to do our part. <https://t.co/KI7pXOYmHc>

— Governor Kate Brown (@OregonGovBrown) [August 27, 2021](#)

In an [interview](#), she said COVID deaths are “unacceptable and preventable.”

The governor said she wouldn’t retract her mandate that health care workers, school employees and state workers get vaccinated.

“We don’t have a lot of options,” she said in interview with the Malheur Enterprise. “We’re in the midst of a public health crisis.”

She said she has seen no plan from any rural county to contain the rapidly-spreading Delta variant despite insistence from rural legislators, county commissioners and other local officials that pandemic decisions should be left to local communities.

Brown also said she intended to address sheriffs from rural counties who in recent days have been insisting on local control – and declaring they won’t enforce state-ordered mask mandates.

Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin said in a statement Wednesday he won’t enforce a mask mandate he considered “reckless.”

She acknowledged that some would quit over the mandate, but said people were already quitting anyway:

Brown granted the interview after two eastern Oregon legislators, state Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, and state Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, pressed her in a letter on Wednesday to drop the mandate. They presented statements from local officials describing how they expect to lose employees and volunteers who don’t want to get vaccinated. In Vale, the local ambulance service said as a result, it could close. In Jordan Valley, the local school district said it would have to shut down.

The governor said she was aware of such concerns.

“There’s no question that there will be some people leaving,” she said.

But the governor noted that employees already are quitting because of the pressures of the pandemic. She said she sees exhausted health care workers and long-term care providers leaving their jobs.

The conflict sets up yet another showdown between the urban and rural parts of Oregon, debates over local control, and whether Oregonians have the right to choose what goes into their bodies. These conflicts, together, could lead to the devastation of Oregon’s rural communities as local emergency services are left unable to respond.

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