

Nearly 50 Connecticut state workers face discipline for disregarding COVID-19 vaccine-or-testing mandate

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FULL TEXT

Nearly 50 state workers have faced disciplinary action or firing after violating Gov. Ned Lamont's mandate that employees get the vaccine or undergo weekly COVID testing, including the first non-probationary workers. Lamont said Monday that an additional 20 long-term, permanent workers have been placed on unpaid leave as the state has reached a compliance rate of 99%.

"Talking to my fellow governors, people are pretty impressed that we've got probably 99% compliance," Lamont told reporters. "That's incredibly important. Remember, just a month ago, we were saying maybe 70 or 75%. A lot of people could be lost [to firing or unpaid leave]. But that's not what's happening. I really give a shout out to state employees and our friends in collective bargaining who put together a deal that makes sense for people. Right now, I think we're better than 99%. I'm very thankful for that."

Overall, more than 600 state employees were listed earlier this month as noncompliant in 50 different agencies, departments, and commissions –ranging from small agencies like the chief medical examiner's office to the state prisons with more than 5,000 employees. Some small agencies like the offices of the attorney general and the state treasurer have 100% compliance.

The 28 probationary employees who were fired were still in their first six months on the job. They have fewer labor protections than longer-term employees who are now on unpaid leave for 45 days.

Josh Geballe, the state's chief operating officer, said that the numbers could potentially change.

"Someone could fall out of compliance. They could stop testing," Geballe said of the weekly requirement. "There could be more that are added in the future, but we hope not."

Initially, some workers had difficulty in submitting their information and were incorrectly listed as unvaccinated when, in fact, they were vaccinated.

While Lamont said some of the problems were due to "user error" by employees, he pledged that he would not place any employees on unpaid leave if they had made a sincere effort to comply and then ran into paperwork problems.

During negotiations with the State Employees Bargaining Agent Coalition, the state agreed that state health insurance plans would fully pay for all COVID-19 tests as long as the emergency declaration is in effect –rather than just the first four tests. Other sites provide free testing for anyone seeking a test.

State employees can use sick time, personal leave and vacation in order to leave work to get tested.

Andrew Matthews, the executive director of the state troopers union, said it was an important move by Lamont and the unions to allow an "opt out" in which workers would not be forced to be vaccinated but instead could agree to weekly testing.

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