

Solidarity for all on anti-COVID-19 measures



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As 2021 winds down, we are nearing a grim milestone—two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, with no conclusive end in sight. We should recognize the significant progress we've made as a country—the development, testing and deployment of safe and effective vaccines; a well-timed and successful set of economic stimulus programs to prevent a deep recession; and the incredible role that letter carriers continue to play in serving our country and our democracy when we need it most. But our exhaustion with this extended public health crisis is undeniable. The surge of the Delta variant of the virus in recent weeks—with infections, hospitalizations and deaths

at two to four times their respective levels of a year ago dashed our hopes for a speedy return to normalcy. Our nerves have frayed, and our patience is being tested, especially in the workplace.

Disagreements about face mask policies, testing rules and vaccine requirements have sown division in companies and at work sites across the country. As a union, we cannot and must not allow this to happen in the Postal Service and within the NALC. Now is the time for solidarity, not division.

In August, the Postal Service quickly reinstated the face mask policy that had been in effect from early in the pandemic through July of this year, which requires face masks regardless of vaccine status for postal employees where state, local or tribal mandates are in place, or where proper social distancing cannot be achieved and maintained in the workplace. It is not a perfect solution, but it is informed by the best science available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and it became necessary when the much more transmissible and dangerous Delta variant of the virus became dominant and as progress on the vaccination front stalled. Just 54 percent of eligible Americans (those age 12 or older) were fully vaccinated as of early September, and infections among the unvaccinated once again soared—filling hospitals and raising the death toll to more than 1,600 people a day. Simply put, neither the federal government nor many state and local governments have been able to convince a large minority of Americans to voluntarily get vaccinated.

As I write this article in mid-September, this latest surge in the pandemic has led the Biden administration to enact more aggressive anti-COVID-19 policies that may apply to letter carriers. One such policy is an executive order that will require COVID-19 vaccination for all federal employees, subject to such exceptions

as required by law. The Safer Federal Workforce Task Force, established by executive order earlier this year, is expected to issue guidance soon on implementation for all agencies covered by the order. It is not likely that the USPS will be covered by this order. Another such policy is a workplace rule currently being developed by the Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) that will require all employers with 100 or more employees to ensure that their workforce is fully vaccinated, or require any workers who remain unvaccinated to produce a negative test result on at least a weekly basis before coming to work. OSHA will issue an Emergency Temporary Standard (ETS) to implement this requirement. This ETS has not yet been issued, but it is likely it will apply to USPS.

We will await issuance of the task force guidance and the OSHA rule regarding any applicability to USPS, as well as any legal or collective-bargaining components associated with either. These actions followed the lead of dozens of major corporations (including Disney, United Airlines, Fox News, etc.) to institute vaccination requirements for their employees after the Food and Drug Administration fully approved one of the COVID-19 vaccines. (Full approval for all the various vaccines that were given emergency use authorization is expected soon.) Such employer mandates have been upheld by federal courts.

President Biden's aggressive actions to fight the virus are controversial to some. As recently as December, he opposed vaccine mandates. But the emergence of the more dangerous and transmissible Delta variant and the slowing progress on vaccinations changed his mind. This may add to the cultural and political divisions that have arisen during the pandemic over public health measures. Much of this division is regrettable, driven by social media misinformation and often raw political opportunism, but there are also legitimate arguments about which level of government in our federal system should take the lead in public health emergencies.

Our membership is not immune to the broader political and cultural divisions revealed by the pandemic. I am sure that NALC members who are vaccinated are frustrated with those who are not. I am equally sure that members who choose not to get a vaccine feel resentment about being pressured to get an injection they don't want. And few of us like to wear face masks, whether we accept the need for a face mask mandate or not. We must respect each other's right to come to our own conclusions.

Debate is healthy, but angry debate is not. Let's try to really listen to each other and aim to reduce the tensions caused by the pandemic, not raise them. Empathy and patience are essential to maintaining a spirit of solidarity within our union. This will facilitate our overriding goal—to protect the health and safety of all carriers.

The pandemic will eventually end. Let's make sure that the NALC is stronger and more united when it does.