

By Robert C. Garrett



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Hackensack Meridian Health CEO: Lessons on a successful COVID-19 mandate

As major companies throughout the nation prepare to meet the Biden administration's COVID-19 vaccination deadline of Jan. 4, I would like to share key lessons on how we vaccinated 99.8 percent of our workforce at Hackensack Meridian Health.

Our health network, New Jersey's largest with 17 hospitals and 36,000 team members, announced a vaccine mandate in July because only 71 percent of our workforce had received their shots. Our mandate went into effect Oct. 1, and we prevailed through frequent and clear communication, targeted sessions for the vaccine hesitant and a firm message that we would not waver from our deadline.

First, give your teams ample information and opportunity to make the right choice. Communication cannot be one way. We listened to our team members and addressed their concerns by creating FAQs distributed in emails and posted on our website, through webinars and daily rounding. We explained our rationale repeatedly and let the organization know we did not make the decision lightly.

We made it clear that the vaccine is safe and highly effective, with more than 7 billion doses distributed worldwide as I write this. We told our team members that our hospitals are among 6,000 across the nation mandating vaccination. We also informed our team members of the pending federal mandate that would require organizations or companies like ours to require shots. Unlike the federal mandate, which allows companies to opt for weekly testing in lieu of a mandate, we did not include this option. We do not believe testing is as effective as mandating the vaccine, especially in a healthcare or clinical setting.

Leadership made it clear that we have a responsibility to protect our patients, our communities and each other. We also reminded team members that we mandate flu vaccines annually, not only for clinical teams but for administrative teams to protect our patients and our colleagues.

Second, respect people's right to choose their own path. We made it clear that we have great respect for the different personal beliefs and viewpoints of each member of our workforce, and we understand that this is a personal decision. We reminded our teams that we believe so strongly in the effectiveness of the vaccine in preventing serious illness or death that we determined that a mandate is essential to employment at our network.

We did grant exemptions for a small number of our team members for medical, religious or strongly held beliefs. A panel of bioethics experts reviewed each case and made the decision based on the merit of the team member's request.

Third, address specific concerns with targeted information. For example, we knew that many team members in their child-bearing years had questions about the potential impact of the vaccine on pregnancy or fertility. We conducted a webinar led by our chief physician executive, our chief clinical officer who is a board-certified physician in obstetrics and gynecology, and our leader of the vaccination efforts.

Our panel explained that there is no evidence that the COVID-19 vaccine or any vaccine causes infertility in women or men. In fact, the medical community and the leaders in women's health, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, encourage all women to get vaccinated.

Given the higher rates of vaccine hesitancy in minority populations, we also had physician leaders and our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion team conduct a webinar to reassure team members of the safety and efficacy of the vaccine. We shared with our teams that our network recruited a significant number of people from communities of color in the clinical trials for the Moderna vaccine and that we conducted extensive outreach in these communities to offer the vaccine as well.

Fourth, let team members know the vaccine mandate is firm and the organization will not waiver from the deadline.

As the Oct. 1 deadline approached, our human resources experts called 800 team members to remind them that they had not been vaccinated and would be separated from the organization if they did not comply.

We understood that to succeed, we needed to gain the hearts and minds of our team members. Key network leaders hosted a virtual town hall meeting a few days before the deadline which I attended. I strongly believe that team members needed to hear from me personally. I told our teams that I care about every one of them and it was my hope that we would not lose even one person. But I also said the deadline is firm. We made it very clear that we have contingency plans if people opted not to get vaccinated. If proof of vaccination was not received, the network would consider it voluntary resignation due to non-compliance with policy.

The response was overwhelming and unprecedented. Hundreds of team members called in with questions and many more got the vaccine. We are proud to have a health network that continues to make the safety of our patients and colleagues at the heart of everything we do.

Robert C. Garrett, FACHE, is CEO of Hackensack Meridian Health, New Jersey's largest health network with 17 hospitals and 36,000 team members.