

Massachusetts Department of Public Health to alter how it reports COVID-19 cases

Starting today Massachusetts officials will change how they list COVID-19 hospitalizations in state data. Officials will now discern between those people who entered the hospital because of COVID or for some other reason even though they tested positive after admittance. In other words, whether admissions are primary or incidental to COVID-19.

The state Department of Public Health stated that this distinction will be important because it will give health officials a sense of the severity of the Omicron variant and how the record high numbers of new cases correlate to illness severe enough to require hospitalization.

Hospitalizations for those infected with the virus have spiked over the last month as the Omicron variant has become dominant due to its more infectious nature. This surge is on par with the peak of the December 2020/January 2021 surge. Prior to this spike there had never been more than 10,000 new cases a day, now there are more than 20,000 new COVID cases daily, likely due in part to public gathering for the holidays.

Massachusetts Gov. Baker has been mulling over making the statistical distinction between those who test positive after being admitted and those with COVID cases severe enough that they head to the hospital for almost a year now. In October 2020 he said: "When you call the hospitals and you talk to them one at a time, or the systems, a significant number of the people who we count as COVID positive are not in the hospital because they have COVID. They're in the hospital for some other purpose and they got tested positive when they came in."

Critics say that Massachusetts is infamous for its snail-like pace when it comes to getting through bureaucratic tape and this distinction should have been made when the Governor made it.

Currently 93% of the state's medical or surgical hospital beds and 86% of intensive care unit beds are occupied.

Massachusetts Gov. Baker's administration launches tool for residents to access COVID-19 digital vaccine card

"My Vax Records" Provides New Option to Access Vaccine History and QR Code to Verify COVID-19 Vaccination.

BOSTON – The Baker-Polito Administration today announced a tool that gives residents a new way to access their COVID-19 digital vaccine card and vaccination history. The new tool, called My Vax Records, allows people who received their vaccination in Massachusetts to access their own vaccination history and generate a COVID-19 digital vaccine card, which would contain similar vaccination information to a paper CDC card. The COVID-19 digital vaccine cards produced by the system utilize the SMART Health Card platform and generate a QR code that can be used to verify vaccination. The Administration is not requiring residents to show proof of vaccination to enter any venue, but this tool will help residents who would like to access and produce a digital copy of their record.

Access the new tool at MyVaxRecords.Mass.Gov.

How It Works: The new tool is easy to use: a person enters their name, date of birth, and mobile phone number or email associated with their vaccine record. After creating a 4-digit PIN, the user receives a link to their vaccine record that will open upon re-entry of the PIN.

The electronic record shows the same information as a paper CDC vaccine card: name, date of birth, date of vaccinations, and vaccine manufacturer. It also includes a QR code that makes these same details readable by a QR scanner, including smartphone apps. Once the SMART Health Card is received, users are able to save the QR code to their phone, such as the Apple Wallet, screenshot the information and save it to their phone's photos, or print out a copy for a paper record. The system follows national standards for security and privacy.

This system provides an optional way that residents can access their vaccination information and a COVID-19 digital vaccine card. This will provide residents with another tool to provide proof of COVID-19 vaccination, should it be requested by businesses, local governments, or other entities.

The system leverages the Massachusetts Immunization Information System (MIIS), the official database used by health care providers across the state to record vaccination information. The system relies on hundreds of providers inputting demographic and health information. Some users may not be able to immediately find their record, or may find an incomplete record. Residents whose record cannot be found or is incomplete can either contact their health care provider or contact the MIIS team to update their records. Learn more about the tool and view frequently-asked-questions at www.mass.gov/myvaxrecord.

Massachusetts has worked with VCI,[™] a voluntary coalition of public and private organizations which developed the open-

source SMART Health Card Framework in use by other states. The VCI coalition is dedicated to improving privacy and security of patient information, making medical records portable and reducing healthcare fraud.

My Vax Records is just one way residents can obtain their COVID vaccination record. Pharmacies that administered the COVID vaccine and many health care providers also are making SMART Health Cards available, or are providing additional options. [Learn more here.](#)

OPINION: “I am frustrated with New Bedford Schools and after-school program quarantine nonsense”

Do your children attend a New Bedford school or after-school program and been quarantined? How was it handled in your opinion? One New Bedford mom shares her disappointment.

“Public school (#LincolnElementary) and after school program (#littlepeople’scollege) need to come to an agreement that makes sense for the parents.

Either the quarantine is 5 days for both, or 10 days for both, but they can’t continue with 5 days in one and 10 days on the other as a rule for quarantine. They are literally forcing parents to lie at this point.

Post this anonymous please. I would like to know what people think about this. As a single mother who can't afford to be off work I am frustrated with this nonsense."

New Bedford's Mayor Mitchell: "The city is down about 30 plow drivers because of COVID-19"

Did it take too long to have your street plowed? Your neighborhood? Come across streets that had not been plowed?

Well, you can thank the recent COVID-19 surge for that. According to Mayor Jon Mitchell, the city is down about 30 plow drivers because of COVID-19. When New Bedford is hit by a storm like yesterday was the city has approximately 120 plows taking care of the roads.

Of those 30 missing drivers, two were absent because they had not complied with the city's vaccine mandate put in place in November.

New Bedford is currently experiencing one of the highest 2-week COVID case numbers in Massachusetts and has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the state.

Massachusetts Education Commissioner To Make Mask Mandate Decision Next Week

By Michael P. Norton

State House News Service

As COVID-19 case counts continue to rise across Massachusetts, including its schools, a decision about whether to extend the mask mandate in public schools will be announced next week, Education Commissioner Jeff Riley told local school officials.

A Department of Elementary and Secondary Education spokeswoman confirmed Thursday morning that Riley informed school superintendents of his plans during a phone call with them on Wednesday.

In October, Riley notified school districts he was extending the mask requirement in K-12 public schools through Jan. 15, citing consultations with medical experts and state health officials. Education Secretary James Peyser said the extension represented “another big step forward in our efforts to keep schools safe for our kids” and would allow more time for the elementary school students to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

Education officials say masking, testing and vaccinations have made school environments safe, and Riley had planned last month to make a call on whether to lift or extend the mask mandate but decided to wait.

“With the new arrival of omicron, it seems too soon to make a decision at this time,” Riley said Dec. 17. “The medical community’s asked for some additional time so that we have better facts on the ground. They’re learning a lot very quickly about the omicron variant. We’ll wait and see, and see what the situation looks like in early January for a

decision.”

Since then, COVID-19 case counts and hospitalizations have exploded across Massachusetts. Schools have stayed open for the most part, although districts coming out of the holiday break are seeing more virus-related absences that have sidelined students, teachers and the other support staff necessary to school functions.

In October, when Riley last extended the mask mandate, state education officials reported 1,804 COVID-19 cases among students during the week of Oct. 14 through Oct. 20, and 350 among staff. In the most recent report, covering the week of Dec. 16 through Dec. 22, 8,576 student cases were reported and 1,544 among staff.

The next report on student and staff infections is due out later Thursday.

In the face of rising infections and an updated mask advisory from state public health officials, education officials have stood by their rule that allows the mask mandate to be lifted, at the discretion of local officials, at middle and high schools with 80 percent of their students and staff vaccinated.

According to the most recent data available, state education officials have approved requests to lift the mask mandate from 31 schools, with seven other requests still processing.

The Department of Public Health on Dec. 21 issued an advisory that recommends, but does not require, all residents to wear masks in indoor public spaces. Massachusetts had varying forms of a mask mandate in place for much of the first year during the pandemic. DPH replaced the mandate with an advisory in May, about a month before Baker ended the COVID-19 state of emergency, and Baker has resisted calls to reinstitute a mask mandate.

“In response to the rise in cases and hospitalizations we are seeing in the Commonwealth and as we learn more about the emerging omicron variant, the Department of Public Health advises that all residents, regardless of vaccination status, wear a mask or face covering when indoors and not in their own home,” state Health and Human Service Secretary Marylou Sudders said last month when the advisory was reintroduced. “We particularly urge this recommendation if you have a weakened immune system or if you are at increased risk for severe disease because of your age or an underlying medical condition, or if someone in your household has a weakened immune system, is at increased risk for severe disease, or unvaccinated.”

The mask advisory was issued on the same day that Gov. Charlie Baker announced he was activating hundreds of Massachusetts National Guard personnel to assist overwhelmed health care providers and requiring hospitals to postpone or cancel non-essential elective procedures in order to preserve hospital bed capacity.

The mask advisory immediately generated calls for a mask mandate, and Baker on Dec. 21 defended the advisory in part by saying that people who have been both vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19 face an “extremely low” risk from the fast-spreading omicron variant.

School districts this year are required to provide in-person learning to all students. The school mask mandate includes exceptions for students who cannot wear a mask due to medical conditions or behavioral needs.

In August, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education gave Riley the authority, at his request, to mandate masks for all public K-12 students, educators, and staff through at least Oct. 1. So far, Riley has twice extended his initial mandate.

COVID-19 Testing at South End New Bedford Fire Station Canceled Friday, Jan. 7, Due to Storm

Former Fire Station on Brock Avenue Will Add Testing Hours on Tuesdays Starting Next Week

COVID-19 testing provided by Seven Hills Behavioral Health at former Fire Station 11 in the South End has been canceled for Friday, Jan. 7, due to the expected winter storm.

With several inches of snow expected and lines of people extending well outside the station in recent days, because of increased demand around the holidays and the emergence of the omicron variant, site organizers have closed Friday's testing clinic to ensure safety for all.

Seven Hills will add testing hours, however, at the Brock Avenue location on Tuesdays starting next week. As of Jan. 11, Seven Hills will offer testing at former Fire Station 11 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Tuesdays. Vaccine services will not be available at the station on Tuesdays, due to the extended testing hours.

Project Beacon's appointment-based COVID-19 testing at New Bedford Regional Airport—part of the state's Stop the Spread program—continues to offer COVID-19 testing at 1569 Airport Road, at these times:

Sundays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Mondays, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Tuesdays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

That schedule will continue through March. Appointments for free COVID-19 tests can be made at beacontesting.com. Airport officials ask that people reach the site via the airport's side entrance on Downey Street.

Other testing sites in New Bedford and surrounding towns can be found on the state's Stop the Spread website, www.mass.gov/info-details/find-a-covid-19-test.

Upcoming testing locations in New Bedford include:

Sunday, Jan. 9:

Project Beacon at New Bedford Regional Airport (1569 Airport Road) – 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Monday, Jan. 10:

Project Beacon at New Bedford Regional Airport (1569 Airport Road) – 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Former Fire Station 11 (754 Brock Ave.) – 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Tuesday, Jan. 11:

Project Beacon at New Bedford Regional Airport (1569 Airport Road) – 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Former Fire Station 11 (754 Brock Ave.) – 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Wednesday, Jan. 12:

Project Beacon at New Bedford Regional Airport (1569 Airport Road) – 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Seven Hills at PAACA (360 Coggeshall St.) – 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Thursday, Jan. 13:

Project Beacon at New Bedford Regional Airport (1569 Airport Road) – 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Former Fire Station 11 (754 Brock Ave.) – 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Friday, Jan. 14:

Former Fire Station 11 (754 Brock Ave.) – 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Sunday, Jan. 16:

Project Beacon at New Bedford Regional Airport (1569 Airport Road) – 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

New Bedford Public Schools Athletics pauses due to COVID

New Bedford Public Schools will be pausing all athletic practices and competitions through this Friday, January 7, due to an increase in positive COVID-19 cases among several different □ athletic teams, Superintendent Thomas Anderson announced today. “In consultation with the New Bedford Department of Health, we have been advised to pause participation in our athletic programming including practices and games for one week, beginning today, and continue with test and stay over the next four days,” he said in a memo to School Committee members today.

“As the number of positive cases continue to rise in our community, we are also experiencing an increased number of positive cases on our athletic teams. We now have several teams proactively participating in the Test and Stay Program due to an increasing number of positive cases over the past weekend,” he said.

Thomas Tarpey, NBPS Director of Physical Education, Health & Athletics stated, “out of an abundance of caution, we have put a pause on all Athletics at New Bedford Public Schools for the remainder of this week. We will re-evaluate this weekend and hope to be up and running again on Monday.”

Jodi Spencer, NBPS Manager of Health Services, noted, “The safety of all our students and staff is our foremost priority and this pause in activities will help to limit spreading

infections. As the situation is highly fluid, we will be assessing positivity rates on an hourly basis, which will inform our determination regarding extending this pause in Athletics and for any other district events or activities going forward.”

Massachusetts Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley tests positive for Coronavirus

Rep. Ayanna Pressley, of Massachusetts announced Friday that she has tested positive for COVID-19. Pressley, 47, is the second member of the Massachusetts congressional delegation to test positive for COVID-19, the first being U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren.

The Congresswoman who is fully vaccinated and boosted said she is only experiencing mild symptoms.

“Vaccines save lives. With this unprecedented pandemic continuing to rage, I am deeply grateful for the scientists, researchers, and frontline healthcare workers who have worked tirelessly to develop vaccines that are safe and effective, and ensure that our communities are protected.” said Pressley.

Pressley is in quarantine and following all health protocols in order to mitigate further spread and keep her loved ones and community safe.

Bristol Community College hosting COVID-19 and Flu Vaccination Clinic

Bristol Community College will be hosting a COVID-19 and flu vaccination clinic on Wednesday, January 12, 2022, from noon to 4 p.m., at the Bristol Fall River Campus. The clinic is open to the general public, ages 12 and up, and will be distributing the Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine boosters. The clinic will also be providing flu shots.

Wednesday, January 12, from noon to 4 p.m.

Bristol Community College Fall River Campus, 777 Elsbree Street

Margaret L. Jackson Arts Center (H building)

Who can receive a COVID-19 vaccine at Bristol's clinic on 1/12?

Bristol students, employees and the general public, ages 12 and up, who have not yet been vaccinated or who qualify for a booster.

Vaccine Booster: To see if you qualify for a vaccine booster, please visit <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/booster-shot.html>.

How does it work?

Bristol's COVID-19 and Flu Vaccination Clinic will be accepting walk-ins. No appointments or pre-registration are necessary. COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine boosters from Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson, as well as flu shots, will be administered by Stop & Shop Pharmacy at Bristol's Fall River Campus, free of charge. Please bring a valid ID and Insurance cards.

Second COVID-19 Vaccine: Individuals receiving the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines will also be scheduled to receive their second dose of the vaccine.

For more information, please contact Bristol Community College Health Services, by email at healthservices@bristolcc.edu or visit <http://www.bristolcc.edu/vaxup>.

Vaxed And Boosted Face “Extremely Low” Risk, Baker Says

By Chris Lisinski and Colin A. Young
State House News Service

People who have been both vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19 face an “extremely low” risk from the fast-spreading omicron variant, Gov. Charlie Baker said Wednesday as he defended his resistance to mandating mask-wearing or reimposing other mitigation measures.

Top-ranking Democrats in the Legislature are unhappy with Baker’s approach to the ongoing COVID-19 surge fueled by the omicron variant, calling for him to pursue more stringent options such as requiring schools to opt out of pooled testing programs rather than opt in.

Senate President Karen Spilka on Tuesday urged Baker to replace his newly revived mask advisory with a full mandate requiring, rather than just recommending, individuals to cover their faces in indoor public spaces.

Her suggestion did not gain any traction with the Republican

governor, who replied Wednesday that he believes “the policies we’ve put in place and the protocols we’re pursuing at this point in time are the right ones.”

Legislative leaders, who plan to meet in lightly attended informal sessions until early January, so far have communicated no interest in forcing additional action through votes. Two key Democratic senators said Wednesday that it is “the Governor’s responsibility” to use his executive powers to impose temporary public health measures.

Baker noted in a GBH News radio interview that mask mandates are still in place in several settings, including nursing homes and schools that have not secured vaccination-based waivers relieving them from the requirement.

“In some respects, what we’ve tried to do with our strategies generally now that we have 5 million people in Massachusetts who are vaccinated and almost 2 million people who are boosted – and we have rapid tests – is to recognize and understand that our strategy at this point is sort of layered and multi-dimensional,” Baker said.

“There are going to be a lot more cases because omicron is very contagious, but people need to understand that the vaccines and the number of people in Massachusetts that have gone out and gotten vaccinated and gotten boosted – their risk is extremely low,” he later added. “It’s important for everybody to understand that vaccines and boosters are in fact doing exactly what they were supposed to do, and they are our best defense.”

Work is underway to open a booster shot clinic in January at Fenway Park, which last year served as a mass vaccination site in the initial vaccine rollout. Baker said Wednesday that the most significant challenge to booster clinics is finding available staff, which is “part of the reason why some of this might happen a little bit after the holidays as opposed to

before.”

The administration does not have any plans in place to open a similar booster clinic in western Massachusetts and will instead look to relaunch a regional collaborative that had previously been in place in Berkshire County.

Federal Support Could Reduce Staffing Pressure

During his interview on GBH, Baker was asked about the federal measures President Joe Biden announced this week to step up the coronavirus response and said he expects that Massachusetts will benefit from Biden’s orders deploying more vaccinators and vaccination/booster sites.

“I don’t think we’re going to get pop-up sites from them, but I think we’re going to get people. And at this point in time, people in some respects, given all the issues everybody has with staffing, are every bit as important as having a site,” Baker told GBH hosts Jim Braude and Margery Eagan. “And for us, that’ll translate into a whole variety of additional sites in communities where we would like to expand access.”

Baker said the president’s actions “will make it possible for us to go even bigger in places like Brockton and Everett and down on the Cape where we have some issues and in Taunton and in Roxbury and in Lynn.”

Earlier in the day, Baker touted rapid tests as a key feature in the state’s evolving pandemic response, even as many residents complain the kits are difficult to find in stores.

“The frustration people feel is real, but this is something we’ve been on for months and I’m glad to see the feds finally get there,” he said after a State House event. “We’ve done a lot of things to alleviate some of the concerns people have about access and availability. You can also order them online. I can tell you by my own experience, having ordered many rapid tests online recently from Walmart, they landed on our front porch within two to three days.”

A day after avoiding any direct response to Boston Mayor Michelle Wu's new policy to require proof of vaccination to enter many indoor spaces starting next month, the governor engaged on the topic a bit more Wednesday.

"It's not like everybody says 'it's awful,' or everybody says 'it's great.' There's mixed opinions on it and a lot of people want to know exactly how it's gonna work. I think the fact that the date is, I think, what, January 15? That does give people a little while to figure out the answers to some of those questions," he said.

Baker also said that the protests at City Hall while Wu announced the new policies were "not helpful at all in any way." Republican candidate for governor Geoff Diehl, a former state representative with whom Baker does not often see eye-to-eye, was among those arguing Monday that Wu was depriving people of their civil rights.

"It doesn't offer solutions, it's not constructive and it doesn't help people sort of get from where we are to where we need to go," Baker, who refused to say whether he might support Diehl or any other candidate for governor next year, said when asked whether Diehl has an argument.

The governor added, "If you're not going to be offering solutions or constructive advice, or providing alternatives, then you're not really helping very much because these are serious times and these are serious issues. Serious people are trying to do things to work us through it and that should be respected and understood."

While Baker is opposed to policies like Wu's that require businesses to screen customers for proof of vaccination, he said Wednesday that a digital way to present proof of COVID-19 vaccination similar to the passports used in other states is still expected to be available in Massachusetts "soon."

On GBH last month, Baker said his administration was working

with more than a dozen states “to try to create a single QR code that can be used for all sorts of things where people may choose to require a vaccine.” He said at the time that it would be ready “soon.” On Wednesday, Braude asked for a status report and Baker would only say it “should be ready soon.”

“A lot of people have asked us to create this so that they would have it and so they could download it and we get it,” Baker said. “We understand it and we’re working on it.”

Eyeing More ARPA Spending

As Massachusetts heads toward the end of the calendar year, the Baker administration is working to put \$4 billion in American Rescue Plan Act and surplus tax revenue dollars to use.

Lawmakers missed their deadline of mid-November to get the bill to Baker, but found compromise and sent it to his desk a few weeks later. The timing works out, Baker said, because officials can align the spending approved from those pots with the administration’s capital plan as well as money flowing to Massachusetts under the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure package Biden signed into law.

“There are ways to use all three of those in a concert of decision-making,” Baker said. “There’s a way to make all of those dollars go farther because of the availability of all three programs.”

With \$2.3 billion in ARPA dollars unspent, Baker said he plans to file a proposal “some time after the first of the year” to use the remaining funding on housing, environmental infrastructure – particularly combined sewer overflows – and downtown revitalization.

“There is the possibility we can use some of the money in the federal infrastructure bill to deal with some of those issues, and we can do a lot with culverts in the federal infrastructure bill as well,” Baker said. “I know that’s

boring to everyone but me, but every time it rains and your downtowns flood and your communities flood, you should know it's because our environmental infrastructure is inadequate to deal with the storms we have these days."

[Chris Van Buskirk contributed reporting]