

# **New Bedford Suspends COVID Vaccination/Testing Policy For Municipal Employees**

Due to a precipitous decline in the number of COVID cases locally, the City of New Bedford is suspending its COVID vaccination/testing policy for municipal employees.

Earlier today, Mayor Jon Mitchell directed the City's Personnel Office to cease implementation and enforcement of the City's COVID vaccination/testing policy across city government, effective immediately. Employees who had chosen to comply with the policy by producing a negative COVID test on a weekly basis will no longer be required to do so, and new employees will not be required to submit proof of vaccination going forward.

COVID cases in New Bedford have fallen dramatically over the past several weeks. The City hit its peak of daily cases on January 7, when 562 cases were reported over the previous day. As of Monday, February 28, the City is seeing an average of 23 cases per day over the past week—a 96% decline in cases from the January peak.

The City of New Bedford's employee vaccination/testing policy was first announced in August 2021, negotiated with employee unions in the fall, and implemented on November 15 for most of the City's approximately 1,100 non-school employees. The primary goal of the policy was to protect residents and staff, as well as set an example for public and private employers in Greater New Bedford. 825 City employees subject to the policy were recorded as fully vaccinated—a rate of 74 percent, compared to New Bedford's general population vaccination rate of about 57 percent.

More than 200 employees chose to comply through weekly

testing. In many instances, the weekly tests revealed COVID infections that would have otherwise gone undiagnosed. As a result, COVID-positive employees were prevented from coming into work and likely infecting colleagues or residents with whom they would have interacted.

No City employees were terminated or issued disciplinary suspensions for non-compliance with the policy. In some instances, employees who failed to supply timely testing results were denied entry to the workplace until test results were submitted. In these cases, employees had their accrued personal or vacation time reduced accordingly.

The City will continue to honor the employee benefits negotiated in agreements with the Police, Fire, AFSCME unions during 2021. The City reserves the right to reinstitute the vaccination and testing policy should a new COVID-related public health threat emerge in the future.

The New Bedford Health Department will also continue to focus on other aspects of the pandemic response, including the promotion of vaccinations and boosters which continue to be highly effective at preventing severe COVID outcomes. The Health Department will also continue to monitor transmission risk and the emergence of new variants that could require additional safeguards.