

Open Letter to America's Private Sector Leaders: Creating #COVIDSafeZones in America's Workplaces

Dear Private Sector Leaders:

The United States sits at a critical juncture in our efforts to move beyond the pandemic. We are seeking your help. More than 164 million Americans – representing 58 percent of the eligible population – have been fully vaccinated, providing substantial protection against illness, reducing deaths, lessening the burden on hospitals, and reducing missed workdays and closures. Increasing vaccination rates is the country's most immediate and best hope of reaching population immunity, beating the pandemic, and restoring our national vitality and way of life.

But obstacles remain – obstacles that the private sector, which employs 124 million Americans and is the engine of American productivity and economic growth, can pull together to overcome.

The latest variant of COVID-19 – Delta – spreads far more easily and rapidly. More people not protected by vaccines are becoming infected faster, from more limited contact. Vaccinated people are generally protected, especially from severe disease, but can become infected and spread the virus to co-workers, families, and their communities. The Delta variant represents a more dangerous threat to your workplace health and safety, business continuity, and ability to serve your clients and customers.

The other challenge our country faces is low vaccination levels. This creates a greater risk of Delta-driven outbreaks and is an emerging competitive disadvantage for the United States compared to a growing number of industrialized nations with higher vaccination rates. Those who remain unvaccinated are diverse, including people under 25, people living in rural and Southern communities, women of childbearing age, young Black and Latino men, people who think they have immunity from prior infection, and others. Many have had legitimate questions and concerns about getting vaccinated that need to be respected and addressed. These are some of your employees, customers, and suppliers, where your business commitments can make a difference.

You have a key role to play in our national quest to keep Americans safe, while respecting individual liberties. This is why we, public health and science experts, leaders in health, education, and civil society, and former officials from both political parties, have come together to ask you to join us and take further steps to maintain safe spaces and prevent spread.

As a complement to actions by federal, state, and local governments, we have put forward **#COVIDSafeZones – simple, achievable, common sense, temporary measures that can be applied by any private sector enterprise with minimal disruption and major benefits for your business and country.**

First, because maximizing vaccination is so critical to the protection of the nation's workforce, a growing number of employers have decided to require vaccination with medical and religious exceptions. This is the best way to protect workers and customers where there is frequent close contact with many individuals who may be infected. If your workplace is a health care setting, we urge vaccination for anyone who comes in contact with patients. High vaccination rates also provide a greater assurance of safety in other high-risk settings, where distancing or reduced contact is not possible.

If a vaccination requirement is not an option, we recommend these clear steps:

1. **Infection Screening Protocol.** Require a protocol for employees and regular visitors (not retail customers) to be routinely screened with a rapid test, typically twice weekly. Repeated negative tests provide a high degree of certainty that the individual is not infectious. More frequent testing should be done in higher-risk settings where appropriate and practical.
2. **Proof of Vaccination.** Allow anyone who provides proof of full vaccination (accounting for the appropriate time period after the final vaccine) to bypass the routine testing requirement.
3. **Incentives for Vaccination.** Offer cash incentives to employees, including cash payments and paid leave to get vaccinated. Offer easy access to vaccination where possible.
4. **Mask Use.** Mask use should follow the latest recommendations from the CDC, which currently advise indoor face coverings in public indoor settings in substantial or high prevalence zones. Where masks are needed, N-95s or their equivalent offer the highest level of protection. **The steps we have described can reduce the need for masks in controlled environments.**

The #COVIDSafeZones recommendations are not a broad vaccination mandate. We believe they are consistent with established precedent and any state laws that prohibit broad vaccination requirements in places of business.

These recommendations are **temporary measures** until we are reliably back to low COVID rates and the public health threat is behind us. The recommendations can be combined with other steps such as improved ventilation and distancing.

We recognize that any protocols create some amount of burden and cost for businesses and your employees. Still, these will be relatively modest compared to the significant cost of ongoing disruption and uncertainty in business productivity and in people's lives.

Many of you in one-on-one conversations with us have expressed a desire to follow the types of policies we are recommending. A growing number of businesses and government agencies have already taken these steps. But we recognize there is momentum for collective action, so no business feels disadvantaged and the impact of these steps is maximized. We believe if you take visible action, many more will follow.

With your leadership, we will beat this pandemic. But this cannot be done with actions from the federal government alone. Private sector leaders have a critical role to play. We believe these recommendations balance respect for public safety and individual liberty, and we hope you will adopt them to move our country forward together.

Signed,

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