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### Why hospitals aren't requiring front-line workers to get COVID boosters

Wary of losing more staff amid the omicron surge, Advocate, Northwestern and others pass on another mandate, despite evidence showing protection against the virus drops sharply without a third jab.

KATHERINE DAVIS

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Even though many Chicago hospitals required employees to get the initial two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, several are not requiring booster shots, reflecting the challenges and pressures health care providers face amid a nationwide health care worker shortage.

Some of Chicago's largest hospital chains, including Advocate Aurora Health, Northwestern Medicine, the University of Chicago Medical Center, NorthShore University HealthSystem and Sinai Chicago, confirmed to Crain's that they're not requiring employees receive the third jab despite data showing that protection against the COVID-19 virus and its variants drops sharply for those without a booster.

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Some hospitals say they are encouraging their staffs to receive the booster but aren't mandating them at this time because it's not required by federal and local laws. Currently, the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services requires health care workers at facilities that participate in Medicare and Medicaid programs to have just two vaccine doses, and the state of Illinois requires all health care workers in the state to have the same. While the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention currently defines "fully vaccinated" as having only two doses of the vaccine, it does recommend boosters, which are shown to increase protection against COVID-19, and the delta and omicron variants of the virus.

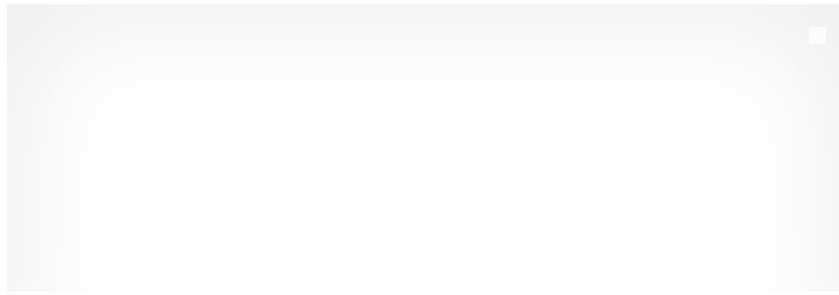
A study published in medical journal JAMA found that the likelihood of developing a symptomatic infection from the omicron variant, the strain that dominated the most recent COVID wave, was 66% lower for people who were boosted compared to those who had only two shots.

"Given the ongoing critical patient-care demands and the pandemic surge faced by hospitals in Chicago and across the country, the University of Chicago Medical Center decided not to introduce additional COVID-19 vaccine mandates for UCMC employees," UChicago Medicine said in a statement to Crain's. "Our approach is consistent with that of our peers in the hospital community nationwide."

Advocate Aurora and Northwestern declined to explain why they are not mandating boosters, and NorthShore didn't respond when asked for its reasoning.

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The reluctance of hospitals to require boosters reflects the dilemma they now face two years into the pandemic. Hospitals are struggling to handle waves of COVID patients amid widespread staffing shortages. Because some local hospitals lost **hundreds of workers** during the first batch of vaccine mandates, they worry a booster requirement might spark more resignations. Yet workers who don't get boosters are more likely to fall ill with COVID and transmit it to others.

### Hospital workers declining

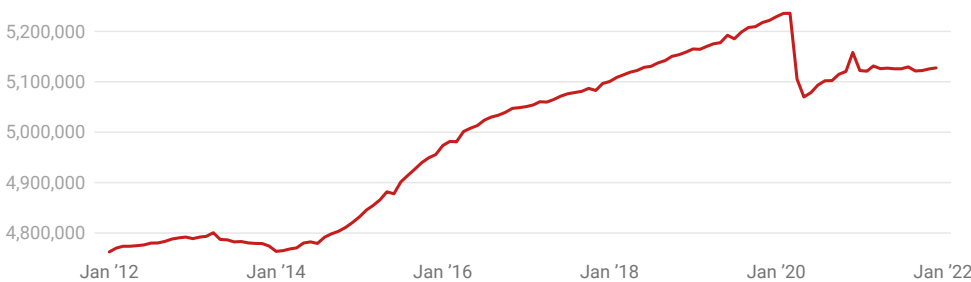
Hospitals across the country and in Illinois have lost workers since the pandemic began as the health care industry faces widespread burnout and turnover. As a result, hospitals are struggling to handle waves of COVID patients.

### Hospital workers in Illinois



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

### U.S. hospital workers



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

“It’s a really, really tough situation here,” Dr. Emily Landon, the executive medical director of infection prevention and control at UChicago Medicine, told Crain’s on Jan. 20 during the omicron surge. “Everybody is short-staffed. Our regular, everyday workers are getting COVID at an alarming rate.”

Hospitals across the country and in Illinois have lost workers since the pandemic began, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The number of U.S. hospital employees has dropped 2% from 5.24 million in March 2020 to 5.12 million in March 2022.

More evidence of labor issues turned up in a recent [survey](#) from Chicago-based American College of Healthcare Executives that polled 310 executives and shows personnel shortages are hospital CEOs' top concern.

"The hospital systems, like other employers—because of the labor shortage, they are following the CDC guidance," says Margo Wolf O'Donnell, an attorney specializing in employment law at Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff. "In some instances, they don't want to exceed what is required in order to ensure there is enough staffing to meet the needs of the patient population right now."

In accordance with state and federal requirements, Sinai Chicago, Chicago's largest safety net hospital, required employees have two COVID-19 doses by Dec. 31. About 99% of its 3,200 caregivers have complied, with a small number of deferrals and just 14 terminations, spokesman Dan Regan says.

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While Sinai says it is strongly encouraging caregivers to get boosted, it's not yet a requirement. But more than 40% of the staff has received a booster.

"Given this response and the fact that there is not yet a state or federal requirement for boosters, we have not yet decided to make boosters mandatory," Regan says.

Unlike some other states, including New Jersey, New York, California and New Mexico, Illinois has yet to require that all health care workers be boosted, though it does require the first two doses. Gov. J.B. Pritzker's office didn't answer questions about boosters for health care workers. But now with COVID restrictions set to [ease in Illinois](#) and around the country, it's possible government will never mandate boosters, says Amanda Sonneborn, a Chicago-based lawyer at Atlanta law firm [King & Spalding](#).

"I am doubtful if you will see (new mandates), based on the fact that much of the government is rolling back requirements, not adding new requirements," Sonneborn says.

Whether or not boosters are ever required for Illinois health care workers, some are still opting to get boosted. James Kerridge, the assistant chief nursing officer at Sinai Chicago, got his booster shot in November. Since then, he's urged co-workers to get the third dose.

"We have an obligation as health care professionals to recommend that people get vaccinated and boosted," Kerridge says. "But the organizational leader in me understands that mandates can be tricky."

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