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Northern Ontario's largest employers don't require workers to get COVID-19 vaccinations

While most government workers are required to prove if they are vaccinated against COVID-19, it's a very different story in the private sector.

Almost none of northeastern Ontario's largest industrial employers have vaccination policies.

The Algoma steel mill in Sault Ste. Marie says it does not require its 2,000 employees to be vaccinated.

Vale, with some 4,000 workers in Sudbury, didn't answer CBC's questions, but United Steelworkers Local 6500 says there is no policy in place.

That's also the case at Glencore in Sudbury, where about 1,000 miners and smelter workers are represented by the Mine Mill union.

"This is a very polarizing issue for a lot of people," says union president Eric Bosley.

"Some are for it and some are against it, and they want to see the union fight for their direction, and that's a different direction," Bosley said that on top of the in-fighting among the membership, his local's "pro-choice" stance also strays from the national Unifor union, which wants to see COVID-19 vaccines made mandatory.

"We do encourage everyone to get vaccinated, but it's still your body and you still have the right to decide what goes in it, and putting your employment on the line isn't reasonable in our mind," he said.

Vaccine mandates are also rare in northern Ontario's forest industry. United Steelworkers Local 1-2010



says none of the 2,000 forest workers it represents are required to show proof of vaccination. The union for the Dornier paper plant in Espanola echoes this.

There are no plans for a vaccine policy at Eascom, which runs sawmills in Nain Centre, Gogama, Elk Lake and Timmins.

Eascom is offering workers at its five northern Ontario sawmills a \$350 bonus to get the shot, but has no plans to make it mandatory.

"We still believe vaccination is the best weapon we have, but we don't want to push it and we don't want to force employees," says Jean Brodeur, director of public relations and communications, adding that instead, their focus is on stopping the spread with handwashing, masking and physical distancing.

Railways are one exception, because they are federally regulated and the Liberal government has said legislation requiring COVID-19 vaccination policies is on its way.

CN Rail has already set a policy that will see unvaccinated workers sent home without pay after Nov. 1.

Ana Khullar says she was shocked how easy it was to refuse to quarantine in a hotel after landing in Calgary on June 20, following a trip to Honduras.

She received no pushback and no fines, she said.

"There were two police officers standing there and they just smiled at me and said, 'Hi,'" said Khullar who lives in Edmonton and owns a home in Honduras.

"Got my luggage, got my car, drove home, everything was great."

Canada's hotel quarantine requirement for international air passengers ended in August, but it's still sparking controversy. That's because while more than 5,000 air passengers who refused to quarantine in a hotel were hit with fines, others who violated the rule faced no repercussions.

"This wasn't a program that was sort of implemented fairly, necessarily, across the board," said Cara Zwiell, director of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association's fundamental freedoms program.

"We are [worried]. I think CN is also worried. They could have a severe manpower shortage come Nov. 1."

Most of the retail workers praised as front-line heroes earlier in the pandemic are not required to get vaccinated.

But Tim Deletra, spokesperson for United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 175 and 633, says they are reviewing policies on a case-by-case basis, but the COVID-19 world remains unpredictable.

"The situation will change and employers will start making various decisions on their own, and in this case they have to," he said. Deletra said his union, which has 70,000 members across Ontario, would like to see the provincial government take the lead and set rules to protect private-sector workers, not just those on the public payroll.

"This was way too easy," said Khullar. Khullar said she felt no need to quarantine in a hotel because she was fully vaccinated and could do her full 14-day quarantine in her empty house.

5,000 travellers who defied hotel quarantine rules got big fines, but no sign of fines in Alberta



Her original return flight to Canada was to land in Vancouver. But Khullar said she switched her arrival city to Calgary after reading scores of posts on social media from people who said they landed in Calgary, refused to go to a quarantine hotel and didn't get fined.

"It was an absolute joke," said Khullar. "You might well say, 'OK, everybody, just fly back to Alberta. You don't have to worry about a single fine.'"

Who can issue fines in Calgary? The federal government created its hotel quarantine program to help stop the spread of COVID-19. The program required international air passengers to do part of their quarantine in a designated hotel while waiting for their post-arrival COVID-19 test results. Passengers had to visit the hotel, which could run as high as \$2,000.

The Public Health Agency of Canada has posted records of 5,315 fines issued to air passengers who refused to quarantine in a hotel. They range from \$3,000 to \$5,000 plus

add-on fees. Almost all of the fines were given to travellers who landed in Toronto (4,711) and Vancouver (601). The remaining three involved Montreal arrivals. However, PHAC clarified in a footnote that it's unknown if those three cases actually resulted in fines.

None of the fines were issued in Calgary. According to Statistics Canada, 434,210 non-essential air passengers entered Canada from March through June, the busiest months for the hotel quarantine program. Of that total, 225,809 landed in Toronto, 94,084 in Montreal, 80,722 in Vancouver and 33,595 in Calgary.

PHAC said its officers couldn't fine hotel quarantine violators in Alberta because the province never adopted the federal Contraventions Act. But the agency said police in Alberta could issue the fines and suggested checking with police for up-to-date statistics.

Alberta RCMP and Calgary police told CBC News they have issued no such fines. In May, Calgary police said that

year after committing a violation. "I'm not paying it. It's a different story for air passengers who landed in Vancouver and Toronto and refused to quarantine in a hotel."

CBC News interviewed eight travellers who were directly fined between \$3,450 and \$6,255 by authorities at the Vancouver or Toronto airport. They each said they plan to contest their fine in court and feel it's unfair they should have to pay when other travellers have faced no repercussions.

"I'm not paying it, because this absolutely doesn't make any sense," said Michael Allen of Windsor, Ont. The former CFL player turned organic greenhouse operator was fined \$6,255 at the Toronto airport on July 8. He said he was returning from a business trip to Jamaica.

Allen said he refused to quarantine in a hotel because he felt it was best to do his full quarantine at his empty house.

He's now waiting to fight his fine in court. "Some people get fined. Some don't. There is no consistency," said Allen, who also pointed out that travellers who entered Canada by land did not have to quarantine in a hotel.

"All these things make it unjust. It's just an unjust law."

Lawyer Zwiell said the inconsistency is one of the many reasons she believes the quarantine program was flawed and unnecessary.

"The reality is that the law can't solve every problem, and this is one instance where I think the law was not very effective," she said. "There are other tools that probably work better, tools like public education."

When asked about claims the hotel quarantine program was unfair because some travellers didn't get fined, PHAC reiterated that authorities in Alberta and Quebec had the power to issue fines.

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