

Secretary of Defense Austin's message to the force: Get the shot - Stay healthy – Stay ready

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For military service members, Secretary Lloyd Austin's memo to the force this week serves as a 'warning order' that COVID-19 vaccinations will become mandatory in the near future. Federal civilian employees can expect that commands will at some point receive implementing guidance for the presidential guidance requiring both masks and COVID-testing for the unvaccinated.

On August 9, 2021, the Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin wrote in a Message to the Force that he will seek, no later than mid-September, the President's approval to make the vaccines mandatory for all Service members, or he will make them mandatory immediately upon U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) licensure, whichever comes first.

The Army is developing a vaccine implementation plan as directed by the Secretary of Defense. We will provide further guidance to this military community soon on this important step.

The U.S. Army War College and Carlisle Barracks will work with

Headquarters, Department of the Army as it develops the Army vaccine implementation plan to better protect the health and safety of our soldiers, families and civilian employees.

Looking ahead to an implementation date, Secretary Austin said, “We are confident the men and women of our military – even the ones who have been hesitant – will comply with this requirement, just as they do when given any other mission-essential order.”

Commanders retain the authority to tailor additional mitigation measures to the local situation, e.g., the current Health Protection Condition-BRAVO for Carlisle Barracks.

Why change, why now?

The Department of Defense began providing COVID-19 vaccines to CONUS and OCONUS DoD populations, including Service members, on a voluntary basis since the Emergency Use Authorization was granted by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in December 2020.

On July 29, 2021, President Biden directed the Department of Defense to look into how and when the COVID-19 vaccination would be added to the list of required vaccinations for members of the military.

The President must grant a waiver that would allow the Secretary of Defense to forego compliance with EAU provisions requiring informing Service members of an option to refuse vaccine administration and use his existing authority to direct mandatory administration of the COVID-19 vaccination to military personnel.

After consultation with medical professionals, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and senior leaders of the Department, Secretary Austin determined that mandatory vaccination was the most effective way to address the increased threat to the force posed by the surge we are seeing in COVID-19 cases due to the lethality and the highly transmissible nature of the Delta variant.

A new COVID-19 reality increases risk to readiness

The facts on the ground have changed, as the president noted July 29. The Delta variant is spreading rapidly across the United States, putting our Service members and our readiness at greater risk. Vaccination is the best way to protect our force against COVID-19.

As a measure of the impact of the Delta variant.

- DoD recorded 5 military COVID deaths in February, 1 in April, and 3 in the past two weeks (July 28-August 6).
- We have lost 29 Service members – active duty, Guard, and Reserve – to COVID to date.
- DoD passed more than 200,000 cumulative military cases on June 25; 150,000 on February 12; 100,000 on December 22; and 50,000 on October 16.
- In the past month, we've increased by more than 13,000 cases to 216,178 cumulative military cases as of August 9.

Given the size, scale and geographic dispersal of the Department of Defense's workforce, the Services and Combatant Commands need some time to develop an implementation plan that would be most feasible for fully vaccinating their personnel.

The range of vaccines currently required of all service members as they enter the military include Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Influenza, Measles, Poliovirus, Tetanus-Diphtheria-Pertussis, and Varicella. Others are required based on service-related circumstances, assignments, etc.