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FEATURED

Mayor Presses May 3 Return of Remote Staff But Unions Not Sold

Recent Spike in Cases Has Some Saying Meet Goal On Vaccinations First

By BOB HENNELLY

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SLOW AND EASY ON THAT RETURN TRIP: While Mayor de Blasio has declared that employees like this member of District Council 37's Local 1503 who has been making masks at home during the pandemic should return to their city offices, union leaders say the May 3 date makes no sense when his target of five million vaccinations citywide is at least three months away and there's a new surge in coronavirus cases.

Photo courtesy of DC 37

Mayor de Blasio is calling for roughly 80,000 employees who have been working remotely during the pandemic to return to their agencies starting May 3.

"We need city workers back in their offices where they can help the most New Yorkers, and it is also going to send a powerful message about this city moving forward," he said at his March 23 daily briefing. "In the next few weeks, [we'll be] working with the municipal labor movement to make sure we get things right. We are devoted to health and safety in all things, but this is an important step for the city and an important step on the way to the full recovery of New York City."

About 75 percent of the city's 320,000 municipal employees have jobs in which working remotely was not an option.

Business Leaders Edgy

Last October, the Wall Street Journal reported that "some business leaders" had urged Mr. de Blasio to plan to start returning those working remotely to their city offices. "The idea there is that even if there is a small increase in the number of people coming into the city, that could be a big help to the small businesses," Jessica Walker, president of the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce, told the newspaper.

The Mayor mentioned a May return during his Jan. 28 State of the City address. He then added, "In June, we will reach a milestone—five million New Yorkers vaccinated. That is how we jump-start a recovery for all of us."

The Mayor's announcement comes at a precarious time, with coronavirus cases rising again after weeks of decline that came with a steady increase in vaccinations. Community spread is still a significant concern, as is a proliferation of virus variants that may be more contagious. The city is still nowhere near the 70-percent vaccination rate cited by public-health officials to establish "herd immunity."

While COVID vaccinations greatly reduce the incidence of the virus leading to hospitalization and death, medical research is still inconclusive on whether receiving them limits the asymptomatic transmission of the virus in all forms.

Union Reservations

The municipal unions have criticized the Mayor's response to the significant occupational-health challenges posed by COVID, which has killed well over 300 city employees.

Last November, District Council 37 Executive Director Henry Garrido testified that a lack of personal protective equipment and "inconsistent guidance" had contributed to 150 deaths of his members, with different agencies using varying standards for allowing employees to continue working after colleagues or family members tested positive for the virus.

In a tweet sent before the Mayor's latest announcement on the May return, Mr. Garrido demanded that the union be actively involved in the process, because "too many DC 37 members died unnecessarily."

"There must be a guarantee workplaces are safe w/PPE, mask regulation & regular cleanings," he tweeted. "Anything less will not do."

In an email, Gloria Middleton, president of Communications Workers of America Local 1180, which represents 8,100 Administrative Managers and Project Managers, said there was going to be a Municipal Labor Committee meeting on March 25 with the de Blasio administration "to give us details of his plan."

Priorities Backward?

In an interview last month, Ms. Middleton said it "didn't make sense" to bring workers back before hitting the Mayor's target of five million vaccinations by June.

"We need to make sure the numbers are down, and down enough that workers are safe when they go back to work," she said. "So I think he is being a little presumptuous right now."

Close to 40 percent of Local 1180's members are working from home, with another 35 percent splitting time between their homes and offices.

Charlene Obernauer, executive director of the New York Committee on Occupational Safety and Health, a non-profit supported by labor unions, shared Ms. Middleton's assessment.

"I think one of the greatest quotes about COVID is just because you are over COVID, it doesn't mean COVID is over," she said during a phone interview. "Right now, we don't have a population fully vaccinated. Last I checked, the numbers were hovering around 10 percent of the population actually vaccinated."

Learn From Others' Mistakes

Ms. Obernauer continued, "We have been spending the last year and change in this situation. What's just waiting a few more months at this point? We have seen the mistakes by other states and the lessons learned."

Council Member I. Daneek Miller, chair of the City Council's Civil Service and Labor Committee, said it was critical to "pay attention to all of the variables between now and then" including the percentage of the city's workforce and population that would be vaccinated by May 3.

"Of course, people want to get back to work, but these policies can just be suggestions to the agencies to do the right thing," he said. "We can educate, we can legislate, but it all has to come down to compliance."

He said that his COVID-19 Workplace Health and Safety Guidance Review Board, which was approved by the Council, would soon be in place to oversee the workforce-return plan.

The board includes two labor representatives and the Commissioners of Health and Mental Hygiene, Citywide Administrative Services, Consumer and Worker Protection, and Office of Labor Relations. It will also have two mayoral appointees; two appointees of the Council Speaker, and one from the Public Advocate.

The largest death toll among city agencies was in the Department of Education, where 73 employees had died as of last October.

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