



Monday, May 17, 2021

Dear Governor Pritzker,

We applaud your continued support of science-based COVID-19 mitigation strategies and the state's efforts to quickly vaccinate as many people as possible.

Earlier this week the CDC released new guidance stating that fully-vaccinated individuals can gather indoors and outdoors in groups large and small without masking or distancing. The guidance reflects accumulating scientific evidence that, in addition to preventing COVID-19-related death and hospitalization, our current vaccines are highly effective against asymptomatic transmission of SARS-CoV2.

Although the CDC's guidance is meant for individuals, it is being interpreted more broadly as permission to eliminate mask mandates. Already we are seeing businesses in Illinois (restaurants, retailers, fitness centers) and other local entities changing mask requirements and abandoning universal masking policies in public places. Without a state mask mandate, our essential workers and businesses, who have been foundational to ensuring services remain open for everyone during this pandemic, lose the power to enforce masking indoors, and have to rely on an honor system for masking, a system that is easily exploited.

The reality in Illinois, like the rest of the country, is that a very large proportion of the population is not yet fully vaccinated. We know that only 37% of Illinoisans are fully-vaccinated, and this number is much lower in underserved areas. There are five rural Illinois counties in which less than 20% of the population is vaccinated. Vaccination rates are also much lower in many communities hardest hit by COVID-19; only 30% of community members in Chicago's Austin neighborhood have received the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. Additionally, children and teens may not be fully vaccinated for months. We just started vaccinating those aged 12 to 15, meaning that this age group will not be fully protected for at least another 5 weeks. Those teens 16 to 18, are a few weeks ahead, but many in these age groups have not been vaccinated yet. And no vaccine has yet been approved for children under the age of 12, as vaccine trials in children 2-12 years old are still months from completion.

As healthcare workers, we are compelled to advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves. We are concerned that doing away with universal masking in public indoor spaces is premature and will place many of Illinois' most vulnerable members at risk. In particular we are worried that this would place an undue burden on essential workers, underserved communities, immunocompromised individuals, and on children. Leaders in the retail industry have put out a statement requesting consistency with mask requirements. We are also acutely aware that the pandemic is not over; we continue to see new COVID-19 patients and the short and long term sequelae of the disease in our daily work.

Unless and until vaccination status can be formally verified, we recommend that Illinois continue to require universal masking for all indoor public spaces. We also recommend masks continue to be required in schools given that children under the age of 12 are still not eligible to receive the vaccine yet, and those 12-15 years will not be fully protected until two weeks after their last dose. We ask that Illinois uses vaccination-based metrics before relaxing this requirement, looking at vaccine access, equity, and percentages of fully vaccinated individuals region-by-region to get the state back to normal. Until all Illinoisians are fully vaccinated, continued vigilance and sound public health policy are crucial to getting all of us to the finish line.

Sincerely,

Illinois Medical Professionals Action Collaborative (IMPACT)