



UA LOCAL 149

Plumbers and Pipefitters

To: All Members

From: Matt Kelly, Business Manager

Date: September 1, 2021

Re: Vaccine mandates

A year ago, contractors and labor unions were trying to navigate new work rules and procedures, doing all we could to keep job sites open and our Members employed during a pandemic. We're proud we fought so hard to keep so many of you working during such an unprecedented time.

Today, we're largely back to normal – or a new normal, anyway – with 90% of our Members actively working. Better yet, with the state recently approving the \$45 billion Rebuild Illinois infrastructure bill and a state mandate to eliminate all lead service lines in the next 20 years, we anticipate steady work for many years to come. The University of Illinois also has a backlog of 18 months of projects on the books, which they've had paused during the pandemic, but are now preparing to move forward with in the weeks ahead.

That's in addition to Congress now considering a \$550 billion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which includes more than \$105 billion in specific water-related projects that will employ plumbers and pipefitters across the country.

All of that means our contractors anticipate we will soon not just be at 100% employment for our Members, but that they will be looking for additional help from UA travelers. We have weathered what seems to be the worst of the situation and emerged even stronger than before.

As those new projects begin, we're all being confronted with new rules and regulations that vary by site. Next week, a COVID vaccine mandate begins at health care and state-run facilities, including Carle Health and the University of Illinois, with others expected to follow, especially since the U.S. Supreme Court recently allowed Indiana University's vaccine mandate to stand.

Those mandates come after the Pfizer vaccine received FDA approval, giving infectious disease experts, physicians, business leaders and elected officials greater confidence that it's safe.

Of course, as we all know, not everyone has expressed the same confidence.

Whatever the reason for any person's hesitancy, questions or flat-out opposition to the vaccine, Local 149 has no role in mandating public health decisions, no more than we do in taking positions on gun rights, abortion or any other controversial issues being debated nationally.

Our mission is to fight for the wages, benefits, workplace safety and health of our Members. We must make sure our contractors provide a safe work environment and bring no harm to our Members or request that we do anything unreasonable.

Of course, some will argue a vaccine mandate may bring harm to some.

To be clear, not a single PHCC contractor has notified Local 149 they are instituting a vaccine mandate. We have no employees at Carle. At the U of I, we have asked for a copy of their policy, disciplinary consequences for non-compliance and any exceptions for employees, so we can better understand it. But with no collective bargaining agreement there, we have little recourse to demand they negotiate these new terms and conditions of employment for our Members.

Going forward, we know there will be even more customers who issue similar mandates. Just as you have individual rights to wait on the vaccine, they have the right to demand it. And the UA Standard of Excellence makes clear we are to respect customer property and policies at all times.

All of which puts PHCC contractors in a difficult position – bid on a job hoping they will have enough vaccinated workers to do it or turn it away? Someone is going to do the work – if not us, then who? Unfortunately, we all know there are non-union contractors lurking, waiting to take advantage of this moment and take millions of dollars in work from our Members.

It is not our job to tell you to get a vaccine and we are also not an activist group ensuring your personal freedoms are protected. It is, however, our job to be honest and transparent with you.

Local 149 has an obligation to the PHCC to provide enough Members at every job site. If concerns about vaccine mandates issued by customers are going to prevent that, there is no question that will have a direct impact on our Members, because we won't be working.

Our Collective Bargaining Agreement says contractors must notify us of customer provisions for any project. It also says that if a Member refuses to abide by the policies, procedures or testing requirements on a job site, that Member will not be referred to the contractor for that job.

But it is becoming clear that additional job opportunities – whether through Rebuild Illinois or the American Jobs Act – may be limited for those Members. If contractors can't provide a workforce that meets customer expectations, they won't be hired. And we won't be, either.

Let there be no doubt that we respect your individual rights and take your representation very seriously. We also respect the terms of our CBA and policies instituted by customers. We will continue to communicate with the PHCC and elected officials about changing workplace policies, state standards and customer expectations. We will also continue to communicate with you about those policies and opportunities to collectively bargain with contractors looking to institute a mandate.

We appreciate your understanding during this period and for your willingness to work together to find a solution that protects all of our Brothers and Sisters.