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Mercy Sr. Mary Haddad, president of the Catholic Health Association (Courtesy of CHA)

Carol Zimmermann

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Mercy Sr. Mary Haddad, president of the Catholic Health Association (Courtesy of CHA)

Mercy Sr. Mary Haddad, president of the Catholic Health Association, is on a mission.

She hopes to clarify some of the current confusion leading to both vaccine hesitancy and recent protests over vaccine mandates being put in place to curb the escalating spread of the delta variant of COVID-19.

She is starting in her own backyard, so to speak, encouraging all health care workers to get vaccinated.

In a July 23 statement, she said vaccinated health care workers were doing their part to "protect themselves, their co-workers, their patients, their loved ones, and their neighbors."

She also said the association, which supports more than 2,200 Catholic hospitals, health care systems, nursing homes and long-term care facilities across the country, "strongly supports member health systems as they take necessary steps toward ensuring as many health care workers as possible receive the vaccines."

She told Catholic News Service on Aug. 11 that some Catholic health systems are now mandating that their employees be vaccinated for COVID-19, while others have said they are awaiting full approval of the vaccine from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Most systems, at the very least, are highly encouraging employees to get vaccinated, and some are offering incentives for them to do so.

Catholic Health World, a CHA publication, reported in early August that six major Catholic health systems — including Ascension, Trinity, Mercy and SSM Health — are requiring employees to be vaccinated for COVID-19 with various start dates in effect from late August to early November.

The policy applies to workers and volunteers, and in some cases, it also applies to vendors. The group of health care systems with COVID-19 vaccine policies in place involves more than 350,000 employees.

Other major health systems in the United States, including Kaiser Permanente, Banner Health, Atrium Health and the Veterans Health Administration, have similarly announced mandatory COVID-19 vaccination policies.

These policies, as well as those for Catholic health systems, include exemptions for medical or religious reasons.

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In a July 21 statement, the American Hospital Association said it "supports hospitals and health systems that adopt mandatory COVID-19 vaccination policies for health care personnel, with local factors and circumstances shaping whether and how these policies are implemented."

As Haddad sees it, Catholic health workers "have to set the example" and should be vaccinated because they are "serving people at a vulnerable time of sickness; the thought that they could infect someone is unconscionable," she said.

She said she also feels strongly about Catholic health systems enforcing a vaccine mandate because by doing so, they take the lead in helping others see the vaccines are "safe, effective and necessary."

For health care systems hesitant to require employee-vaccine policies, she said she understands what they are facing but also sees the dire emergency of the current crisis.

"We can't wait; we need to move quickly," she said.

Some hospital CEOs have told her they fear losing staff members to other hospitals that aren't mandating COVID-19 vaccines.

"It's really a crisis," she said, noting that health care workers are exhausted and nurses are angry because the current coronavirus surge that is filling hospitals with primarily unvaccinated patients "could have been prevented."

The other issue she is coming up against is people "using religion as a choice for an exemption" to getting the COVID-19 vaccine.

She said CHA has been working to get the word out that the vaccines are morally acceptable and there should be "no exemptions for Catholics other than medical" reasons.

Catholic bishops in Colorado and South Dakota have issued statements stressing the need to follow one's conscience in getting the COVID-19 vaccine and have supported religious exemptions to vaccine mandates.

Haddad said she finds it "troublesome" that many are using the argument that it is a personal choice not to get vaccinated.

That choice, she said, "puts others in harm's way."

The work that CHA members have been doing since the vaccines became available in the United States continues; that is, letting people know about them and not only providing the vaccines, but making sure people have transportation to get to where they were offered.

But months since the vaccines have been available, there are still barriers to overcome.

A new one Haddad has seen she believes stems from increased isolation brought on by the pandemic.

She said people feel removed from others and have taken on the attitude of "this doesn't impact me" about getting vaccinated or even following mandates for vaccines or masks.

But, as she points out: "This is impacting all of us."