

The Chronicle Herald

Giving NSLC workers more time to get vaccinated puts profit over people's health: prof

Andrew Rankin, December 7, 2021



COVID-19 Vaccination Policy: Mandatory

“NSLC Business” means any activities related to NSLC operations, whether conducted on or off NSLC Sites and whether in the usual course of business or related to other NSLC promoted activities such as special events, volunteer activities, etc.

POLICY SCOPE

This Policy applies to all NSLC employees and contract service providers.

POLICY STATEMENT

NSLC will endeavor to maintain a COVID-19-free status for the NSLC by requiring all employees working at NSLC Sites to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Therefore:

- Beginning on **January 15, 2022** (the “Full Vaccination Date”), Employees and contract service providers will not be granted access to any NSLC Site unless they provide proof that they are Fully Vaccinated.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND PROCEDURES

1. **Disclosure of Vaccination Status:** All employees must provide NSLC's Human Resource (“HR”) Department with proof of their vaccination status through signed declaration prior to January 15, 2022.
2. **Failure to Provide Proof of Vaccination Status:** Any employee who has not

The NSLC vaccination policy that requires employees and contract workers to be fully vaccinated by January 15.

Nova Scotia liquor store employees will have six weeks more than most provincial workers to get their COVID shots.

The province's mandatory vaccination policy came into effect Dec 1. But the mandate didn't include Crown corporations like the Nova Scotia Liquor Corp. NSLC, which operate at arms-length from the public service and, in the case of the vaccine mandate, can make their own rules.

A Dalhousie University addictions expert said delaying the requirement for two vaccine shots shows the Crown alcohol and cannabis retailer is more concerned with cashing in on Christmas.

“This is another example of revenue generation coming before public health at the NSLC,” said Simon Sherry, a psychology professor at Dalhousie University.

“Cannabis and alcohol are widely available and actively promoted by the NSLC as a means of profit, despite causing obvious harms.”

The Chronicle Herald obtained a copy of NSLC’s vaccination policy that requires employees and contract service providers to be fully vaccinated by Jan 15. Those who are not will be denied access to NSLC sites and will be put on temporary unpaid leave.

Beverly Ware, a spokeswoman for NSLC, said the corporation chose to wait to see details of the province's policy before implementing its own.

Details came out in early October when Colton LeBlanc, minister of the Public Service Commission, announced that all 11,000 direct employees of the province would be required to be fully vaccinated by Nov. 30.

From there, Ware said NSLC took some time to look into what would be an appropriate vaccination mandate for employees. She said the policy then had to be approved by NSLC’s board of directors.

"We had to give reasonable time for all of our employees to get all of their vaccinations."

Christmas is the busiest time of year at liquor stores. In its most recent 2020 annual report NSLC highlighted the fact it debuted cannabis edibles just in time for Christmas as well as record-breaking efforts to get products to stores.

"In just six days, the distribution centre moved more than 180,000 cases of product, surpassing the previous record by more than 30,000 cases," says the document.

“We far exceeded the volume of product we would move throughout the Christmas and New Year’s seasons and we plan months ahead for that," said the manager of the distribution centre.

Ware denied that the board intentionally delayed its vaccination policy until after the Christmas/New Year’s rush. She said NSLC has enough casual, part-time and full time employees to fully staff all 108 of its stores throughout the holiday season.

"That is the case whether the vaccination deadline was before Christmas or in January," said Ware.

The province's vaccination policy has proven to be a challenge for the public service. Since coming into effect last week hundreds of provincial employees are off the job. Ware could not say how many employees have been vaccinated but that store managers have said most are. Last

week employees were provided documents to report their vaccine. She said numbers would be made available on Jan 15, the deadline for employees to be vaccinated.

But Sherry is not convinced. The professor has repeatedly raised concerns about Nova Scotians' heavy drinking habits. He says every year the province loses twice the amount it makes from alcohol to hospitalizations, domestic violence and premature death because of excess drinking.

"Alcohol already harms and kills in so many ways and Nova Scotians now have to face an additional risk of being exposed to potentially unvaccinated staff members," said Sherry.

NSLC's Ware said store staff and management take all the precautions that any other retailer does to guard the safety of its customers.

Business at NSLC has been booming during the pandemic. Last year's annual financial report shows sales of over \$793 million, up almost \$70 million from the previous fiscal year.

The professor and practising psychologist has been calling on the province to take steps to curb the collateral costs of excessive drinking by imposing higher taxes on alcohol and reducing the number of NSLC outlets in the province.

"NSLC website boasts about responsible stewardship and responsible sales, but their track record of action suggests otherwise," said Sherry.

He said it's well established that alcohol can weaken people immune systems, making them more vulnerable to catching COVID-19. Lots of NSLC customers will be drinking more during the holidays and the province and NSLC should be ensuring staff are fully vaccinated.

"People with underlying health conditions - obesity and kidney disease - are more susceptible to COVID-19, therefore the NSLC owes a higher duty of care to its customers, many of whom will no doubt be immune-compromised."

Deputy Premier Allan MacMaster is the minister responsible for NSLC. The Herald sent a list of questions to MacMaster about what role he played in the NSLC's vaccination policy. MacMaster did not respond directly to the questions.

Gary Andrea, a government spokesman, said Crown corporations have been following provincial guidelines throughout COVID-19. Andrea said each are responsible for their own workplace policies and implementation plans and "can create their own plans depending on their unique needs and operations."

Tom Urbaniak, a political scientist at Cape Breton University, said the NSLC board of directors and CEO have direct authority in establishing an employee vaccination policy. Because it operates as arms-length from the public service, the NSLC is generally not subject to internal directives affecting the provincial public service, said Urbaniak.

But the professor said the NSLC board should provide the public with a thorough explanation for not rolling out its vaccine mandate at the same time as the public service.

"In fact, most of Nova Scotia's Crown corporations have indeed followed the example of the provincial public service," Urbaniak said.

The Herald submitted a list of questions to the NSLC to be passed on to George McLellan, the chairman of the NSLC's board of directors. The questions included whether the board consulted with Nova Scotia Public Health. Ware responded instead, saying it's not standard practice for the chair to respond to inquiries of this nature.

Ware would not say whether NSLC communicated with Public Health about its policy but pointed out that the agency consulted with Public Health throughout the pandemic on implementing appropriate COVID protocols in the workplace. She said its policy was reviewed and vetted by its medical doctor and legal team to ensure it is appropriate, thorough, and accurate.

"We made every effort to ensure it is in keeping with the intent of the province's policy as well as approaches taken by other businesses," said Ware.

The Herald asked the Department of Health and Wellness whether anyone from Public Health, including chief medical officer Dr. Robert Strang reached out to NSLC on its policy.

It is unclear whether anyone did.

"The civil service vaccination directive was an initiative of the Public Service Commission, not Dr. Strang," said Marla MacInnis, a Health Department spokeswoman.

The Herald also asked if Strang recommends NSLC Christmas shoppers should take any extra precautions given the uncertainty of employee vaccination status, but we were provided no response.