



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on December 21, 2021

## D.C. Announces State of Emergency, Sets COVID Booster Mandate for City Workers, Other Measures

Citing “rapidly evolving cases related to Omicron variant,” Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser has declared a public-health emergency, reimposed the indoor masking mandate, and ordered all city employees to get fully vaccinated against COVID and get the booster as well.

Speaking on Monday, Bowser said that she needs to “adjust the District’s posture” amid the “seasonal” surge of COVID infections.

The key measures of the Bowser’s “[COVID-19 Action Plan](#)” include reinstating of the indoor mask mandate; first-in-the-nation implementation of a government vaccine mandate to include boosters; expansion of testing, including new “Test Yourself DC” sites; the launch of the new “Test Yourself Express Program,” the use of rapid tests for students and staff as they return from winter break; and the creation of COVID-19 Testing and Vaccination sites.



AP Images  
Muriel Bowser

### Indoor Mask Mandate

According to the mayor’s [website](#), the indoor mask mandate will begin today and will last until January 31, 2022.

Originally enacted in July, the mandate was lifted on November 22 — just days before the World Health Organization (WHO) [designated](#) Omicron a variant of concern, and the United States imposed travel restrictions from affected African countries.

Per recent city data, Omicron accounts for less than one percent of all COVID cases in the area, yet city health officials are “expecting that number to increase,” while ignoring the emerging evidence that the variant causes much milder symptoms than previous ones.

Interestingly, Bowser lifted the mask requirements in November because of the low levels of COVID hospitalizations. Bowser [praised](#) the vaccines for preventing serious illness in fully vaccinated people, and said that “we’re shifting government response to give you this risk-based information and recommend layering strategies as the best way to protect yourself.”

Notably, according to the city metrics cited in the Action plan, while the cases are on the rise, the rate of hospitalizations has actually improved compared to November numbers, as stands at 4.5 percent, down from 5.1 percent a month ago.

According to [The Washington Post](#), Bowser’s decision came as 10 of 13 members of the D.C. Council



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called on her to reimplement the mandate, arguing the lifting was “poorly timed ahead of winter holiday travel and when many children were not fully vaccinated.”

The outlet added that when Bowser was asked on Monday if she regretted ending the mandate in November only to reimpose it a barely a month later, Bowser replied, “I don’t regret evolving with the virus.”

### **D.C. Government Vaccine Mandate**

According to the new rule, all employees, contractors, interns, and grantees of the D.C. Government must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and must have a booster. There will be no test-out option anymore, and the deadline to comply will be announced shortly.

According to D.C. City Administrator Kevin Donahue, who spoke at the Monday meeting, 866 religious exemptions and 75 medical-exemption requests have been submitted by city government workers. Of the religious exemption requests, 149 have been denied and just one has been approved so far. Of the medical requests, eight have been granted, and 13 denied so far. The remainder of the requests are still being considered, Donahue said.

Since the vaccine-or-testing mandate was implemented for city workers in August, 57 D.C. government workers have been suspended for failing to comply with the rule, and 505 have received a written reprimand that they are out of compliance, the administrator added.

### **Expanded COVID Testing**

According to the plan, in addition to eight firehouse testing sites and the existing 27 so-called Test Yourself DC pick-up and drop-off sites, where the residents can get rapid at-home COVID test kits, the district is adding nine new ones for a total of 36 sites.

The city has also ordered 1,050,000 rapid antigen tests that will be provided to residents for free, but no more than two kits per day, and proof of DC residency will be required.

After using a rapid at-home test, residents will have to report their results to city health authorities.

### **D.C. Public Schools**

The capital’s public schools will be closed for instruction on January 3 and January 4. Staff and families will use those days to pick up rapid antigen tests before returning to in-person instruction.

The city has already moved four schools to virtual instruction for the rest of the week before the holiday break due to the reported COVID cases: Whittier Elementary School, McKinley Tech High School, Turner Elementary School, and Bard High School Early College, per *The Post*.

D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Dr. Lewis Ferebee remarked that such outbreaks are not the norm at D.C. public schools, majority of which have seen “one or less” COVID case “on average.”

Still, the officials called on all parents to get their children ages five and older to get vaccinated, even though the risks associated with the vaccines [arguably](#) far outweigh the benefits for children.

The news from the capital came as President Joe Biden is [expected](#) to announce new COVID measures to fight the Omicron variant that would “go beyond” his already revealed “[Action Plan](#)” against the new strain. The White House has recently [warned](#) unvaccinated Americans that they are “looking at a winter of severe illness and death for yourselves, your families, and the hospitals you may soon overwhelm.”



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