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City to warn, fine and potentially shut down businesses for mask mandate noncompliance

The crackdown is a result of a tenfold increase in hospitalizations since July 1.

OWEN TUCKER-SMITH | 10:53 PM, SEP 01, 2021

STAFF REPORTER



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Jessie Cheung, Staff Photographer

New Haven businesses will face an additional layer of scrutiny in the coming weeks as the city kicks off a new wave of pandemic restrictions enforcement.

For the past several weeks, officials have educated local businesses on how to comply with the citywide mask mandate that has been in place since Aug. 8. But now, establishments that are seen not following the mandate or other safety protocols could face hundreds of dollars in fines, and, if the infringements continue, a forced shutdown, city officials shared at a Wednesday morning press conference. This means business owners will be responsible for requiring that patrons wear masks while inside.

“Businesses were notified properly, and given posters and even masks, so that we can support reopening,” New Haven Health Director Maritza Bond said at the press conference. “While we do support

reopening, we will not tolerate individuals that disregard the lives of the larger population. It is a tough position that I'm in. ... We have to think about the health and well-being of the overall population that we serve.”

Bond said the crackdown would start Thursday morning. Discipline can happen on multiple levels: first, establishments will be met with a verbal warning — the city has issued 28 of those already. Then, they will get a written warning — Bond said there have been two so far. After the written warning, businesses will be fined \$100 per infraction, meaning that one visit could result in a several hundred dollar fine if inspectors notice multiple people without masks.

Members of the New Haven Fire Department will be present at the enforcement visits, officials noted. At the press conference, New Haven Deputy Chief Fire Marshall Jen Forslund said the department would help the city set occupancy limits.

New Haven Mayor Justin Elicker joined Bond in saying the rising level of enforcement is the result of a rapid uptick in cases and hospitalizations over the last two months, both in New Haven and the state as a whole. Connecticut's positivity rate has increased tenfold since July 1, when it was 0.43 percent; now, it has risen to 4.65 percent. During the same period, the number of hospitalizations statewide jumped from 37 two months ago to 363 on Tuesday.

Elicker stressed that the Elm City must remain vigilant and continue to raise the city's vaccination rate. The city's 430 pop-up clinics and government canvassing efforts since February have helped keep vaccination rates steadily above the national average.

As of Monday, just under 69 percent of eligible New Haven residents have been vaccinated, Elicker said, compared to 53 percent nationally.

“It is clear that if you get vaccinated you are much, much more protected from getting COVID,” he said at the press conference. “It could not be easier to get vaccinated.”

The city continues to prioritize publicizing the efficacy of COVID vaccines, Elicker said, but he also said that it also needs to continue convincing Elm City residents that masks are an important and effective mechanism against the spread of the virus.

“I've received one or two emails from people that cite a couple of studies that say that masks are not effective,” the mayor said. “The overwhelming majority of studies indicate that masks are very, very effective.”

If the city does shut down noncompliant businesses in the coming days, it will mirror actions it took earlier on in the pandemic.

In the summer of 2020, at the peak of the first wave of the pandemic, Bond said the city shut down over 13 businesses for COVID restriction

infringements.

It is important that the public does not become complacent, Bond said. She added that assuming that the worst of the pandemic has passed is inadvisable. Indoor activity and the return of university students to the Elm City could increase infection rates.

Enforcement of the restrictions will include monitoring New Haven's nightlife, which is expected to rise in the area surrounding Yale, officials said. In response to questions on the feasibility of enforcing mask mandates at nightclubs, Bond said it is the responsibility of the establishment to enforce mask mandates, and that they should contact the city to brainstorm ways to ensure compliance.

On Wednesday, Elicker also spoke about the recently announced vaccination and testing policy for city employees. Each worker is required to either be fully vaccinated by Sept. 27, or submit to weekly testing.

“Employees will have 24 hours to correct the situation by either getting tested or uploading their vaccination information” if they are found to not be in compliance after that date, Elicker said. “If they do not do that, they will be deemed unable to work and be put on unpaid leave.

Almost 100 percent of cases in New Haven are of the Delta variant, Elicker said at the press conference.



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