



Pentagon 'Exploring' Back Pay for Troops Kicked Out Over COVID Vaccine Mandate

Description

USA: The U.S. Department of Defense may provide back pay to former service members who were removed for not receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, coming after the Pentagon repealed the mandate, a spokesperson confirmed Friday.

A Pentagon spokesperson told The Epoch Times, in response to reports from Politico and others, that regarding back pay, the "Department is still exploring this and will provide its views on legislation of this nature at the appropriate time and through the appropriate process." Dietz did not provide a timetable for when back pay might be considered.

On Tuesday, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin issued a memo ([pdf](#)) formally rescinding the vaccine mandate after lawmakers passed a defense spending bill into law in December that required the change. The Pentagon had already stopped discharging service members who didn't get the vaccine.

"The Department will continue to promote and encourage COVID-19 vaccination for all service members," Austin wrote, coming about a year and a half after it was implemented. "Vaccination enhances operational readiness and protects the force."

Commanders can decide on whether to deploy troops who are not vaccinated, the memo said. That includes when COVID-19 vaccination is mandated "for travel to, or entry into, a foreign nation," it added.

"Certainly commanders do have a responsibility to ensure that if they're sending forces to a place that requires a vaccine that that's a situation that will be addressed, you know, on a case-by-case basis," Pentagon spokesman Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder told reporters on Thursday. "But you know, we have a responsibility for the health and welfare of our forces. And so, you know, again, depending on the situation and the circumstances, it is incumbent on commanders to ensure that they're doing what they need to do to make sure those forces are ready."

The contentious mandate forced more than 8,400 troops out of the military as top officials said they were refusing to obey an order for declining to take the vaccine. Thousands of people sought medical and religious exemptions, although a federal judge last month wrote ([pdf](#)) that the number of service

members who successfully obtained religious exemption is far smaller than those who got medical exemptions.

Austin said more than 2 million service members, or 96 percent of the active duty and reserve forces, are fully vaccinated.

In August 2021 and after the Pfizer vaccine was granted emergency use authorization by the Food and Drug Administration, Austin instituted the mandate and said that it was necessary to protect the health of the military force.

He and other defense leaders argued that for decades troops, particularly those deployed overseas, had been required to get as many as 17 different vaccines, including shots for anthrax. No other vaccine mandates were affected by the new rules.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters in December that the Biden administration had signed an executive order that the shot requirement was necessary to protect the health of the military force. She said that the order was signed on December 13, 2021.



Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin speaks during a news conference at the Pentagon in Washington on Nov. 3, 2022. (Andrew Harnik/AP Photo)

Despite those arguments, Congress agreed to rescind the mandate, with opponents reluctantly saying that perhaps it had already succeeded in getting the bulk of the force vaccinated. Some lawmakers have expressed concerns that the mandate and other policy directives have driven down enlistment in recent years.

Those members of Congress argued that ending the mandate would help with recruiting. Defense officials have pushed back by saying that while it may help a bit, a department survey during the first nine months of last year found that a large majority said the mandate did not change the likelihood they would consider enlisting.

Those who were discharged for refusing to obey a lawful order to take the vaccine received either an honorable discharge or a general discharge under honorable conditions. Austin's memo says that anyone who was discharged can petition their military service to request a change in the "characterization of their discharge" in their personnel records. It does not, however, say what possible corrections could be awarded.

by Jack Phillips

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