

COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination of Special Status Public Sector Employees. An Analysis of Requests for Exemption in the US Air Force

David BARNES¹
Octavian MOLDOVAN²

ABSTRACT

One of the largest public sector operations in the world is within the US military, with over 2 million service members and approximately 1.4 million full-time equivalent civilian workers, with bases and operations in at least 80 different nations. The US military made COVID-19 vaccinations (COVAX) mandatory among all members but allows for requests to accommodate refusals for reasons of personal beliefs. These can be beliefs of conscience, personal morality or religious expression, whether from organized or individual tenets. Multiple articles have been produced during the COVID-19 pandemic identifying willingness to receive COVAX or reasons for COVAX reluctance and refusal. However, almost all data has been obtained from short-response surveys. This study reviews the qualitative data from over 100 extensive interviews conducted with individual military members (from the US Air Force) who requested COVAX exemption. Their reasons given are also provided in a letter written by the member, regardless of rank, directly to the general at the top of their particular command. Examination of the reasons given provides unique insights into the thought processes of requestors. Regardless of the request's outcome, this data demonstrates the administrative and policy importance placed by the US military on at least considering personal beliefs, even in a pandemic, and protecting individual freedoms, even of military members with curtailed rights. By far, disproportionate requests came from lower ranks with some mid-level leadership making formal requests to refuse the COVAX. In this sample, no top leadership requested exemptions.

The analysis finds pressure exerted on members to not submit an exemption request. For those who did, the 111 requests were not a static or set doctrinal view. Arising from at least 29 distinct religious traditions, all requests showed signs of an emerging or developing sense of belief praxis in the face of new situations. Other dominant patterns also emerged. The study found critical objections to the use of fetal stem lines in developing available vaccines and concerns about potential vaccine side effects to the requestor's body. Trust in the process and a sense of autonomy in participation also were found to be critically import to most requests.

POINTS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Our research provides useful insights into the reasoning of special status public sector employees that requested COVID-19 vaccination exemptions, focusing on the demographic characteristics of requestors as well as the reasons they provided. These results can be used by national and local policy makers to design more efficient and effective general policies on mandatory and recommended vaccination policies and to establish adequate rules for granting exemptions for non-medical reasons based on personal beliefs.

KEY WORDS: Covid-19 Vaccinations, vaccine exemptions, public health policy.

¹ Staff Chaplain, U.S. Air Force, Hungary, PhD in Public Policy and Administration, E-mail: dbarnes_942@hotmail.com.

² Lecturer, Department of Public Administration and Management, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail: octavian.moldovan@fspac.ro.