

# As COVID-19 vaccine mandates rise, religious exemptions grow

By COLLEEN LONG and ANDREW DEMILLO | AP



FILE — In this April 27, 2021 file photo, opponents of a bill to repeal Connecticut's religious exemption for required school vaccinations march down Capitol Avenue before the State Senate voted on legislation, in Hartford, Conn. Religious objections, once used only sparingly around the country to get exempted from various required vaccines, are becoming a much more widely used loophole against the COVID-19 shot. (Mark Mirko/Hartford Courant via AP, File)

(AP) - About 3,000 Los Angeles Police Department employees are citing religious objections to try to get out of the required COVID-19 vaccination. In Washington state, thousands of state workers are seeking similar exemptions.

And an Arkansas hospital has been swamped with so many such requests from employees that it is apparently calling their bluff.

Religious objections, once used sparingly around the country to get exempted from various required vaccines, are becoming a much more widely used loophole against the COVID-19 shot.

And it is only likely to grow following President Joe Biden's sweeping new vaccine mandates covering more than 100 million Americans, including executive branch employees and workers at businesses with more than 100 people on the payroll.

The administration acknowledges that a small minority of Americans will use — and some may seek to exploit — religious exemptions. But it said it believes even marginal improvements in vaccination rates will save lives.

It is not clear how many federal employees have asked for a religious exemption, though union officials say there will be many requests. The Labor Department has said an accommodation can be denied if it causes an undue burden on the employer.

In the states, mask and vaccine requirements vary, but most offer exemptions for certain medical conditions or religious or philo-

sophical objections. The use of such exemptions, particularly by parents on behalf of their schoolchildren, has been growing over the past decade.

The allowance was enshrined in the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, which says employers must make reasonable accommodations for employees who object to work requirements because of "sincerely held" religious beliefs.

A religious belief does not have to be recognized by an organized religion, and it can be new, unusual or "seem illogical or unreasonable to others," according to rules laid out by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. But it can't be founded solely on political or social ideas.

That puts employers in the position of determining what is a legitimate religious belief and what is a dodge.

Many major religious denominations have no objections to the COVID-19 vaccines. But the rollout has prompted heated debates because of the longtime role that cell lines derived from fetal tissue have played, directly or indirectly, in the research and development of various vaccines and medicines.

Roman Catholic leaders in New Orleans and St. Louis went so far as to call Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 shot "morally compromised." J&J has stressed that there is no fetal tissue in its vaccine.

Moreover, the Vatican's doctrine office has said it is "morally acceptable" for Catholics to receive COVID-19 vaccines that are based

on research that used cells derived from aborted fetuses. Pope Francis himself has said it would be "suicide" not to get the shot, and he has been fully vaccinated with the Pfizer formula.

In New York, state lawmakers have attempted to make the vaccine mandatory for medical workers, with no religious exemptions. On Tuesday, a federal judge blocked the state from enforcing the rule to give a group of workers time to argue that it is illegal because it lacks the opt-out.

An August AP-NORC poll found that 58% of white evangelical Protestants, 72% of white mainline Protestants, 80% of Catholics and 73% of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated say they have been vaccinated. Seventy percent of nonwhite Protestants say they have been, including 70% of Black Protestants.

Across the U.S., public officials, doctors and community leaders have been trying to help people circumvent COVID-19 mask and vaccine requirements.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, pastor Jackson Lahmeyer is offering a "religious exemption" form on his church's website for download, along with links for suggested donations to the church. The 29-year-old is running for the U.S. Senate as a Republican.

Anyone interested can get the form signed by a religious leader, or Lahmeyer can sign it himself if the person joins the church and donates. He said more than 35,000 people downloaded the form in just three days.

# FBI Director Wray apologizes for bureau's failure to stop 'monster' doctor Larry Nassar

by DYLAN STABLEFORD | Yahoo! News



FBI Director Christopher Wray appearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee Wednesday, September 15, 2021

(Y! NEWS) - Appearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee Wednesday, FBI Director Christopher Wray apologized for the bureau's failure to properly investigate sexual abuse allegations against former USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar.

Wray's testimony came after four of Nassar's victims — Simone Biles, McKayla Maroney, Aly Raisman and Maggie Nichols — described in stunning detail the abuse they suffered and the failure of the agency to take them seriously.

"I'm deeply and profoundly sorry to each and every one of you,"

not treat the case with the "utmost seriousness," including after the bureau was first made aware of them in 2015.

The inspector general estimated that about 70 girls and women were abused by Nassar between the time the FBI was made aware of the allegations and his arrest in late 2016. Wray was appointed to his post in 2017.

The report found that the special agent who interviewed Maroney in 2015 about her claims of Nassar's abuse did not write up a formal report of that interview, known as a "302," for 17 months.

was published. Each of the gymnasts recalled her abuse and the FBI's failings while speaking Wednesday before the panel.

"After telling my entire story of abuse to the FBI in the summer of 2015, not only did the FBI not report my abuse, but when they eventually documented my report 17 months later, they made entirely false claims about what I said," Maroney said. "They chose to lie about what I said and protect a serial child molester rather than protect not only me but countless others."

She added: "What is the point of reporting



Gymnasts Aly Raisman, Simone Biles, McKayla Maroney and Maggie Nichols after testifying on Capitol Hill Wednesday. (Saul Loeb/AFP via Getty Images)

Wray said in his opening statement. "I'm sorry for what you and your families have been through. I'm sorry so many people let you down over and over again. And I'm especially sorry there were people at the FBI who had their own chance to stop this monster back in 2015 and failed, and that is inexcusable. It never should have happened, and we're doing everything in our power to make sure it never happens again."

A report issued by the Justice Department's inspector general in July concluded that the FBI made "fundamental" errors in investigating the abuse allegations against Nassar and did

The special agent, Michael Langeman, was fired by the FBI last week.

The report also found that during the Nassar case, Jay Abbott, the head of the bureau's Indianapolis office, was in talks with USA Gymnastics about getting a possible job with the Olympic Committee. Abbott retired from the bureau in 2018.

In his testimony Wednesday, Wray said those agents "betrayed" the FBI and "broke" the trust that the American people have in the agency.

He said the FBI has made "significant changes," adopting new training protocols and procedures since the inspector general's report

abuse if our own FBI agents are going to take it upon themselves to bury that report in the drawer?"

"It was like serving innocent children up to a pedophile on a silver platter," Raisman said in her testimony.

"We have been failed, and we deserve answers," Biles said through tears. "A message needs to be sent. If you allow a predator to harm children, the consequences will be severe. Enough is enough."

In 2018, Nassar was sentenced to a prison term of up to 175 years after more than 160 women came forward with allegations of sexual assault against him. He is currently in federal prison in Florida.

