

The City of Spokane

Weekly News Update for Nov. 23

Information about COVID-19 is evolving rapidly, and our important work as a City is continuing. We want to make sure our City employees have up-to-date information on both COVID and employee news. We will provide this update, as needed, to communicate what you need to know, while we work to reduce the spread of this disease in our community and continue to provide critical public services.

A Message from Mayor Woodward

Next week, Volunteers of America will move its Young Adult Shelter into a permanent location near Spokane Community College marking an important milestone in our work to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring.

A year and a half ago we announced a plan to fundamentally shift how we transition people out of homelessness as regional partners. Our plan was based on the Continuum of Care 5-Year Plan and focused on initial steps to enhance our system and make it more efficient. [Opening the Young Adult Shelter](#) is the final deliverable.

When the doors open on December 1, welcoming in individuals 18 to 24 years old will be the next step in a journey that began with Spokane County and Spokane Valley coming together with us as the collaborative applicant for a state Department of Commerce grant to operate a space specifically for young adults. Since securing that grant, the partners have also committed funds to purchase and renovate a space into something that will be part of a campus dedicated to wrap-around services and access to technical training – all away from the concentration of chronic homelessness in our downtown core.

While we are celebrating resources dedicated to young adults, we are also starting a ripple effect for all adults. The 44 young adults we are moving out of the low-barrier shelter system frees up capacity for others to come in behind.

The plan we announced a year and a half ago focused on efficiency and outcomes. It had four parts:

- Establish contracts that flex to meet varying needs and provide predictability for providers and individuals who use the resources. Contracts were established with Truth Ministries and The Guardians Foundation in August and September.
- Individualize case management and housing support. The Way Out Center operated by The Salvation Army will open next month.
- Establish a young adult space with services and case management. We are celebrating with VOA the opening of the Young Adult Shelter in its permanent location.
- Engage regional partners to better leverage resources. The outcomes just noted were accomplished through continuous regional discussion over the past year and a half.

Advancements of this magnitude take time to develop. That's why work and planning have already gone into the next evolution of our plan. That includes:

- Capital investments in the VOA Crosswalk Project
- Ongoing operation of the Cannon Street Shelter and The Way Out Center
- A proposed new low-barrier shelter outside of the downtown core
- A capital contribution for a rapid rehousing project
- And, discussions with private sector partners about how to better engage them as partners in this regional effort

As regional partners, we have accomplished a lot over the past year and a half and are prepared to continue our work together to provide the individualized services and build the types of housing that transition people out of homelessness.

Vaccine Mandate Information

The state announced its intentions to implement a vaccine mandate that mirrors the federal mandate, which was clarified earlier this month by the federal Office of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and is currently on pause as a result of a challenge in federal court in the southern U.S. City Human Resources and Legal departments are continuing to monitor the federal court case and gather any new information about the 5th District Federal Court case and state guidance as it becomes available.

Here's what it means to you as a City employee:

- HR is working with IT to finalize a COVID-19 vaccine verification process. The intention is to initiate vaccine verification for employees that are already fully vaccinated as soon as possible to better manage the workload and demands on HR. More information about how that process will work is coming soon.
- The federal mandate covers employers of 100 or more organization-wide, which includes the City of Spokane and all of its divisions and departments. Impact bargaining will occur separately with the represented employee groups. Accommodations will be based on specific working conditions and the ability to reasonably accommodate within the required function.
- Washington will follow federal OSHA's criteria for a COVID-19 vaccine mandate, pending current court challenges. A timeline for the court challenge is not yet known.
- The state will wait for judicial decisions and follow the criteria from OSHA, except where changes may be necessary to align with state laws. Specifically, employers with 100 or more employees will be covered, and testing will be provided as an alternative.
- Implementation of the federal and state mandates are dependent upon resolution of the legal challenge in 5th District Federal Court and any new state guidance. At this time, we anticipate full implementation will occur after the first of the year.
- The 5th District Federal Court challenge and new mandates do not apply to City employees previously covered under the state healthcare mandate.

The federal and state mandates are still new and guidance, both legal and administrative, is still evolving. We expect there may be changes yet to come and are committed to keeping you updated as new information becomes available.

Health Risk Assessment

Does your position fall under one of the below Associations or Unions?

Your collective bargaining agreement requires you to complete a Health Risk Assessment under your health insurance plan in order to avoid being charged a monthly \$30 Administration Fee. The Health Risk Assessment should be **completed by Tuesday, Nov. 30.**

- Managerial & Professional A & B
- Mayor
- Fire Managerial
- Exempt-Confidential
- City Council
- City Council Staff
- Judges
- Court Commissioners
- Local 270 Prosecuting Attorneys

Employees who complete the annual online Health Risk Assessment will have their monthly Benefit Administration Fee waived for the 2022 plan year. **(Benefits Administration fee is \$30 a month/\$360 a year)**

Premera Members

Premera members must send a copy of their Completion Certificate to the [Employee Benefits Department](#).

After signing into your account at ([Premera.com](#)) go to Benefits Coverage>Wellness Tools>Start Wellness Tools>Health Risk Assessment tile

Kaiser Permanente Members

After signing into your account ([kp.org/wa](#)), go to the "Health Profile" tile on the bottom of the main page. Click on "Complete your Health Profile"

The **Health Risk Assignment should be completed during Oct. 27 – Nov. 30, 2021** If you experience problems logging in, please call the Benefits Department at 509-625-6565.

Mandatory Payroll Tax Effective Jan. 1, 2022

Taxation of employees in Washington state for the new WA Cares Fund (Long-Term Care Tax) begins in January 2022. The one-time opt-out period has ended. To qualify for an exemption from the tax, you must have purchased a private Long-Term Care plan and have the plan in force prior to November 1, 2021. If you have done so, below are the necessary steps to obtain an exemption. Please read carefully:

1. [Create a SAW account](#). This account also provides you access to Paid Family Medical Leave benefits.
 - If you have used Unemployment, Paid Family Medical Leave (PFML) benefits or renewed vehicle tabs online in the past, you should already have a SAW account.
2. Visit [WA Cares Fund](#) to complete an exemption application.
 - You are attesting that you have individual coverage. At this time, no specific information regarding your policy is needed. **However**, it is our understanding, the State is creating an auditing program for exempt residents.
 - Proof of ID will be required. Please have this image ready to upload beforehand.
3. **Once approved, kindly submit a copy of your exemption approval letter to** Accountingpayroll@spokanecity.org.

- Your exemption letter must be submitted prior to December 31, 2021 to ensure you are not paying the tax beginning January 2022. Please allow additional time for Payroll to process.
- The turnaround time for receiving this letter, after completing your application, can fluctuate. The letter will be mailed to you and uploaded to your SAW account.

Important things to note:

- Employee Benefits nor Payroll are not able to assist with your login credentials to SAW.
- The WA Cares Fund Exemption website is overloaded and occasionally crashes; the best times to access the site is evenings and weekends.
- If you do not submit your letter of exemption by December 31, 2021, you will be required to pay the tax through, at minimum, March 31, 2022. Payroll can only remove the tax, on behalf of an employee, quarterly.
- A screenshot that you have submitted an exemption will not suffice, you must provide the official letter to be exempt from the tax.

The City of Spokane Payroll Department and Employee Benefits Department have no additional information to share other than referring you to the [WA Cares Fund website](#).

Paid Family Medical Leave Rate Change Effective Jan. 1, 2022

For the first time since Paid Family and Medical Leave launched, the **premium rate will increase**. This change goes into effect Quarter 1 of 2022. The split of the employer and employee share of the premium rates will also change in the new year.

Starting January 1, 2022, the premium rate will be 0.6%.

The new premium rate of 0.6% takes effect on Jan. 1, 2022. But for now, the current rate of 0.4% is in effect until Dec. 31, 2021.

Employers will pay approximately 27% of the total premium and employees will pay about 73%. For more information on Paid Family and Medical Leave, [click here](#).

More Information to Assist You

Here are some more resources from our Employee Assistance Program:

- [Stress, Depression and the Holidays: Tips for Coping](#)
Don't let the holidays become something you dread. Instead, take steps to prevent the stress and depression that can descend during the holidays. Learn to recognize your holiday triggers so you can combat them before they lead to a meltdown. With a little planning and some positive thinking, you can find peace and joy during the holidays.
- [Make The Holidays Your Own](#)
So it's that time of year again. You take one look at the calendar and you're hit with pictures of perfect holidays. There are kids frolicking in the snow, big families laughing around a huge meal, and smitten couples exchanging gifts in front of the fireplace. The pressure is on to make the traditional holiday images come to life—or else! If you don't belong in a traditional holiday portrait you can still make the holidays your own by creating your own traditions.

Employee Information Portal (covid19.spokanecity.org/)

Remember, this Employee Information Portal is a great resource for employees to stay current on what's happening with the COVID-19 response. The [Employee Information Portal](#) can be accessed from work or home, using a computer or mobile device. All of the emailed information we have sent to employees is archived here.