

'Time to heal the divisions': Sask. ending proof of vaccination Monday

Urging tolerance and unity, Premier Scott Moe announced a firm date for the end of Saskatchewan's vax pass.

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Premier Scott Moe delivers new information to the public on restrictions and mandates surrounding COVID-19 at the Saskatchewan Legislative Building on Tuesday, February 8, 2022 in Regina. PHOTO BY KAYLE NEIS /Regina Leader-Post

Premier Scott Moe said the decision to remove all remaining COVID-19 public health measures is based on a “blend” of science and public opinion as he seeks to mend the societal rifts created during the pandemic.

When asked if his decision to phase out remaining measures over the month of February was influenced by the [recent freedom convoys taking place across the country](#), Moe said he and his caucus have been listening to people from across the province.

“Individuals, yes, have an influence as they talk to their respective MLAs. Whether or not they’re in a convoy, they’re still individuals and we respect that,” Moe told reporters Tuesday during a press conference.

What he hears from people is about the negative, unintended consequences of public health orders and their desire to go back to normal life, Moe said.

“Ultimately, we blend that with the science that we have,” he said.

On Tuesday, Moe announced the province’s proof of vaccination policy will end at 12:01 a.m. Feb. 14, saying the benefits of this policy are no longer outweighing the costs. This means anyone — whether vaccinated or unvaccinated — will be able to celebrate Valentine’s Day by dining in at a restaurant or heading to a movie theatre.

The indoor mask mandate will lift March 1, after the existing public health order expires on Feb. 28. With the expiry of that final order, self-isolation will also no longer be mandatory for people who test positive for COVID-19. However, Dr. Saqib Shahab, the province’s chief medical health officer, still encouraged people to stay home if they are showing symptoms.

Since October, Saskatchewan residents have been required to show proof of receiving two shots to enter bars, restaurants, theatres and other businesses, or show a negative COVID-19 test.

Moe resisted introducing such a system in the fall, saying it would create “two classes” of citizens. He reversed policy in September and has credited the system with raising vaccine uptake.

Saskatchewan’s eHealth will continue to make proof of vaccination records and QR codes available to residents for use where needed, including for travel or in other jurisdictions, the province said.

Vaccines and rapid test kits will continue to be widely accessible.

On Jan. 26, Shahab said Saskatchewan needed to “stay the course for another four to six weeks” with its existing measures “to prevent a rebound.” The proof of vaccination policy will drop fewer than three weeks after he made that statement, while masking will remain until around five weeks from that statement.

“Our trajectory of case numbers, as much as we can determine (from) wastewater surveillance, hospitalizations, it is actually tracking better than even the most optimistic scenarios, and I think that is quite significant,” Shahab told reporters Tuesday.

Moe recently cited an Angus Reid Institute poll in which 62 per cent of 128 Saskatchewan respondents agreed it was time to “end restrictions and let people self-isolate if they’re at risk” — the highest rate of support among surveyed provinces.

Saskatchewan NDP Leader Ryan Meili argued Moe’s moves are motivated by politics more than policy. He said Moe relaxed measures prematurely in late winter 2021 and again in July, making it hard to trust the premier’s judgment.

“He always wants to be the first to remove public health protections, and yet the last to bring them in when they’re needed,” Meili said during a Saskatoon news conference Tuesday afternoon.

He told reporters Moe should release a clear “roadmap” for when restrictions will be relaxed and tie them to specific metrics, as the premier did in the summer, and that the government should resume daily reporting of COVID-19 data.

He could not say whether now is the appropriate time to remove the proof of vaccination policy because he does not have access to that data.

“Right now he’s saying he’s giving us a roadmap, but he’s actually asking people to drive blind,” Meili said.

Once government mandates are gone, Moe urged people to respect the choices made by those around them, whether on vaccine status or mask use. He said by respecting other peoples’ decisions, Saskatchewan will be able to heal some of the rifts created by the pandemic.

“As we find our way through these mandates, and I believe we will, in the weeks ahead at all levels ... we need to make every effort to heal some of the divisions that have been created in our communities,” Moe said.

“We shouldn’t be dwelling or focusing in on what other people’s decisions are. We each should do our own personal risk assessment.”

But with the province’s recent move to weekly instead of daily COVID-19 reporting, Meili said people are no longer being provided with the information they need to make those risk assessments.

“He’s out there telling you as Saskatchewan people to make your own choices, to make your own risk assessments. But he’s giving you less information to do that with,” he said.

Moe acknowledged the future of the pandemic remains uncertain and that if future waves hit Saskatchewan in the months ahead, public health orders could be reintroduced.

“We’ll assess what that wave means and is at that point in time as far as transmissibility, as far as is it acting more like Delta with respect to the impact on the health-care system or more like Omicron,” he said.

Health care workers previously said the announcement was premature. The Saskatchewan Health Authority projects an “overwhelming surge” of COVID-19 hospital admissions in coming weeks.

On Jan. 12, Moe repeated there would be no further public health measures in the province despite surging COVID-19 cases while also telling people they should [“trust themselves”](#) as they navigate the fifth wave.

In the first month of 2022, [20,765 people received their first dose](#) — bringing the province to 963,399 people with one dose as of Jan. 31. With more than [20 per cent of the total population still unvaccinated, Saskatchewan](#) continues to battle it out with Alberta and the territories for the worst record in Canada.

January became the lowest vaccination month since vaccines were widely available. December had 38,799 first doses given; November, 32,272; October, 48,047 and September, 41,948.

— *with files from Zak Vescera*