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Moscow Businesses Call For Free Vaccination for Labor Migrants

Unless the rules around foreigners receiving vaccines are relaxed, entrepreneurs doubt Moscow's mandatory vaccination campaign will be a success.

By Jake Cordell

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Delivery Club is among the companies calling for Moscow to relax rules against foreign citizens receiving the coronavirus vaccine. **RBC / TASS**

Moscow's business community is calling on the government to relax restrictions on foreign citizens being vaccinated in state clinics to ensure thousands of couriers, delivery staff, taxi drivers, construction workers and others can get the coronavirus jab.

The city tightened rules earlier this year to ensure Russian citizens and residents would be prioritized in its vaccination drive, requiring those seeking a vaccine in a free state clinic to have a residency permit in Moscow.

Some private clinics were still offering vaccines to foreign citizens, though prices started from around 14,000 rubles ($194) for the two-dose regimen.

But amid a sluggish vaccination drive in the capital and public scepticism over the new mandatory inoculations, several business owners have said that Moscow must allow foreign workers — many of whom may lack the official paperwork required to get a free jab in the city's state clinics — to be vaccinated.

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Delivery Club, Russia's largest online fast food delivery service, told The Moscow Times "including non-residents in the list of those who can get vaccinated at free state clinics is a priority for us." If the rules are changed, the company said it will be able to launch a mass vaccination campaign for its couriers in cooperation with some of the capital's other largest delivery companies.

Migrant workers and labor organizations are also calling for free vaccines to be made more widely available.

"Labor migrants are one of the most vulnerable groups in Russian society — both from a social and economic point of view," a representative of the "Courier" delivery workers' organization said.

"But Moscow authorities have excluded migrants from being able to get vaccinated free of charge, while they are also making a vaccination certificate mandatory in order to carry on working. Vaccination should be free for everyone — because the fight against the pandemic concerns everyone, not just certain citizens."

The block on non-residents being vaccinated in state clinics has remained even as the Russian government is preparing to launch a vaccine tourism scheme, offering foreign citizens the chance to pay to come to Russia to be vaccinated with its homemade Sputnik V vaccine.

'Vaccinate everyone'

The number of labor migrants in Moscow fell by 40% during the pandemic, Russian officials have said, though their numbers are still close to one million — making up around one in seven of the capital's workforce. Issues with proper documentation have been exacerbated during the pandemic, as Russia sealed its borders in March 2020 and has issued several decrees to automatically extend visa and residency permits for foreign citizens from most countries.

Moscow's mandatory vaccination campaign, under which businesses operating in the service sector must ensure 60% of their employees are vaccinated, has won cautious support from entrepreneurs and business leaders. But they say they need the government to relax the rules around vaccinating migrants to help them hit the target and, crucially, control the spread of the coronavirus, which has accelerated dramatically in the capital in recent weeks.

In a statement outlining how Moscow's entrepreneurs want city authorities to battle the

virus, support firms and avoid another lockdown, small business ombudsman Anastasia Tatulova said: "Vaccinate all labor migrants. Start with delivery staff and taxi drivers — go for 100%, vaccinate everyone — it doesn't matter if they have a permit or not," she said, referring to current rules requiring foreign citizens to have a temporary residence permit with an address in Moscow and a relevant stamp in their passport to be eligible for a vaccination.

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Head of the Russian Entrepreneurs' Movement Andrey Kovalev said he would back proposals that make it mandatory for labor migrants to receive a coronavirus vaccine to work in Russia.

Following vocal pressure from businesses, Moscow authorities looked poised to loosen the restrictions Thursday evening, as part of an overhaul of the capital's approach to vaccination and containing the coronavirus.

After a meeting between the capital's business leaders and Mayor Sergei Sobyanin on Thursday afternoon, restaurateur Dmitry Levitsky said the city would agree to open up vaccinations for foreign workers by early July in a new decree set to be published in the coming days.

Earlier in the day the Moscow Oblast health department said it was considering opening up paid vaccination for labor migrants with the newly-approved Sputnik Light vaccine — a one-dose jab which is made up of the first part of Russia's flagship Sputnik V vaccine.

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