

An open letter to the contra dance community

We, the undersigned contra dance organizations, are grateful to be putting on dances once again and we applaud dance organizers everywhere for their successful efforts at safely restarting the many dance series and events that have so enriched our lives for decades.

Although we believe that every dance organization has the right to establish its own COVID-19 policies with respect to registration, testing, masking, and reporting, we feel strongly that no organization should have a policy that excludes unvaccinated or unboosted dancers. Such vaccine mandates are no longer scientifically justified and we are deeply troubled by the way they put up barriers to diversity and inclusion in our dance communities. Unfortunately, many dance series, festivals, and camps – particularly in the northeast – continue to have these mandates.

The impact of vaccine mandates extends well beyond the duration of any dance event. One can't simply "unvaccinate" after every dance. While vaccinating may be an obvious and easy choice for some, for others it remains complicated and difficult. People are resistant to vaccinating for a variety of reasons including, to name but a few, medical ineligibility, complex medical conditions, side effects from prior vaccinations, "vaccine fatigue", religious or philosophical beliefs, and mistrust in the government and/or medical profession, due to past mistakes and abuses. Such resistance helps explain why less than one in five eligible Americans have opted to receive the bivalent booster despite it being available now for many months.

Because getting a vaccine or a booster presents serious obstacles for so many people, dance organizations should be careful not to adopt or sustain vaccine mandates without compelling evidence that such mandates make dances tangibly safer. Perhaps they once did when breakthrough cases were rare, but now, these cases have become so common, there is little reason to believe that unvaccinated or unboosted dancers pose any more of a risk of spreading infection at a dance than fully vaccinated dancers. Indeed, in a recent meeting of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), the CDC clarified that the goal of the COVID-19 vaccine program is to prevent severe infection, not transmission, and in a joint letter in March to the Florida Surgeon General, the FDA and CDC admitted that the latest outcome data indicate only "a modest benefit in the prevention of infection and transmission that wanes over time." In fact, a study published just last month in the New England Journal of Medicine found that the effectiveness of the bivalent booster against infection drops to zero after just 16 weeks.

Vaccines and boosters do continue to reduce the likelihood of severe infection, but that individual benefit does not have transmission or public safety implications that would warrant a vaccine mandate. Accordingly, organizations as disparate as the United States Armed Forces, Goldman Sachs, and the New York Metropolitan Opera have rescinded their vaccine mandates and such mandates have all but disappeared from public spaces including places of worship, schools, theaters, music venues, dance halls, museums, restaurants, and bars.

The wider contra dance community has strived for many years to be welcoming and inclusive of all people. Vaccine mandates that fail to make dance events appreciably safer yet exclude as much as 80% of the population are illogical and unjust and, at this point, they only serve to fracture and isolate our dance community. And the longer they remain in place, the more harm they do. We therefore urge our fellow dance organizers to end policies that exclude unvaccinated or unboosted dancers, and we look forward to the day when everyone, regardless of their vaccination status, is once again free to attend whatever dance they like.

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If your dance organization would like to sign this letter, please send an email to openletter@lenoxcontradance.org and we will add you to the list.

1. Lenox Contra Dance	Lenox, MA	04/20/2023
2. Columbia County Contra Dance	Chatham, NY	04/24/2023
3. TapRoot Sessions	Sheffield, MA	04/28/2023
4. Sheffield Contra Dance	Sheffield, MA	05/14/2023

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1. ACIP meeting on 2/24/23 under “Considerations for future planning, COVID-19 vaccines”
www.cdc.gov/vaccines/acip/meetings/downloads/slides-2023-02/slides-02-24/COVID-10-Oliver-508.pdf
2. Letter to Florida Surgeon General in the third paragraph
<https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2023/p0313-letter.html>
3. New England Journal of Medicine study, top left graph (A)
<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2302462>
4. Uptake percentage of bivalent booster: click on “Updated (Bivalent) Booster Dose” chart
https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#vaccinations_vacc-people-booster-percent-pop5