



COVID-19 “Omicron” Variant United States Advisory Update

The emergence and subsequent explosion COVID-19 “Omicron” variant has the potential to cause disruption to the progress the maritime industry has made in fighting the pandemic over the past two years. While this is yet another twist in the journey out of the pandemic, the world has become more well equipped to fight this and future variants of the virus.

On November 24, 2021 a new COVID-19 variant was first detected in Botswana and South Africa. On December 1, 2021, the first confirmed case of the Omicron variant was identified. Omicron spreads and infects at a more rapid pace than previous forms of the virus. While this variant may spread more rapidly than Delta, and is poised to become the dominant strain as early as January, 2022, early reports also indicate that it causes less severe illness. Scientists have cautioned against placing too much stock in early reports of the above “good news.” In the United States, the number of Omicron cases has exploded. The number of deaths, while currently elevated, has not. More of the hospitalizations are among unvaccinated patients and there continues to be an apparent correlation with comorbidities. The effects of the new strain have exacerbated COVID related healthcare labor shortages. Increasing hospitalizations have strained healthcare systems unable to remain fully staffed through an exhausting two (2) years of pandemic and layoffs due to vaccine mandate non-compliance.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) continues to opine that vaccines remain the best public health measure to protect people from COVID-19, slow transmission, and reduce the likelihood of new variants emerging. Early indications point to reduced effectiveness of a single round (1 shot of J&J or 2 of Pfizer/Moderna) of the COVID vaccine in fighting against the new omicron variant. The CDC recommends that everyone 5 years and older be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. The CDC further recommends that everyone age eighteen (18) years and older get a booster shot at least two (2) months after their initial Johnson & Johnson (single shot) vaccine.

Due to fluctuating port stays, seafarers vaccinated in the United States have been receiving the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The J&J vaccine requires only a single dosage, and therefore does not require a second shot 2 weeks after the first. To best protect against the omicron variant, booster shots for seafarers should be strongly considered. As research into the variant progresses, we will have a better idea of when and if booster shots will become a requirement. There is the potential that the definition of “fully vaccinated” changes to mean that a seafarer has received the initial dose and is up to date with a booster shot. So far, local restrictions have not “required” that an individual be boosted. Currently, an individual is considered fully vaccinated two (2) weeks after receiving the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. We note that Johnson & Johnson recently announced that they would slow production of the single shot vaccine. The company has stated that they still have millions of doses. As that inventory dwindles, it may cease to be an option for seafarers.

While the variant continues to be studied and understood, there have been responses in some nations that affect the maritime industry. To date, fifty-six (56) countries have placed restrictions on travel from

Southern Africa, where the omicron variant was first discovered. In the United States, from December 6, 2021 on, all passengers by air are required to show a negative COVID-19 test result taken no more than 24 hours before travel, or documentation of having recovered from COVID-19 in the past 90 days before they board their flight. These rules apply to both vaccinated and unvaccinated passengers. Additionally, unvaccinated travelers must self-quarantine in the United States for seven days and undergo further testing. There are currently no exemptions for seafarers. Unfortunately, this has the potential to affect the already tenuous crew change crisis.

At this time, booster shots for already vaccinated seafarers and continued efforts to reach 100% crew vaccination levels appear to be the best defenses against this emerging COVID variant. This is also the best way to address a wide range of ever-changing regulations affecting seafarers ashore. With vaccination available the CDC has shortened recommended quarantine time for individuals exposed to the virus. The CDC now recommends quarantine for 5 days (instead of 10) followed by 5 days of masking for individuals exposed to the virus.

In early December the IMO assembly adopted a resolution to combat the pandemic's effect on seafarers. This resolution includes guidance for member states to "prioritize vaccination of seafarers, as far as practicable, in their national COVID-19 vaccination programmes," and to "consider exempting seafarers from any national policy requiring proof of COVID-19 vaccination as a condition for entry, taking into account that seafarers should be designated as 'key workers' and that they travel across borders frequently." The goal of this resolution is to address the restrictions that have thus far not addressed the unique needs of the seafarer, the very people whose herculean efforts have played such a huge role in keeping the global economy running.

An additional consideration is the varied responses to COVID at United States Ports. Ports consider guidelines from local, federal, and state health agencies in determining COVID-19 related restrictions and protocols. Depending on the State or City, local health agencies may have far more stringent or more relaxed rules when compared to the Federal response. Again, the most effective solution is the continued vaccination of seafarers. Currently, vaccination remains the best means to take the guesswork out of the United States' patchwork of local COVID restrictions and guidelines.

As this issue remains in flux, shipowners should defer to the CDC for the latest and most up to date guidance. Guidance may be found at the following link:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>

Respectfully submitted,

Taylor E. Trumbower | Correspondent | Lamorte Burns & Co., Inc.
201 St. Charles Avenue, Suite 2500, New Orleans, LA 70170 USA
T: +1 (504) 833 0312 | M: +1 (504) 754 5214 | F: +1 (504) 833 9071
Lamorte Burns 24 Hour Emergency Assistance: 1-203-761-6000
E: taylort@lamorte.com W: <http://www.lamorte.com>

