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## Despite COVID surge, Houston companies won't issue strict travel guidelines for the holidays

**Gwendolyn Wu**

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A passenger makes a stop to get a fresh new protective mask before entering William P. Hobby Airport's security checkpoint on Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020, in Houston.

Photo: Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Even as public health officials urge people to stay at home during the holidays, Houston companies are hesitant to issue strict policies on personal travel during the pandemic.

Legally, companies can require employees who take trips during the holidays to quarantine upon their return or test negative for COVID-19 before allowing them to come back to the workplace. But these days, with people eating indoors at restaurants,

frequenting shopping centers and for some, going to the office, making a travel policy just doesn't make sense, said Mike Muskat, a partner at the Houston employment law firm Muskat, Mahony & Devine.

“Since March, the CDC has loosened its guidance and it's become clear the pandemic is everywhere,” Muskat said. “I think employers are starting to realize it's really hard to try to actually regulate travel.”

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## ‘Serve as examples’

Many companies have backed off issuing strict policies around holiday travel, opting to leave it up to the employee.

At some of Houston's hospital systems, such as Houston Methodist and Memorial Hermann, executives have not instituted strict policies for going out-of-state during the holiday season. Instead, they're hoping that their employees understand the gravity of the situation and postpone their plans.

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Just before Thanksgiving, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued recommendations asking would-be travelers to stay home and avoid multi-household gatherings during the holidays. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said Monday that Christmas travel will pose a serious risk and urged people to wear masks and practice social distancing

“We’re really encouraging our people to serve as examples and follow the CDC guidance,” said Memorial Hermann CEO David Callender.

It “doesn’t make sense” to prohibit travel, Callender said – an echo of sentiments by federal public health officials who recently cut quarantine guidelines from 14 to as little as seven days to boost compliance.

Rice University, which at one point asked students to register any planned spring break trips before the pandemic shuttered in-person learning, said it was “strongly encouraging” its faculty and staff to follow CDC guidelines.

It is offering testing on-campus for employees, said Sue Prochazka, Rice’s director of benefits and human resources.

“We are not requiring quarantine any differently than we have been,” Prochazka said. “We have not only been honoring employees’ request to take time off but have also encouraged it as we all need some down time in these times.”

Camden, the Houston-based apartment developer, also does not require employees to quarantine or test if they travel during the holidays. If an employee tests positive for COVID-19, they receive emergency pay and do not have to use paid time off during their quarantine.

NRG Energy, the electricity company, said employees who travel must answer a checklist of questions about their health and exposure to COVID-19 before returning to their facilities. Most of their office-based employees have been working from home since March, and would be able to work during self-quarantine, said spokesperson Pat Hammond.

## **‘Probably the minority now’**

While some workplaces shy away from iron-clad rules, others are issuing strict policies in an effort to limit the havoc COVID-19 could wreak on its patient base.

Workers at MD Anderson Cancer Center are being asked to avoid travel and large gatherings. If they do gather, said human resources director Paul Kattapong, they need to work remotely if possible for two weeks before going back into the office.

“If employees do travel outside of Texas, they must register their personal travel prior to leaving,” Kattapong said. “We are not requiring them to be tested before traveling.”

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When the cancer center’s employees return to Houston, they must quarantine for two weeks or get present two negative COVID-19 tests within six days of return.

Muskat, the employment lawyer, says he’s not surprised that a facility like MD. Anderson would have stricter requirements because of how vulnerable their cancer patients are due to weaker immune systems. Legally, workplaces can regulate their employees’ travel plans.

“There’s nothing that says employers cannot tell employees that if they travel, for example, they will have to stay out of the office for a certain period of time,” Muskat said.

Staff writers Nancy Sarnoff and L.M. Sixel contributed to this story.

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