

Workers Awarded Millions After Denied COVID-19 Vaccine Religious Exemptions



Employees who were fired after being denied religious exemptions to COVID-19 vaccination requirements are increasingly finding success in the courtroom, with many receiving substantial compensation for unlawful terminations.

A federal jury in Detroit awarded more than \$12 million in November to a former Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan (BCBSM) employee who was denied a religious exemption and terminated from her job after refusing to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

The plaintiff, Lisa Domski, a long-time BCBSM employee, argued that her termination violated federal anti-discrimination laws, including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which requires employers to accommodate workers' sincerely held religious beliefs unless doing so would impose an undue hardship. Domski's attorneys contended that the company failed to explore reasonable accommodations before taking

disciplinary action. The jury awarded Domski \$10 million in punitive damages, \$1.7 million in lost pay, and \$1 million in noneconomic damages.

In California, a state judge recently [upheld a \\$7.8 million jury verdict](#) against Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) for denying vaccine exemption requests. The plaintiffs, six former employees, claimed that their terminations were rooted in discriminatory practices rather than legitimate public health concerns. BART argued that it implemented its vaccine mandate in good faith to protect employees and the public, but the court found that it failed to properly evaluate the plaintiffs' religious accommodation requests.

Legal experts suggest that the success of these lawsuits stems from inconsistent enforcement of vaccine mandates and a failure by employers to engage in the interactive process to provide reasonable accommodations. In many instances, the terminated employees had no interaction with other individuals in the course of performing their jobs or worked remotely.

"Employers must show that accommodating an employee's religious beliefs would cause more than a minimal cost or disruption to their operations," said one labor attorney. "In many of these cases, they simply skipped that step."

The surge in litigation is not limited to private employers. Public-sector workers, including teachers, firefighters, and healthcare professionals, have also brought successful claims against government agencies. Courts have scrutinized how mandates were implemented, often finding procedural flaws or inadequate efforts to accommodate religious objections.

A prominent example involves the U.S. Navy, where service members filed lawsuits after being denied religious exemptions to the military's vaccine requirement. In 2022, a federal judge issued an injunction preventing the Navy from taking disciplinary action against unvaccinated sailors with pending

exemption requests. While the military eventually rescinded its vaccine mandate, these lawsuits continue to highlight tensions between public health policies and individual rights.

Critics of these settlements argue that they could discourage future vaccine mandates, potentially undermining public health initiatives. However, proponents maintain that these cases reinforce the importance of protecting religious freedoms, even during a public health crisis.

The financial implications for employers are significant. Beyond the cost of settlements and jury awards, organizations face reputational damage and increased scrutiny over their policies. Several companies and government agencies have revisited their exemption protocols in light of recent court decisions, aiming to avoid similar lawsuits.

As more cases make their way through the courts, employees and employers alike will be closely watching for precedent-setting rulings. For now, the message from the judiciary is unmistakable—religious rights cannot be sidelined, even in the face of a pandemic.