

# Insurers to cover COVID

## Three of state's largest commit to paying for shot

BY LISA L. COLANGELO  
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Three of the state's largest health insurance companies said Friday they would continue to cover updated COVID-19 vaccine for members, as the impact of new federal guidelines on cost and accessibility of the shot remained unclear.

Aetna, Emblem Health and UnitedHealthcare told Newsday they would pay for fully insured members who want to receive the vaccine. Aetna and UnitedHealthcare officials said self-funded employer plans made their own decisions on coverage.

Earlier this week, Gov. Kathy Hochul urged state insurers to cover the vaccine for all New Yorkers who request it as federal officials narrow the populations it recommended for the shot.



Gov. Kathy Hochul signed an executive order on Sept. 5 that allows pharmacies to distribute the COVID-19 vaccine. ■ Video: newsday.tv

On Aug. 27 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration authorized the updated COVID-19 vaccines for people 65 and older, along with younger people who have chronic health conditions. Previously, COVID-19 vaccines were recommended for everyone 6

months and older.

Insurance coverage of vaccines is usually linked to decisions from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, a panel that is not scheduled to meet



until Thursday.

### Uncertainty on policy

This left doctor's offices and pharmacies uncertain about who they were allowed to vaccinate and if the vaccines would be covered by insurance.

"There are so many different directives from all the different agencies," said Dr. Eric Levene, a pediatrician who works with several Long Island offices of Allied Physicians Group. "There is no one clear straight path like there has been in the past with vaccines."

Infectious disease experts expressed concerns after U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. fired all members of the ACIP in June and replaced some with people who share his skeptical view of vaccines.

Hochul responded by signing an executive order last Friday that expands access to the vac-

cine in New York, saying she will "continue developing a long-term plan to fight these reckless decisions coming out of Washington, because I have no choice."

After the signing, an HHS spokesperson called the executive order "misguided and ill-conceived," and insisted anyone who wanted the vaccine could get it after consulting with their health care provider.

### Clarifying information

The president of an organization that represents state health insurers said plans were committed to working with the state to "ensure New Yorkers have the information they need on the importance of vaccines, where and how to get immunized, and understand coverage rules."

"It is also important that immunization recommendations be informed by science that reflect the latest medical evidence, including but not limited to the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices,"

# GOP hits LI Dems over Mamdani's run for

BY BILLY HOUSE  
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Long Island Democrats Tom Suozzi and Laura Gillen are being taunted by House Speaker Mike Johnson's GOP political arm for having "no plan" to stop the "dangerous" Zohran Mamdani from becoming New York City's mayor.

Both are very publicly seeking to distance themselves from the democratic socialist, who in June decisively won their party's primary to be the Big Apple's mayor, and who polls show is the front-runner in the November general election.

But Republicans say their criticisms of Mamdani are thinly contrived political cover.

"Tom Suozzi and Laura Gillen's concern about dangerous socialist Zohran Mamdani is nothing more than fake outrage," Maureen O'Toole, a spokeswoman for the National Republican Congressional Committee said in a statement.

Suozzi did not respond through his office. And a Gillen spokesperson declined



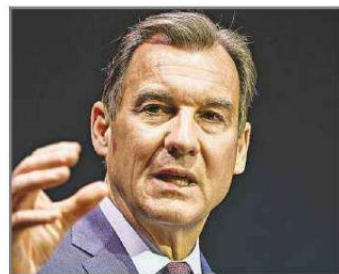
Rep. Laura Gillen

to comment.

Veteran New York Democratic political consultant Hank Sheinkopf spelled out the dilemma for both Suozzi and Gillen as the GOP tries to make the two wear Mamdani and his political positions — and the two lawmakers wrestle with whether to address his candidacy, or not.

"Mamdani is the best thing to happen to Republicans since the election of President Ronald Reagan," Sheinkopf said. "Every time he speaks another suburban Republican is born."

Suozzi had continued his broadsides against Mamdani in interviews with news outlets as



Rep. Tom Suozzi

recently as last week and has been saying that he doesn't even want to be in the same party as Mamdani, accusing him of "messing with the Democratic brand."

Suozzi, whose district reaches from Long Island into parts of Queens, asked rhetorically of Mamdani in a Newsday interview: "You want to be a democratic socialist? Go create a democratic socialist party. Either you are a Democrat, or you are not a Democrat."

Mamdani, pressed last week at one event about Suozzi's criticisms, responded dryly, "I have yet to meet a New Yorker who has asked me about the opin-



NYC mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani is leading in the polls.

ions of Tom Suozzi as it pertains to what it means to lead this city."

Gillen's district doesn't extend into New York City and is rated by independent political handicappers as toss-up turf next year. She reiterated last week that she believes Mamdani's progressive policies are too extreme for her district and that she could never support him.

But on Thursday, the NRCC's O'Toole jabbed, "If they actually cared about stopping Mamdani's agenda, which will devastate their own constituents, they would have a plan to stop him."

Most recent polling shows Mamdani with commanding leads heading into the November election against former Democratic Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and Mayor Eric Adams, who remain in the race as inde-

# vax

said Eric Linzer, president and CEO of the New York Health Plan Association.

Levene said some patients have asked for the vaccine, while others were holding off until they were sure their insurance would cover it.

"And we are starting to see more COVID cases," he said.

Allied physicians are offering the vaccine at their offices but also asking patients to sign a form saying they will pay out of pocket if their insurance company declines to pay.

According to the CDC, the private sector cost of a dose of the adult COVID-19 vaccine costs about \$140.

On its website, CVS pharmacies state the out-of-pocket cost for an updated COVID-19 vaccination could be as high as \$250 in some cases.

CVS is offering the vaccine to people 65 and older, younger people with a medical condition and those with a prescription.

# mayor

pendents, and Republican candidate Curtis Sliwa.

This comes as there remains heavy concern within the Democratic Party over candidates being tied to Mamdani in the midterm congressional election next year, in New York and elsewhere. President Donald Trump and other Republicans do not hesitate in characterizing him as communist.

Top New York Democrats — including Sen. Chuck Schumer and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries — still have not endorsed Mamdani in the mayor's race. But there are growing calls from his supporters in-state and out of New York for them to do so, and a decision from Jeffries is signaled as coming soon.

And there are other signs of some shift. This week, mid-Hudson Valley Democratic Rep. Pat Ryan, (D-Gardiner), did endorse Mamdani, though he depicted the decision as being more based on opposition to Cuomo.

# LIRR RIDERS PREP FOR STRIKE

## Weigh commute options if there's a work stoppage

BY ALFONSO A. CASTILLO  
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Long Island commuters are scrambling to figure out how to get around during a Long Island Rail Road strike that could begin Thursday, especially those without the option of working from home.

As the LIRR inches closer to what would be its first work stoppage in more than three decades, commuters have begun weighing a host of bad options, which include limited shuttle bus service between three railroad stations on Long Island and two subway stations in Queens, or driving into Manhattan.

"As it gets closer, it's becoming a bigger issue on my mind . . . I don't know what I'm going to do," Eric Grandine, of Amityville, said while waiting for his train at Penn Station Thursday.

As an elevator repairman in Manhattan's Financial District, Grandine said he can't do his job remotely, and he said buses are too unpredictable to reliably get him to work each day.

"I guess I'd have to drive into the city," Grandine, 23, said. "New York traffic is already terrible as it is. It's terrible right now. If it were to be even worse by the Long Island Rail Road being on strike, God, it would be a nightmare."

Commuters at the Stony Brook and Port Jefferson stations told Newsday the loss of train service would blow a hole in their work and family lives.

"I'll probably have to drive to work," said 35-year old accountant Sascha Shakoor, who works in New York City and takes the Port Jefferson train into work every day.

To beat the traffic, Shakoor said he'd probably have to get up around 3 a.m. "That would be very inconvenient for me."

Lee Fennimore, a real estate marketing professional who takes the Stony Brook train into the city every day, said if the strike happens, "I will have to figure it out."

"I have to get my kids out the



Commuters at Mineola LIRR station on Friday as the possibility of a strike looms as early as Thursday.

## WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

■ **Long Island commuters who can't work** from home are weighing a host of bad options to get to and from their jobs during a possible LIRR strike next week.

■ **Employers and schools in the region** have begun communicating about their strike plans, with some employees and students being allowed to stay home, and others told to build in extra time for their commutes.

■ **The five unions involved** in the contract dispute say their demands for raises above what most other LIRR workers have already accepted are reasonable and in line with the industry.

door, so I won't be able to leave until 8:30," Fennimore, 50 of Setauket, told Newsday. "You figure, a two-hour drive on a good day. So who knows how it'll be with the strike with everyone driving in?"

The LIRR earlier this week began notifying riders and their employers of the potential for a strike, which could legally commence as early as 12:01 a.m. Thursday. Messages to riders over station loudspeakers, digital signs, emails, and the railroad's mobile app all warned of the possibility of a "service shutdown."

The railroad's contingency plan includes shuttle buses during peak hours serving LIRR stations in Bellmore, Hicksville and Ronkonkoma. LIRR President Robert Free, in an interview Friday, said the locations were cho-

sen based on proximity to major highways, parking availability, and their ability to handle bus traffic.

But Free acknowledged the buses, which will link to subway stations in Howard Beach and Willets Point, are no replacement for the 940 trains the LIRR operates each day, serving 270,000 riders.

"We couldn't possibly have enough buses to move all these people," Free said. "I don't know if there are enough buses on Long Island to do so."

## Working from home

The MTA is counting on many commuters staying home. On Friday, some employers and schools in the regions began communicating their plans for a strike. The Legal Aid Society of New York City told its employees, in an email, "to consider the potential citywide impact of a strike and take reasonable steps to prepare," including by working from home if possible, or building extra time into their commute.

At Farmingdale State College, if students are unable to reach the campus by public or private transportation during the strike, the college said in a statement it will work with students to "accommodate their absence from class for the duration of the strike, including, but not limited to allowing remote instruction and/or submission of assignments electronically."

Matthew Cohen, president of the Long Island Association, a business group, said he's been in touch with MTA officials, who have urged him to get the word out about the potential strike to employers in Nassau and Suffolk.

As the LIRR's busing plan aims to primarily serve workers commuting to jobs in Manhattan, it would do little to help those commuting to jobs on Long Island.

"It's going to be a real body blow to employees who are so reliant to getting to their jobs by the railroad," Cohen said, urging the sides to reach a resolution.

## Details of dispute

Five labor organizations representing just under half of LIRR union workers are pushing for raises high than the 9.5% over three years already accepted by most other MTA workers, including the LIRR's largest union, the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers. They say they're asking for enough to keep up with inflation, match other railroads' awards and account for the region's high cost of living.

On Friday, DeLane Adams, spokesman for the International Association of Machinists — one of the organizations involved in the contract dispute — said the unions' demands are "fair, reasonable, and in line with surrounding contracts in the industry."

Also Friday, the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen became the last of the five organizations to announce that its members had voted in favor of a strike. The union's general chairman, Mike Sullivan, in a statement, said his members "will not stand for a contract that results in a loss of real wages" and that they are "prepared to use all means available to achieve a fair contract."

Newsday's Maura McDermott contributed to this story.

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