

Chamber convenes for AGM, answering vaccine questions for local business owners

If you're going to require your employees to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 going forward, you're going to have to have a strong and solid why.

This was the message delivered to members of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce last week by human resources lawyer Laura Williams as the Chamber held its first in-person event - its Annual General Meeting (AGM) - since the start of the global pandemic in March of 2019.

A lot has changed for local, national and international business since COVID-19 made itself known, but the Chamber is looking forward to the months ahead with a greater degree of certainty, and further supports from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce to underscore the Shop Local movement.

"We have received a government grant through the Ontario Chamber of Commerce to support a five-month Explore Aurora, Shop Local, Support Local campaign," said Sandra Ferri, President & CEO of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

The program, she said, will include four professionally produced videos, one of which will be for the Experience York Region website, promoting Aurora as a destination along with the eight other municipalities under York's umbrella, under the theme of "It's All Here in York Region."

Three further videos will be produced for Explore Aurora, a website founded jointly by the Chamber and the Town of Aurora in response to the pandemic. These pieces will highlight "where to shop, dine and play" in Aurora.

The grant will also go to support a new online campaign which will kick off early next month with a focus on shopping local during the holidays.

"It has been a tough year, but an exciting one as well, and we have been creative in the ways we have approached our challenges and have looked to alternate sources of funding and supports for our local businesses," said Ms. Ferri. "I look forward to another exciting year, one which will see us getting back to our in-person events like tonight."

Also excited to be back at an in-person event was returning Chamber Board President Al Wilson who said nobody was turned away from the door and everyone who registered was able to show their vaccination certificates - something which could prove to be a hallmark of the year ahead for many local businesses.

"As we emerge from this pandemic, and we will, the new normal includes government restrictions," said Wilson. "That is going to require businesses like you to check vaccination certificates like we did [tonight] and monitor who comes into your businesses. Employers are having to make decisions every day regarding employee vaccinations, rapid testing of employees, but most importantly how to keep their businesses safe."

On hand to share some tips on how to do so was Ms. Williams of Williams HR Law who said there has been a lot of conflict between employers and employees as not every workplace has to institute a mandatory vaccination policy.

"We have all been sucker-punched by the impacts of the pandemic, the mental health crisis we're in, and we have only seen the tip of the iceberg," she said. "The escalations that are occurring in the workplace because of the realities we have all had to confront and we're thinking about it increasingly as it relates to social justice, which also impacts the workplace, and now vaccinations.

"What requirements do organizations have? What are the obligations of employers to ensure a safe workplace, to take every precaution possible to ensure that the workplace is safe? There are certain kinds of work - they're in high-risk settings, certain

environments, educational environments where, yes, there are mandatory vaccination requirements, but within your respective workplaces start to assess whether or not health and safety considerations to prevent the transmission of the virus and variants within your environment require you to require others ? be it your employees, volunteers, contractors ? to be vaccinated.

?It behoves employers to ensure they find out the level of vaccination in terms of employees that have been fully vaccinated within their workplaces because you need to address your health and safety considerations accordingly. There are some workplaces?who have boasted they know they have 100 per cent vaccination within their employee base and then there are others who are challenged right now and they don't know how to institute? return to work protocols to ensure safety within the workplace.

?There are risks in requiring existing employees to be vaccinated because a lot of employees are challenging this requirement saying, 'now you're unilaterally changing the terms and conditions of my employment,' so they are claiming constructive dismissal. Apart from that risk, one of the things a lot of employers need to bear in mind? and this helps to mitigate the risk, is you really have to look at the work that is being performed? Really go through the time and consideration and reflection on what is happening in your workplace, how work is being performed, how you have to perform the work before rushing off in a knee-jerk fashion and implementing rules and requirements, including those that relate to vaccinations.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter