

France moves towards vaccine pass to fight Omicron 'tidal wave'

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French MPs on Monday began debating draft legislation that would require most people to be vaccinated against COVID-19 to enter public spaces such as bars, restaurants and long-distance public transport.

Dubbed the "vaccine pass", the bill's headline measure is aimed at getting France's remaining five million unvaccinated [people](#) over 12 to accept a shot.

So far, a recent negative test has been enough to secure a "health pass" granting access to the same activities.

But the Omicron variant of coronavirus has stoked average daily confirmed cases to more than 160,000 per day over the past week, with peaks above 200,000.

"The tidal wave has indeed arrived, it's enormous, but we will not give in to panic," Health Minister Olivier Veran told parliament.

Reacting to critics who say the law infringes on people's [civil liberties](#), Veran added that "selfishness often hides behind talk of supposed liberty".

Although there is [fierce opposition](#) to the bill in parts of the left and far-right, the support of President Emmanuel Macron's centrist party and most opposition conservatives and socialists should see it through the lower house.

It is expected to come into force on January 15 after passing through the upper house Senate.

As well as the headline shift to granting access to many aspects of public life based on vaccines, the bill would also mean heavier penalties for those sharing or forging their vaccine passes, and for venues failing to check up on them.

People holding a fake pass could face a sentence as high as five years in prison and a fine of 75,000 euros (\$85,000).

France has also tweaked rules for how schools should react to infected pupils, allowing them to return sooner if more frequent follow-up tests prove negative after just five days.

Later Monday, Prime Minister Jean Castex was expected to meet with ministers to discuss the impact on crucial services like hospitals, transport, policing and energy from large numbers of people calling in sick.

And after meeting representatives from employers' organisations, and the tourism, hotel and restaurant industries, Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said the government would extend access to aid for businesses suffering under anti-coronavirus measures.

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