MEMBERS REACT TO REMOVAL OF COOP’S MASKING REQUIREMENTS

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PHOTO BY CAROLINE MARDON

Alicia Villarosa

By Leila Darabi

On a recent spring day, two weeks after the Coop lifted its requirement that all who enter must wear a mask, the *Gazette* visited the store to gauge member reactions and spoke to members calling for designated masked shopping days.

As reported in the Gazette, a poll conducted earlier this year by the General Coordinators found that more than two thirds of participants (68%) voted to make masks optional, with 32% preferring to retain the mask requirement for all working and shopping members.

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>
> *—ALICIA VILLAROSA*

Alicia Villarosa, a shift worker for the entrance desk, estimated that about 40% of shoppers entering the store opted to mask, despite no longer being required to do so. Villarosa wore a mask as she checked members into the store.

"At the desk, I think I'm exposed to a lot of people, so I keep it on while I'm working," she explained, noting that she "maybe, maybe not" wears a mask while shopping. "Depends how crowded the store is."

A CALL FOR DESIGNATED MASKED SHOPPING DAYS

One of those members checking in was George Sarah Olken, who shared with the *Gazette* that he and a group of other members had organized a petition calling on the Coop to reinstate masking two days each week, on Mondays and Fridays, to accommodate the needs of disabled and immunocompromised members.

“I think that it didn’t need to be an all-or-nothing decision,” Olken said of the poll. “Thirty percent of respondents to the survey wanted to keep masking, so we could spend 30 percent of the days of the week doing it.”

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Speaking by phone from his home in Brooklyn, Coop member and disability rights and public health advocate JD Davids questioned the Coop’s use of a poll at all in deciding to lift the mask requirement.

“I don’t think matters of member and worker safety should be the subject of an opinion poll,” said Davids. “It seemed [at the last General Meeting] like there was this ‘bothsidesism’ that’s going on.” He continued, “But actually, what I perceive is that there’s people who have preferences, and then there’s people who have needs…who have been medically advised to not be in spaces where there’s only one-way masking, because it is jeopardizing their lives or the lives of people they live with.”

Davids, the co-author of a set of social media tiles designed to educate the general public on inclusion of people with disabilities, also recognized the pressure put on the General Coordinators.

“We have all been put in harm’s way and that includes members of a cooperative grocery store,” he acknowledged, referring to both members and Coop leadership facing unprecedented challenges during a global pandemic. “So, the Coop has been put in a difficult position of appearing to have a different standard for public health than the bodies that are supposed to be responsible for the public’s health, and that’s not fair

to anybody."

Davids noted that his "privileged, moderately disabled family" now pays someone to grocery shop and run errands for them, noting that many disabled and immunocompromised members may not have this option.

"It's extremely high stakes for a small, but not tiny, number of people," Davids said.

WHAT'S NEXT IN THE MASK POLICY DEBATE?

Coop General Manager Joe Holtz told the *Gazette* that in their discussions, the General Coordinators did consider reserving weekly shopping hours for disabled and immunocompromised members to shop. With the mask mandate lifted across New York City, Holtz said he and his colleagues no longer felt they could maintain a masking policy without involving member input.

"We look at this as something that's winding down, and we felt like our ability to make emergency decisions and defend the continuation of decisions [without inviting input from the full Coop membership at the General Meetings] was no longer tenable,"said Holtz. "There were people who said out loud at the General Meetings, 'What gives you the authority to continue masking?' There're two sides to the story. And the General Coordinators took those questions to heart. We also took to heart what people were saying about their disabilities and the disabilities of others."

TO MASK OR NOT TO MASK

Holtz noted that the idea of designated shopping days with required masking had been submitted to the Agenda Committee and would likely be up for discussion at a future GM. He voiced support for this approach and noted discussions of masking.

The *Gazette* spoke with 12 other members on the same day, some wearing masks and others opting not to wear masks—all of whom said they would support designated mask-only shopping days. The following are excerpts from those conversations.

“I actually did a shift without a mask the day the mandate was lifted. It was stocking, but we broke down boxes. It was just me and another person but neither of us wore a mask. I’m fine not wearing a mask. I respect people who want to wear masks if that’s their comfort level.” —Julie Mashack, who was leaving the Coop after shopping



Julie Mashack

“I still wear my mask when I’m taking the subway or in a crowded place. I like to do the outdoor shifts or CHiPS, which requires a mask.” —Carolyn, who was working a

shift as a walker

“I wear a mask, especially when I’m working or know I’m going to be [in the Coop] for a while and it’s crowded.” —Sophie Davidson, who was waiting with her dog, Idgie, while her partner shopped

“I wear a mask, partially because of anxiety and partially because grocery stores are a space where immunocompromised people don’t have a choice. You have to go to the grocery store.” —Rebecca Chaisson, Sophie’s partner



Sophie Davidson and Rebecca Chaisson

“I feel like it’s where the city’s going. I still wear [a mask] if the subway’s crowded. And if [the Coop] was crowded, I would probably wear it to whatever degree that’s solid science or not, I don’t know.” —Darren, who was working a shift as a walker

“I continue to wear a mask because I believe it is the best choice for my own health

and for public health.” —CJ Holm, who was working a shift as a cashier



CJ Holm

“I’m visiting my father next week, and he’s elderly, and I’m just protecting myself in preparation for a trip. I’m wearing it anywhere where I’m indoors for more than 15 minutes.” —Susan Ohashi, who was shopping in the checkout aisle



Susan Ohashi

“I wear a mask just to be safe, just supermarkets. I’m kind of loose now.” —Kanne Ge, who was shopping for vitamins

“I’m fine either way.” —Alex, who was shopping in the bulk aisle

PHOTO BY CAROLINE MARDOK

Kanne Ge

PHOTO BY CAROLINE MARDOK

Alex

“I prefer the choice [whether or not to wear a mask] to be mine. For the common good, [I would be open to designated masking hours or days], because there are people who have conditions that I don’t have.” —Joseph Picciano, who was shopping in the bulk aisle



Joseph Picciano

“I have family members who are not well, so I have to be careful.” —Sahadra, who was shopping for her older parents



Sahadra

“I think we’re now at a point where everybody’s very informed and COVID is not the main problem. I think at one point, we have to go back to normal. I think the Coop kept the mandate for a long time, and that was a good idea. I teach, and at one point the mandate was dropped during the winter. I kept wearing one, but I feel now with the spring, [I no longer need to].” —Benoit Challand, who was shopping in the produce aisle



Benoit Challand

In addition to following the discussions at upcoming Coop General Meetings, members can refer to the Current Operational And Safety Procedures section of the Coop website for the latest updates on COVID-19 precautions, including instructions on how to authorize a non-member to shop on their behalf.

Leila Darabi often posts photos of the food she makes with Coop ingredients @persian_ish on Instagram; she also cohosts Cringewatchers, a podcast about representations of sexuality on popular TV.