

Business News: Supermarkets Cut Services, Hours As Omicron Reduces Staffing

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FULL TEXT

Some U.S. supermarkets are reducing hours and cutting services as Covid-19's Omicron variant infects cashiers, baggers and stockers, deepening grocery chains' staffing challenges.

Across the country, supermarket workers are calling out sick after contracting Covid-19 or getting exposed to the virus, executives and employees said, prompting retailers to manage operations with fewer workers, while shopper demand for groceries remains high. Some grocers said they are hiring new employees, using temporary employment agencies and overscheduling available staffers to keep stores open.

Before Omicron hit the U.S. Northeast, seven-store supermarket chain Stew Leonard's was finding its way back to normal, according to Chief Executive Stew Leonard Jr.

The chain, which runs locations in New York, Connecticut and New Jersey, has reached a 90% employee-vaccination rate, Mr. Leonard said. But Covid-19 cases surged over the past month: The week before Christmas, Stew Leonard's had around 30 of its 3,000 employees in quarantine or isolation, according to the CEO. By Dec. 26, it was 100, and by Jan. 6 the company was missing over 200 employees to Covid-19 infections and exposures. "We sort of feel like we've got to buckle down for round two," Mr. Leonard said.

Giant Eagle Inc. has avoided closing any of its approximately 470 stores during the Omicron surge by adjusting hours and sending staff from its corporate office near Pittsburgh to supermarkets, according to Vic Vercammen, chief compliance officer, who leads its pandemic response. The regional chain has seen a rise in employee Covid-19 cases that mirrors the area's case numbers, he said.

At Piggly Wiggly stores in Alabama and Georgia, managers are overscheduling workers under the assumption that some staffers aren't going to make it in, said Keith Milligan, the controller of the 17-store chain. The company, which is a franchisee of New Hampshire-based Piggly Wiggly LLC, hired people from temporary agencies to work in its warehouses.

Supermarkets struggled with hiring and retaining workers during the pandemic. Executives said unemployment benefits and federal stimulus checks made it harder to find people willing to work at their stores. Some executives and store workers said fears of working in public and potentially spreading or contracting Covid-19 are keeping potential employees out of the job market.

Harris Teeter supermarkets, owned by Kroger Co. and operating primarily in the U.S. Southeast, said most of its stores are closing an hour earlier at 9 p.m. so employees can restock shelves, clean stores and better prepare for the next day. The company said the decision wasn't made because of staffing shortages.

On Wednesday, about 8,400 unionized workers at Kroger's King Soopers stores in Denver went on strike, pushing for higher wages and expanded benefits. The company called the move reckless, and said it hired temporary workers to help staff stores.

Fresh Encounter Inc., a 100-store supermarket chain based in Ohio, has been closing most stores at 10 p.m. over the past three months, versus operating 24 hours a day before the pandemic, to accommodate for staffing shortages.

In recent months, most of the chain's deli departments have been shutting down at 5 p.m., compared with 9 p.m. to 10 p.m. previously, because more than half of the company's deli team has been out sick, said Michael Needler Jr., the chain's chief executive. "The staffing situation started out very tenuous," he said.

In New York state, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union Local 1500 said 1,000 of the 17,000 grocery employees the union usually represents are off the job, either in quarantine, isolation or switched away from grocery work.

Credit: By Stephen Council and Jaewon Kang

DETAILS

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