

Air Force Association Moving Ahead with Plans to Hold Warfare Symposium in Orlando

By [Frank Wolfe](#) |
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Despite the decision this week by the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) to cancel a conference in Huntsville, Alabama in late March because of COVID-19 risks cited by AUSA, the Air Force Association (AFA) is so far moving forward on its plan to hold a warfare symposium in Orlando, Fla., on March 2-4.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has said that the highly contagious Omicron variant appears to be less pernicious than previous coronavirus waves and that the numbers of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are starting to fall across the U.S., even as deaths continue to rise, possibly because of the several week lag time between infection and serious illness and death—the chances of which are significantly higher for the unvaccinated, per the CDC.

“To ensure a safe and successful event, proof of vaccination or negative test results are a prerequisite for symposium attendance,” retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, the AFA executive vice president, said in a statement this week about the March 2-4 warfare symposium in Orlando at the Rosen Shingle Creek Hotel.

“While it is impossible to predict the future, we are encouraged by the most recent data and will continue coordinating closely with Air Force and Space Force leadership, supporting our mutual objectives for a safe, productive professional development gathering,” he said.

Unlike the canceled AUSA event, the AFA symposium in Orlando offers a virtual option. 2022 marks the [third straight year that AUSA has canceled](#) the in-person Global Force Symposium, a major defense show where senior Army officials provide updates on the service’s major weapon system programs and modernization efforts (*Defense Daily*, Jan. 24).

The 2020 AUSA show was canceled outright, while last year’s version was held as a virtual event.

At least five states—Alabama, Florida, Texas, North Dakota, and Iowa—prohibit requiring people to show CDC proof of vaccination cards to be admitted to businesses, including hotels and convention centers. Yet, associations, if they are renting hotel space, may establish such requirements for admittance to the association's events.

One issue associations face is that hotels in those five states may adopt divergent vaccination policies, as none of the five states have issued legal guidance related to association meetings, said Jeff Tenenbaum, a managing partner of the Washington, D.C.-based Tenenbaum Law Group that represents about 500 non-profits, including AFA.

"There is no vaccine or mask mandate in the state of Florida," Gary Bitz, the director of conference management at the Rosen Shingle Creek, wrote in a Jan. 28 email. "Guests are not required to mask or be vaccinated to enter the hotel. Any vaccination, testing or masking protocols are strictly up to the group/conference administrators. The AFA conference is indeed planned as scheduled."

Tenenbaum said that a number of his clients have canceled events because of Omicron, "and then we have some that are moving ahead."

"Anecdotally, what we've heard is that, particularly in Florida and Texas—where there are more conferences than the other [three] states—hotels and convention centers are allowing associations to impose a vaccine mandate and require proof of vaccination, if they want to," Tenenbaum said. "It's just that the hotel or the convention center can't do it itself. That's anecdotal. That's not to say there might not be an aggressive attorney at the [state] attorney general's office or an aggressive hotel lawyer who's going to interpret what is a pretty vague statute in a more expansive way."

When COVID-19 began in 2020, most states banned large gatherings so that associations were able to cancel planned conferences without financial penalty under hotel contract "force majeure" provisions. Yet, as those large gathering restrictions have disappeared in states, the current conference cancellation fees for associations "can be crippling," Tenenbaum said.

"We've had to adopt more creative negotiation strategies, usually things that involve rebooking of the meeting to a future date, paying some more advanced deposit money, other things like that, sometimes even paying some cancellation penalty," he said.