

# Jury Awards \$687,000 To BlueCross BlueShield Scientist Fired For Refusing COVID-19 Vaccine

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Authored by Zachary Stieber via The Epoch Times.

A federal jury has awarded \$687,000 to a research scientist who was fired from BlueCross BlueShield in Tennessee for refusing to comply with the company's COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

**Tanja Benton, who had worked 16 years at the firm when she was fired, was awarded \$177,240 in back pay, \$10,000 in compensation, and \$500,000 in punitive damages,** according to a [document](#) made public by the federal court in eastern Tennessee on June 30.



Company officials told Ms. Benton in August of 2021 that she would need to be “fully vaccinated” to keep her position, according to her lawsuit. Ms. Benton refused, saying aborted fetal cell lines were involved in the development of the COVID-19 vaccines and **she could not “in good conscience consume the vaccine, which would not only defile her body but also anger and dishonor God.”**

**BlueCross BlueShield said her position involved “regular external public-facing interactions” so she couldn’t keep it.** Ms. Benton said her position became fully remote in 2020 but BlueCross BlueShield said it would have involved some in-person interaction with clients.

Ms. Benton was told to pursue other positions within the company and applied for two. But she was fired on Nov. 4, 2021, and told five days later that, **“Unfortunately, all positions require the vax now,” according to an email entered in the case.**

Her lawsuit charged that BlueCross BlueShield violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which says an employer may not “discharge any individual, or otherwise discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment” because of that person’s religion. Employers can disregard religious exemption requests if they can prove accommodating them would create undue hardship.

**BlueCross BlueShield “cannot prove that allowing Plaintiff to continue her employment as a Bio Statistical Research Scientist without being vaccinated for COVID-19 constitutes an undue hardship,”** the suit stated. The company “also cannot show that it made any good-faith efforts to accommodate plaintiff’s sincerely held religious beliefs.”

BlueCross BlueShield was also accused of violating the Tennessee Human Rights Act, which bars discrimination by employers at the state level.

**“We’re disappointed by the decision,”** Dalya Qualls White, chief communications officer for BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, told The Epoch Times in an email.

**“We believe our vaccine requirement was the best decision for our employees and members, and we believe our accommodation to the requirement complied with the law. We appreciate our former employees’ service to our members and communities throughout their time with our company.”**

A lawyer representing Ms. Benton did not respond to a request for comment.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, presented with the case, cleared Ms. Benton to sue her former employer.

**Company lawyers had argued the firm would be unduly burdened by providing Ms. Benton an indefinite exception despite her role as a “public-facing employee.”** The lawyers said she could not have continued working remotely indefinitely.

The company also asserted that Ms. Benton did not hold a sincerely held religious belief and “denies that the COVID-19 vaccine was derived from aborted fetus cell lines, which is verifiably false,” according to the company’s filing.

Johnson & Johnson [used](#) cells derived from an aborted fetus in the design, production, and testing of its COVID-19 vaccine. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines also utilized the cells in early testing. The companies have said the final products do not contain aborted fetal cells.

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