

As you may have heard, this week Congress passed legislation to establish June 19 as a new federal holiday. President Biden is expected to sign the bill into law later today. Below are some frequently asked questions on how this change in federal law may apply to university employees in North Carolina.

What is Juneteenth?

Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day and Emancipation Day, is the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States. It recognizes the events of June 19, 1865, when news of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation reached Galveston, Texas, freeing enslaved people in the furthest reaches of the South. The event took place two and a half years after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.

Do federal holidays apply to state employees?

Although many of the paid holidays for state employees in North Carolina align with federal holidays, there are some differences. The State Human Resources Commission determines the 12 paid holidays for state employees consistent with the requirements of Chapter 126 of the North Carolina General Statutes (the NC Human Resources Act). Any additional paid holidays for state employees above the current must be authorized directly by the NC General Assembly.

Is the State going to add Juneteenth to its paid holidays for state employees?

No determination on this has been made. Because state law currently caps the total number of paid holidays for state employees during the calendar year at 12, any additional paid holidays must be authorized directly by the NC General Assembly.

Can the University change which paid holidays it follows?

Chapter 126 provides flexibility to University of North Carolina System institutions to move paid holidays within a calendar year to better accommodate the academic calendar. Due to this flexibility, many institutions have taken one or more state paid holidays and moved their observance into the winter holidays between the academic semesters. These schedule changes are generally made well in advance to align with the planned academic calendars. Any modifications cannot change the total number of the 12 paid holidays for state employees in a calendar year.

Could a UNC Institution adopt Juneteenth as a paid holiday?

A UNC Institution could move one of their existing state paid holidays and observe it on Juneteenth; however, an institution cannot authorize an additional paid holiday above the statutory limit of 12 total paid holidays during the calendar year. These schedule changes are generally made well in advance to align with the planned academic calendars.

Can an employee use a paid holiday to observe Juneteenth?

State policy allows an employee with supervisory approval to exchange any state paid holiday for a religious holiday provided that the employee can do meaningful work on the state paid holiday they are exchanging. Because this provision applies only to the employee observing an alternative religious holiday, this flexibility would not apply to Juneteenth.

However, under the University's additional authority regarding its paid holiday schedule, some institutions have adopted a "flexible" paid holiday that allows an employee to exchange a paid holiday for another workday during the same calendar year, provided that the employee can do meaningful work on the state paid holiday they are exchanging. Under this kind of flexibility, an employee could exchange an existing paid holiday to be absent on Juneteenth.

Otherwise, employees may always request the use of their accrued vacation leave to be absent from work to observe Juneteenth. Employees also may request the use of accrued Community Service Leave to volunteer with nonprofit or community-based organizations to commemorate Juneteenth.