

# Maintaining Fire Department Capabilities During a Pandemic



**Use this information to help your fire department prepare for a pandemic.**

## **Put the wet stuff on the red stuff**

- Stop all nonemergency tasks, such as hydrant inspection, code inspection, outreach and drills.
- Reassign personnel from nonemergency tasks to field operations.
- Backfill less-essential functions with supplemental volunteers and personnel from other departments and agencies.

## **Manage expectations**

- Keep government officials and leadership informed of potential impacts on response times caused by loss of personnel.
- Include labor and other municipal components in planning.
- Inform the public.
- Maintain coordination with your local public health officials: Be informed.
- Ensure that everyone is on the same page.

## **Keep your distance**

- Assess patients at a distance — 6 feet away at first (or as determined by CDC) — in order to determine the presence of a respiratory or other contagious illness.
- If possible, meet patients in open air.
- If you must enter a home, assess the patient from the doorway first.
- Do not have your entire crew exposed when only one or two could conduct initial patient assessment.
- Follow guidance from CDC, state and local public health, and EMS officials.

## **Fresh air is your friend**

- Ventilate vehicles during transport.
- Ventilate vehicles after transport.



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## Wipe it down, wipe it out

- Use wipes — not sprays — to decontaminate equipment and exposed surfaces in vehicles post-response. Wipes are recommended to avoid re-aerosolizing the germs or bacteria on contact.
- Place alcohol-based sanitizer in easily accessible locations.
- Do not touch your face with gloved or unwashed hands.
- Wash hands after cleaning equipment.
- Ensure that the cab areas of the ambulance and fire apparatus are also decontaminated.

## Train the way you fight

- Postpone routine training or conduct training specific to the pandemic instead.
- Train your volunteer force.

## Cleanliness is nonnegotiable

- Establish a location away from the firehouse where patients can come to you for assessment.
- Plan for receiving patients if they are walk-ins at facilities.
- Control the living and working environment (ventilation, contamination and patient flow).
- Decontaminate! Decontaminate! Decontaminate!
- Ensure that facilities are available for individuals to wash their hands and provide hand sanitizer in vehicles and facilities per CDC guidance.
- Shower and change clothes before leaving work: Go home clean!

## Assume the worst — hope for the best

- Assume that patients with respiratory symptoms have a viral infection.
- Always don recommended PPE before entering the environment of a patient with respiratory symptoms.
- If possible, place a mask on patients with respiratory symptoms.
- Wash hands, wash hands, wash hands.
- Change bunk bedding daily or after each use and clean linens and surfaces per CDC guidance.
- Follow guidance from CDC, state and local public health, and EMS officials.

## Green is not always clean

- Do not recycle or reuse anything that could be contaminated.
- If you cannot clean it adequately, dispose of it.
- Do not reuse any disposables, particularly masks and gloves.

## Mobilize your reserves

- Identify potential volunteers now such as nontraditional volunteer firefighting forces (e.g., CERTs, Medical Reserve Corps, Red Cross members).
- Call up volunteers (firefighters, support personnel).
- Identify tasks for volunteers (for example, decontaminating vehicles and protective clothing (if trained and provided with PPE)).
- Provide only the essential training needed for their role.
- As time allows, provide additional training for volunteers.

## Rise to the occasion

- Reduce the number of shifts and lengthen shifts (for example, “12 on, 12 off”).
- Consider special shift for two-earner families so one can stay home for child care.
- Require overtime when needed to manage adequate staffing levels.
- If people have had the virus and returned to work, if cleared, ask more of them.
- Identify who is double-booked (for example, “I work in one community, but I serve as a volunteer in another community”).

## Let’s work together

- Cross-train with EMS, law enforcement and 911.
- Know what you can expect from your partners and do not assume business as usual.
- Do not assume that mutual-aid will be there. Contact mutual-aid coordinators and partners to maintain situational awareness.
  - Your first responders may be sick while someone else’s in the next county may not be so hard hit.
- If your region is unaffected, surge (if approved by the authority having jurisdiction) to help those regions that are affected.

## Fireproof your family

- Recognize that personnel have to take care of their families and plan accordingly.
- Consider allowing appropriate personnel to take the equipment home and possibly even respond from home depending on the situation and providing for proper infection control procedures.
- Encourage personnel at the firehouse to communicate with their families when possible to relieve stress.
- Encourage availability of webcams to enable firefighters to keep in touch with their families.

## Stock up

- You have to have food, water and supplies for your station.
- Stockpile the right things as soon as possible prior to or during the event.
- Purchase and store nutritious emergency food, such as beans and rice.
- Make contingency plans for water in case the city water supply is compromised or if bottled water is no longer delivered.

## Business as *un*-usual

- Acknowledge the acceptance of increased risk (depleted workforce and increased call volume).
- Anticipate that the situation will last for a long time.
- Fill fuel tanks more often.
- Use recommended PPE.
- Minimize size and deployment of response teams to minimize exposure.
- Reduce alarm responses. Consider alternatives to initial automatic alarms reporting hazardous materials incidents. Initial response could be a single unit or hazmat company unless there are other indicators that a larger response is needed.
- Limited staff may mean reduced crews on apparatus. Consider doubling apparatus response, or other options, to meet staffing needs.
- Cross-train other municipal workers or applicable volunteers to drive apparatus if allowable under the law (e.g., plow truck operators may be able to operate a fire engine, but you may need to provide basic pump operations training).

## Two in, two out

- Watch for fatigue and stress.
- Increase hydration.
- Aggressively engage peer support.
- Augment peer support with auxiliaries.
- Use the telephone for counseling to reduce exposure.
- Provide counseling and support for firefighters' families.
- Provide respite breaks for on-duty responders as needed.

## We are all in this together

- If not already required, encourage 100% vaccination for all personnel.
- If a vaccine is developed, vaccinate families if the vaccine is available for them.
- If a vaccine is developed, vaccinate at the station while on shift. (Contact your local public health director or agency to provide vaccines to the station.)
- If EMS personnel have authority to vaccinate in your state, coordinate with your EMS medical director to have them do so.
- Develop local incentives for rewarding those who get vaccinated and strongly encouraging those who do not.
- Maintain joint rumor control system and provide information.
- Lead by example: Leaders get vaccinated first.



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