

Fire Department Frequently Asked Questions Regarding COVID-19

March 31, 2020



The Division of Fire Safety has been surveying fire service points of contact in each county to monitor the current capabilities of fire departments on a weekly basis. This has opened strong communications and, in your feedback, we have seen some frequently asked questions in these surveys.

What personal protective equipment (PPE) should our firefighters be wearing to protect them from COVID-19?

Responders who will be in direct contact (within 6 feet) with a person who is suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 should follow standard precautions and CDC guidelines and use the following PPE:

- Facemask
- N95 respirators or respirators that offer a higher level of protection should be used instead of a facemask when in the presence of a confirmed COVID-19 case, or when performing or present for an aerosol-generating procedure. If N95 masks are not available, procedure masks should be used.
- Eye protection (i.e., goggles or disposable face shield that fully covers the front and sides of the face).
- A single pair of disposable patient examination gloves.
- Isolation gown.

Responders should assess each situation and determine if utilizing this PPE is warranted.

How do we know if we need to don a higher level of PPE than normal while on an emergency call?

First, maintain a minimum of 6 feet from members of the public when responding to calls whenever possible and assess the situation from a distance. Limit the number of personnel that enter a building if the situation can be handled safely by a smaller crew. If you must enter a building, first ask if anyone in the building has been feeling unwell or had close contact with a person who has COVID-19. If you find either of these to be the case and you must enter the building, use the proper PPE. Doff the PPE as soon as you leave the building and immediately wash your hands thoroughly.

My fire department does not have the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), how do we get it?

Personal protective equipment is in high demand with limited resources. Of course, the highest priority is healthcare workers. The Vermont Department of Health is coordinating the issuance of PPE and requests will be prioritized based on resource availability. You can request PPE for your department by completing an online request using the following link:

<https://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/5504100/COVID-Resource-Request-Form>

Upon completion of this request, you will receive an e-mail confirming receipt of your order and then an update when your order is processing. Please do not request any more than you need and understand

that some items are currently not available or have limited sizing selections, but orders are being fulfilled efficiently. Fire Departments are receiving this equipment when requested.

What should we use to disinfect the interior of our apparatus, equipment, and contact surfaces around the fire station?

You may already have an effective disinfectant on hand. The EPA maintains a list of disinfectant products that are effective against coronavirus that can be found by using this link:

<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>

Self-contained breathing apparatus face pieces and regulators should be cleaned and disinfected according to the manufacturer's instructions. Most manufacturer's permit the use of a hypochlorite solution (50 ppm of chlorine) made by adding approximately 1 mL of laundry bleach (verify that the bleach contains 5% sodium hypochlorite) to 1 liter of water. Allow the disinfectant to have a minimum of 5 minutes of contact time before rinsing with tap water and drying.

Structural firefighting PPE should also be cleaned and disinfected following the manufacturer's instructions. Remember, you can degrade the material by using overly strong cleaning products on your structural gear.

Do we need to make changes in our emergency response guidelines?

Yes, just like in our personal lives, we need to take additional precautions to keep ourselves safe. Each jurisdiction should adjust based on your individual situation. There is a list of recommended changes to fire department operations on the Division of Fire Safety website for you to consider. These can be found by following this link: <https://firesafety.vermont.gov/Firesafety/covid-19fdresources>

There are many local fire departments who have developed guidelines for their responders to follow. You should reach out to your neighboring departments and see if they have developed guidelines that may be appropriate to share with your department.

How will our department answer emergency calls if large numbers of personnel become unavailable due to illness, quarantine, self-isolation, family responsibilities, or assignment to essential work?

The Division of Fire Safety is monitoring current fire department capabilities on a weekly basis by surveying points of contact in each county. Departments who experience personnel shortages may need to rely upon mutual aid. If it looks like an area is going to be severely impacted by personnel shortages, that will be reported to the State Emergency Operations Center so that the situation can be assessed at the State level.