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April 29, 2020

## **The Impact of Covid-19 on the New Hampshire Fire Service**

***Paul J. Parisi, NH State Fire Marshal***

I would like to first express my appreciation for the invitation to testify in front of the Legislative Advisory Board of the Governor's Office of Emergency Relief and Recovery. I am honored to have the opportunity do so, and in an effort to bring forth a complete overview of the topic at hand I have solicited input from the following Fire Service leaders for this presentation: Chief Robert Buxton, President of the NH Association of Fire Chiefs, Captain William McQuillen, President of the Professional Firefighters of NH, Chief Deb Pendergast, Director of the NH Fire and EMS Academy, and President Glenn Davis of the NH State Fireman's Association.

Over the last seven weeks that our state has been engaged in the Covid-19 Pandemic we have seen a profound impact on the New Hampshire Fire Service, from its member's health and safety to the ever changing capabilities of our departments. In the NH Fire Service, there are approximately 5,600 firefighters; 70% of these firefighters are volunteer or on-call members, and approximately 30% are full-time career firefighters. In addition to their duties of responding to fires and conducting technical rescue, approximately 84% of the 226 municipal fire departments also provide emergency medical services to their communities. While New Hampshire's firefighters have been engaged in this battle, we are proud to report that we have been at the tip of the spear, answering every call with compassion and loyalty, and will continue to respond to our citizens' request for help throughout this pandemic and beyond.

Our firefighters have been thrust onto the front lines of this epidemic, and have been continually serving in their mission to respond to meet the needs of their communities throughout this state of emergency. In addition to answering routine calls for service and in order to effectively respond to the community needs that this ongoing emergency has

created, fire department members have been operating in roles outside their normal scope of duties. Members of New Hampshire's Fire Departments are fulfilling many jobs in this crisis, from being leaders in their respective Emergency Operations Centers overseeing their community's response to the pandemic, to participating in regional Public Health Networks, to setting up and assisting with Alternative Care Sites (or surge centers).

#### Current COVID-19 Pandemic Fire Service Operations:

Members of the fire service have had to quickly adapt to the current situation by creating and implementing a different emergency call response model than we have always been used to. Where in the past, members had ordinarily responded by rushing into houses to take care of their citizens when called, we now have had to take timely safety measures by donning PPE, cautiously approaching a patient or subject and asking questions from a safe distance. Even using this method, which is the safest reasonable response, Firefighters have still experienced unprotected exposures and as a result have had to be quarantined continually throughout this pandemic.

As of April 28<sup>th</sup>, 208 members of the NH fire service have suffered an unprotected exposure and have been quarantined for some period of time, from a couple of days to the full 14-day required time period . The impact of these quarantine situations has varied across the state in both the impact to a department as well as their mutual-aid partners. Some of the more significant exposures in departments have led to the following quarantine situations; 6 members being out of service in Laconia, 7 members being quarantined in Holderness, 9 members in Nashua, 9 in Londonderry, and 10 each in Freemont and Peterborough. Depending on the municipality, in some cases these quarantines resulted in over 25% of the department being out of service and therefore not able to provide full fire and emergency medical service protection to their communities.

Moreover, members have had to immediately adjust to the daily-changing information coming from the Centers for Disease Control in regards to PPE and exposure guidelines, particularly at the beginning of this incident. New Standard Operating Procedures were being disseminated frequently to stay consistent with the most up-to-date information, and keeping members informed was, and continues to be, challenging. Additionally, the constantly changing unprotected exposure algorithms used to determine if a member has sustained an unprotected exposure, who their close contacts have been, and protecting not only other members but possible public contacts has been a continual time consuming undertaking.

#### Recruitment and Retention:

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, recruitment and retention in the New Hampshire fire service had been identified as a critical statewide issue. In call and volunteer departments,

finding and recruiting individuals that have an interest in the field and also want to sacrifice time away from their families to dedicate to the training necessary to become a firefighter was a challenge. In New Hampshire, fire chiefs now fear that this pandemic will have an even more significant impact on the ability to recruit community members, who now have to consider that during the course of their service to their fellow citizens they may expose themselves and/or their family to this virus as well as all the other typical dangers. In career departments, several economic factors had already made hiring good qualified candidates a problem. For similar reasons as on the call and volunteer side, it will undoubtedly be more difficult to encourage the next generation of this integral emergency workforce to be on the frontlines of what we know to be an already dangerous profession. Finally and certainly as critical to consider is the lasting effects that this prolonged event will have on the mental health of our responders. Repeated exposure to a potential life-threatening virus can have a cumulative effect on the psyche of any individual. We must remember what impact it could have as our firefighters deal with this situation and its potential dangers on each and every incident.

#### Financial Impact:

Although not fully understood at this time, the financial impact of this crisis will undoubtedly be felt for years to come. Communities are currently spending money on callback and/or overtime for personnel, emergency operation center tasks, and personal protective equipment in response to this ongoing event, all of which were unanticipated in their budget. These necessary financial expenditures will most certainly result in operational budget deficits in at least the proceeding months as we hopefully begin to enter the recovery phase of this pandemic. Even if the Public Assistance FEMA approved costs are reimbursed at the 75% rate, 25% of costs would still need to be absorbed by the municipality, and this assistance won't be awarded for time some. Also, the costs that do not qualify for federal assistance and aren't able to be recovered could be substantial.

The long-term impact this incident is likely to have could be devastating. From deferring capital expenditures such as equipment and apparatus, to lay-offs of front-line personnel, a clear and palpable impact on the ability for chiefs to provide essential services to their communities seems inevitable. We understand that one of the hardest parts of this conundrum is how to bridge the financial gap during what is undoubtedly presenting to be a significant economic downturn in the state, while also balancing critical emergency service delivery to our citizens. Are there ways to take advantage of any funding to potentially minimize the impact our state will feel in this area? While there is no magic bullet, the leaders of New Hampshire's Fire Service would respectfully offer the following suggestions. We would encourage the committee to consider a funding methodology or grant opportunity to be able to help municipalities to continue the mission to provide essential services in our communities. We need to keep our first responders on the front

lines during this state of emergency. Perhaps the committee could consider creating a simple, competitive process to apply for funding for apparatus, equipment, and/or staffing needs. Also is it possible that a fund or reserve could be established to distribute resources if we find ourselves in another surge, where the state could act quickly with local partners to react and direct resources immediately?

We also are strongly encouraging that we collectively look at the human toll that this event is taking on our members and perhaps build out a robust mental health component to address it as the stress continues to mount. We have seen the mental anguish of isolation of responders in quarantine, and also knowing that they are potentially being the cause of spread of infection to their family. Incentivizing the use of equipment that allows our responders to maintain their own safety and minimizing a potential exposure is also something we would encourage, such as the use of a mechanical compression device during medical emergencies. Lastly, perhaps funding to increase remote learning opportunities to ensure the most current updates are communicated to providers in the field as this continues, so that best practices are employed and safety of the public is ensured.

In closing, the men and women of New Hampshire's fire service continue to stand ready to respond to help our fellow citizens and neighbors in their time of need. Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today, and I would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have.