

Firefighters work to stay safe amid coronavirus outbreak



Figure 1 From left, Lowell Fire Lt. Buddy Latham and firefighter Korey Preston show off personal protective equipment used to fight the COVID-19 virus. PHOTO COURTESY OF LOWELL FIRE DEPARTMENT.

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Life at work for a firefighter includes 24-hour shifts, close living quarters, shared eating areas, along with periodic emergency calls requiring an immediate response.

It's a challenging life to live in the midst of the still-spreading coronavirus outbreak.

"We are working hard everyday to keep our firefighters safe so we can continue to keep the citizens of Lowell safe," said Lowell Fire Chief Jeffrey Winward.

As the disease spreads, first responders are increasingly put in harm's way.

Last week the Fire Department in Brookline closed one of its five fire stations as a precautionary measure after a member of the department exhibited symptoms consistent with the virus. The same day, the Professional Firefighters of Massachusetts reported two Billerica firefighters tested positive after likely being exposed to the disease during a routine medical call.

Billerica Town Manager John Curran did not confirm the report of infected firefighters, but did acknowledge one first responder in the town had tested positive. He added the Billerica Fire Department is fully staffed and the town has implemented extensive measures to ensure that all first responders on duty are healthy.

With the challenges and concerns spreading as fast as the virus itself, most first responders have altered their response protocols to align with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations.

Chelmsford Fire Chief Gary Ryan said changes include firefighters conducting initial medical assessments of patients they encounter from a distance of six feet. Firefighters are also required to wear enhanced personal protective equipment, or PPE, which includes masks, medical gloves and goggles.

“Our dispatchers are notifying us when we respond to a residence where a known COVID-19 positive or quarantined person lives,” Winward said. “We currently have N95 masks, medical gloves and protective goggles on the trucks, but we have not been able to purchase protective gowns.”

If anyone has medical equipment, such as N95 masks, medical gowns, goggles, face shields or Nitrile medical gloves, the Lowell Fire Department is accepting donations at the JFK Civic Center at 99 Moody St. in Lowell, according to Winward.

“We are sharing our resources with our first responder partners in the city and supplies are very difficult to find because of the high demand around the world,” Winward said.

The shortage of PPE is not unusual among departments, which has led to generosity shown by the community. Ryan shared a photograph of several boxes stacked inside a station containing a total of more than 1,000 N95 masks donated to the department by Chelmsford’s Lighthouse School.

According to Ryan, Chelmsford Superintendent of Schools Jay Lang also allowed the department to borrow a district portable disinfectant machine, which has since been used at several stations.

Greater Lowell Technical High School donated medical supplies and alcohol wipes to the Lowell Fire Department, according to Winward. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health and MACOM Technology Solutions donated masks.

For the past few weeks, Ryan said the Chelmsford Fire Department has adjusted strategies to address supply needs.

“For example, we have been in contact with nontraditional suppliers such as nail salons for gloves and the Nashoba High School for masks,” Ryan said. “We even sent someone to a distillery that was offering a hand sanitizer substitute. We were able to secure a couple gallons in exchange for a \$10 donation.

Keeping a healthy environment within each department station is also prioritized.

“Anybody who shows any signs of the major coronavirus symptoms — the high fever, the constant coughing, the shortness of breath, chest pressure — we certainly don’t want those people coming to work, and we take the steps to have them tested,” said Fitchburg Fire Chief Kevin Roy.

Anyone who has been outside the country and in an area of high risk will undergo testing before they are allowed back on the job, according to Roy. He added firefighters are evaluating their health throughout their shifts.

Ryan said firefighters have their temperature taken at the beginning and the end of each shift. Anyone with a temperature of 100.4 degrees or higher will be referred for additional medical evaluation, he said.

Area department stations are also closed off to outside groups and visitors.

“We are keeping all station doors locked, and we are not allowing members of the public into the stations,” Winward said. “We encourage firefighters to wash their hands frequently, sneeze and cough into their elbows, avoid hand shaking and practice social distancing.”

Stations have also increased their cleaning schedule, disinfecting all areas of the stations multiple times a day. Winward encouraged members of the community to follow similar protocols.

“Please work with us by staying home, practicing social distancing, and good hygiene so that we don’t overwhelm our hospitals during this very difficult time,” Winward said. “If we all work together to keep each other safe and healthy, we will ultimately defeat this terrible pandemic.”