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PPE Compliance COVID-19 Bulletin 2021-3

Recent Mask Guidance Updates – Not for Fire & Emergency Medical Services

On March 8, 2021 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), released its latest interim guidance, the **Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People**. While this is a much-welcomed update, it is important to note that CDC recommendations are federal recommendations and these recommendations apply to households and non-healthcare settings, not places of work.

On March 12, 2021, the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) released **Statewide Reopening Guidance** – Masks, Face Coverings, and Face Shields. However, this guidance does not apply to areas within workplaces where employees live together for periods of time, such as fire stations

OHA's Temporary Rule Addressing COVID-19 Workplace Risks Still In Effect

Oregon Fire and EMS agencies must still adhere to state and/or local public health department guidance and recommendations. Specifically, Oregon Fire and EMS agencies must still follow **OHA's Temporary Rule Addressing COVID-19 Workplace Risks**.

In the Oregon OSHA guidance Section C in Appendix A-17 (Mandatory Workplace Guidance for Emergency Medical Services: First Responders, Firefighters, And Non-Emergency Medical Transport) notes:

General Operations – Fire Departments and Ambulance Agencies.

Fire Departments and Ambulance Agencies must comply with the provisions of the rule, with the following specific provisions and exceptions:

1. Spacing requirements do not need to be followed on any Agency apparatus when responding to or returning from a call, although respiratory protection must be worn as necessary.
2. To the degree 6-foot distancing cannot be reliably maintained in common living areas in a fire station or ambulance agency facility, the personnel residing there are not required to wear masks, face coverings or face shields (this exception applies only to shared living areas; it does not apply to break rooms, shared toilet facilities,

or other common areas used by other employees or individuals other than those residing in the living areas).

3. The driver of an emergency response vehicle may adjust or remove a mask or face covering that impedes their vision or distracts from the safe operation of the vehicle.

Combatting PPE Fatigue

It is understandable for firefighters and EMS responders to be facing “PPE fatigue” within agencies a full year into a worldwide pandemic. Consider some of these strategies (adapted from **We’ve become numb: Combatting PPE fatigue**¹):

Manage your overall fatigue – If you manage your overall fatigue effectively, you are more likely to keep up your prevention practices.

Commit to be the example-setter, not the group-follower – It’s common to take our lead from other people. When everyone has their mask around their chin, sipping coffee and chatting elbow to elbow around the station dining table, it’s natural to think, “I feel silly being the only one with my mask on.” Commit to setting a good example when you’re around others.

Keep your risk assessments simple – Air that has or recently has had people in it who are not in your COVID-19-safe pod is potentially dangerous. It’s more dangerous if it’s still air, if the people involved are unwell, or if the people involved are unmasked. To protect against these risks practice physical distancing, wear a mask, and increase air flow.

Get yourself a “battle buddy” and make sure no one on your team is without one – Originally created by the U.S. Army, the battle buddy system was focused on ensuring soldiers had someone watching their metaphorical back, to prevent suicide, but the concept can be used to shore up each other’s PPE use on calls and off. For this to work, you both must commit to the other that you’ll speak up and not let your buddy expose themselves unnecessarily.

Avoid shaming people into PPE compliance – Shame causes people to hide their unsafe behavior and causes additional stress-fatigue.

Many, if not most of us, like to think of our work colleagues as family. Keep in mind, that’s not the same as your COVID-19-safe family pod. I know that in work situations where you live together, sleep under the same roof together, eat together and save lives together, it feels safe. It feels like family. But the number of possible virus exposures within these professional families is too high to be considered safe. It’s important to use your masks in your rigs and in the station unless you’re in your private bedroom.

¹Taigman, M. (2021, February 4). We’ve become numb: Combatting PPE fatigue. Retrieved from FireRescue1: <https://www.firerescue1.com/fire-products/personal-protective-equipment-ppe/articles/weve-become-numb-combatting-ppe-fatigue-0J5oYAqcaAqdJIrf/>