



Florida Fire Chiefs' Association
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Serving Florida's Fire Service Since 1958

December 2, 2020

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Office of the Governor, State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Re: COVID19 Vaccination Prioritization of First Responders

Honorable Ron DeSantis, Governor of the State of Florida,

On behalf of the chief fire and emergency medical services (EMS) officers of the Florida Fire Chiefs' Association (FFCA), we urge you to recommend that the nation's governors adopt the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's (NASEM) recommendation that all firefighters and EMS personnel be placed in the highest priority tier for receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. Firefighters and EMS personnel serve on the front lines of the battle against COVID-19 and care for countless known and suspected COVID-19 patients. The FFCA recommends that the National Governors Association (NGA) urge their members to keep firefighters and EMS personnel in Priority Tier 1A, alongside other key healthcare providers.

Firefighters and EMS personnel provide emergency medical care and transportation to more than 30 million people each year. This year has been especially difficult as fire departments faced increasing demands to care for patients suffering from the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its ensuing illness, COVID-19. Because they provide aid to COVID-19 patients in their homes and offices, fire and EMS personnel are extremely susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 exposure. In fact, recent reports have indicated that firefighters and emergency medical workers were a staggering 15 times more likely than the general public to be infected with COVID-19 during the first wave of the pandemic.

One of the biggest threats facing firefighters and EMS personnel has been a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) for use when caring for patients. Fire departments around the United States continue to face unprecedented challenges in accessing PPE. The dangers of these exposures are equally serious for single-role EMS personnel, cross-trained firefighters/EMS personnel, and single-role firefighters. Due to the unique demands of the role of firefighters and EMS personnel, these individuals often are in close and sustained contact with members of the public and each other. These factors place them at a heightened risk of infection.

Considering these critical needs, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) stated that fire departments should be placed in the highest priority tier for access to PPE. Unfortunately, many states disregarded this recommendation and de-prioritized firefighters and EMS personnel. Although we are eight months into the response, fire departments still are feeling the effects of this decision. Although firefighters and EMS personnel do not work in traditional healthcare facilities, they face extreme risks of exposure while caring for patients in uncontrolled environments such as a patient's home or in a moving ambulance. In fact, firefighters and EMS personnel often respond to an emergency entirely unrelated to whether a patient has COVID-19, such as a car accident or a trip-and-fall, only to later find out that the individual potentially exposed them to the virus.

As we approach the release of a COVID-19 vaccine, these state-level decisions to de-prioritize firefighters and EMS personnel must not be repeated. The FFCA is troubled to hear of several states that are considering downgrading firefighters and EMS personnel on their list of vaccine recipients. The NASEM appropriately recognized the need to protect all firefighters and EMS personnel when they advised that they be placed in Tier 1A for access to the COVID-19 vaccine.

The FFCA is concerned that states may implement decisions to deprioritize firefighters and EMS personnel for access to a COVID-19 vaccine. Firefighters and EMS personnel are forced to undergo lengthy quarantines when they experience unprotected exposures to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19. These quarantines place immeasurable stress on the firefighters, EMS personnel, and their families. Fire department operations also are stressed as jurisdictions must pay overtime costs to backfill these positions. In the cases of volunteer fire departments, quarantines may result in a lapse of protection for a community as no other volunteers are available to backfill. With these consequences in mind, we must provide firefighters and EMS personnel with every available safeguard. While access to PPE will continue to be vital, states must maintain parity between firefighters, EMS personnel, and in-facility healthcare workers when deciding upon a vaccine prioritization schedule.

Governor DeSantis, we applaud your leadership and appreciate your commitment not only to the citizens of Florida but the public safety community as well. You have been, and continue to be, a leader in doing what's right in the battle we currently find ourselves in.

Again, thank you for your leadership and continued support.

Sincerely,



Wm. Ray Colburn, Fire Chief-Retired
Executive Director/CEO
Florida Fire Chiefs' Association

Cc: FFCA Board of Directors