

**Congressional Fire Services Institute · International Association of Fire Chiefs
International Association of Fire Fighters · National Association of Emergency
Medical Technicians · National Fire Protection Association · National Volunteer
Fire Council**

March 27, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

On behalf of the Congressional Fire Services Institute, International Association of Fire Chiefs, International Association of Fire Fighters, National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians, National Fire Protection Association, and the National Volunteer Fire Council, we urge you to prioritize firefighters and EMS personnel when deciding who will receive tests for COVID-19. Firefighters and EMS personnel are serving valiantly on the front lines of the battle against COVID-19. Due to increasingly dwindling supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE), increasing numbers of firefighters and EMS personnel are experiencing unprotected exposures to the COVID-19 virus. The inability to test these first responders places potentially unnecessary stress on these individuals and creates acute workforce shortages as these individuals are forced to undergo 14-day quarantines. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) must prioritize the testing of firefighters and EMS personnel in order to allow them to receive prompt medical treatment and to maintain safe staffing levels at fire departments and EMS agencies across the United States.

As you know, firefighters and EMS personnel often are the first healthcare providers to interact with known or suspected COVID-19 patients. However, these first responders are in an increasingly perilous position as PPE supplies are becoming depleted rapidly across the nation. This lack of PPE is one of several factors leading to high numbers of firefighters and EMS personnel being quarantined for 14 days due to unprotected exposures to COVID-19. Without the ability to test these individuals for COVID-19, they must remain in quarantine for 14 days. These quarantines deplete a fire department or EMS agency's staffing levels as well as force the individual responder and their family to undergo considerable mental stress.

Our organizations are deeply concerned by a factsheet from the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) which places firefighters and EMS personnel on a Tier 2 or Tier 3 priority status for testing depending on if they have COVID-19 symptoms. Despite placing symptomatic "first responders" on Tier 2 status, the same factsheet places "healthcare facility workers with symptoms" on Tier 1 status. This failure to recognize firefighters and EMS personnel as healthcare workers and the lack of parity between pre-hospital EMS personnel and in-facility healthcare providers is causing unnecessary delays in the testing process for firefighters and EMS personnel. Failure to efficiently test firefighters and EMS personnel results in personnel

being forced into unnecessarily long quarantines and/or inadvertently exacerbates the spread of COVID-19 by allowing unknowingly infected first responders and healthcare providers to continue to interact with patients and the public. The USPHS must address this issue by placing all symptomatic and asymptomatic first responders on Tier 1 priority status for COVID-19 testing.

Identifying all first responders and healthcare providers as a top-tier priority for testing is a sound policy already recognized by HHS and other federal agencies. As you know, HHS and the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) recently published a document titled *Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19*. Page 20 of this joint HHS-DOL guidance explicitly identifies paramedics and emergency medical technicians (EMTs) as being included in the definition of “healthcare workers” in the “Very High Exposure Risk” category due to their close and frequent interaction with known or suspected COVID-19 patients. Based on this HHS publication, and in recognition of the close contact and shared living spaces between single-role firefighters, single-role EMS personnel, and cross-trained firefighter/EMS personnel, our organizations urge HHS to add all firefighters and EMS personnel to Tier 1 priority status for COVID-19 testing.

Our organizations hope for HHS’ prompt action to ensure fire departments and EMS agencies are supported as they serve on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response efforts. Placing all firefighters and EMS personnel on Tier 1 priority for COVID-19 testing is one of the most important ways in which HHS can continue supporting fire departments and EMS agencies. We look forward to continuing to work with you to prioritize the health and safety of firefighters and EMS personnel.

Sincerely,

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