



April 29, 2020

The Honorable Peter T. Gaynor  
Administrator  
Federal Emergency Management Agency  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
500 C St., SW  
Washington, DC 20024

DELIVERED VIA EMAIL TO [KIMBERLY.HELM@FEMA.DHS.GOV](mailto:KIMBERLY.HELM@FEMA.DHS.GOV)

Dear Administrator Gaynor:

On behalf of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), the leading national organization representing the interests of the nation's volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services, I am writing to ask for your assistance in addressing the challenges that volunteer emergency services personnel and organizations are facing during the pandemic and the related economic contraction that our nation is experiencing. I am also enclosing a letter that I sent to President Trump today outlining some of these same concerns and asking for his assistance.

Volunteer fire and EMS organizations in many parts of the country continue to struggle to access resupply of personal protective equipment (PPE). Last week, 65 percent of respondents to a weekly survey that the NVFC started to better understand the impact that the pandemic is having on our members indicated that they are running low or have completely run out of PPE. Without adequate PPE responders have a heightened risk of exposure, which is leading to some personnel being hesitant or unwilling to continue responding.

I am aware that the Defense Logistics Agency has awarded a contract to Battelle Critical Care Decontamination Systems for 60 N95 decontamination units for the sanitation and reuse of N95 respirators. I am also aware that the President has been working through FEMA and other federal agencies to exercise his authority under the Defense Production Act (DPA) to reduce the time that it takes to ship imported PPE into this country, to eliminate exports of PPE to other countries so that domestic supplies, to limit hoarding of PPE supplies, and to ensure that a portion of new PPE supplies entering the market are directed to COVID-19 hotspots throughout the country.

All of these measures are sensible, and I understand that they have led to a nearly 50 percent increase in the supply of available PPE in the United States since December 2019, but the demand is many times higher than that and more needs to be done. As you know, the President has the power under the DPA to encourage manufacturers to produce goods that are in short supply. The President has used this power to increase production of ventilators, and I have asked him to consider using this same authority to increase production of PPE that is in short supply.

Volunteer fire and EMS organizations are struggling financially, and many will soon be unable to sustain themselves without significant assistance. The challenges that we are hearing about from our members

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include that they are unable to fundraise because of social distancing, local tax dollars are starting to dry up due to the economy slowing, reimbursements from ambulance transports are down because patients are avoiding hospitals, and operational costs are higher due to increased usage of PPE and having to disinfect vehicles and equipment.

The NVFC has asked President Trump to waive the local cost share requirement for accessing disaster assistance under the Stafford Act. I urge you to convey to the President that unless the cost share is waived, many volunteer fire and EMS organizations will not be able to afford to access disaster assistance and may instead be forced to curtail or even cease operations altogether. Losing access to emergency services would be challenging in normal times, but the impact will be devastating when that occurs in the middle of a pandemic.

The NVFC has heard from members that they are considering temporarily hiring volunteer personnel to ensure that they have adequate staffing capacity. Because of social distancing recruitment, training, and education of new volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel is difficult or even impossible in many areas at the moment. At the same time, attrition rates have increased in many departments due to concern about contracting COVID-19 – a worry that is exacerbated by the national PPE shortage. Many departments will struggle to afford to hire temporary personnel due to funding shortfalls at the local level, even though personnel costs associated with the pandemic are reimbursable through the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF). I urge you to develop clear guidance for volunteer emergency services organizations that outlines exactly what they need to do to be reimbursed for the full cost of hiring temporary employees to deal with staffing shortfalls caused by the current pandemic.

We continue to hear from our members in certain areas that access to testing for COVID-19 is a problem. 24 percent of respondents listed this as a challenge for their department in our survey last week. We are told that in some places responders can't get tested until they exhibit symptoms, and/or that it can take a week or more to get the results of tests back. This creates a situation where some personnel who are infected and may be contagious continue responding to calls while others who are not infected are nevertheless in isolation due to an exposure. Much more needs to be done to expand testing access to emergency responders throughout the country.

I would like to schedule a time to discuss these issues with you in greater detail via web conference. Given the scope of the challenges facing our nation at this time, unprecedented in modern times, it is more important than ever that we work together. The NVFC stands ready and willing to do what we can to support FEMA as you work to help the nation respond to the pandemic.

Sincerely,



Steven W. Hirsch, Chair