

First Responders Continue Crucial Work In The Face Of Heightened Risk

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As of Tuesday night, 31 uniformed officers and four civilians in the Boston Police Department had tested positive for COVID-19. And there are many more first responders across the state who have been infected.

The current crisis has police, paramedics and firefighters doing whatever they can to stay healthy while continuing to do their crucial jobs.

Michael MacNeil, a paramedic and president of the E.M.S. Division of Boston Police Patrolmen's Association, told WGBH News that COVID-19 is changing the way they look at all calls. When there's any indication they might interact with someone with the virus, they take precautions.

"Our guys will put a full gown on, a face shield, two pairs of gloves, some booties on top of their shoes, and an N95 mask," MacNeil said.

And all that protection doesn't make their job any easier.

"It's hot," he said. "The face shield will fog up. It's not fun. It's not comfortable."

But it's essential. Even with that protection, though, it's not like paramedics can stay the recommended six feet away from people.

"The closest we're going to get is when we actually have to intubate somebody — direct laryngoscopy," he said. "We have to get in, and you put a blade in someone's mouth and open their airway, insert a breathing tube. Your face is going to be six inches from the person's mouth. That's at the farthest."

Police officers don't usually have to get quite that close, but they're still at significant risk.

Scott Hovsepian, president of the Massachusetts Coalition of Police, said he'd like to know more — at the beginning of each shift — about where there are known infections.

"I just want to know those addresses," said Hovsepian, who is also a patrolman with the Waltham Police Department. "That's it. So if I do get sent to a call, I know, 'OK. That's a positive. That's a negative.'"

Part of the challenge right now, he said, is there's no consistent policy across the state for how first responders should safely do their jobs.

"Every department, every municipality, is left up to their own devices as far as how they want to deal with this," he said.

And in some places, he said, that can be dangerous.

"We do still have some administrations in different departments that have taken this lightly," he said. "They think that the media is overblowing this."

Hovsepian said some officers are being encouraged by their chiefs to continue interacting directly with the public, even in groups. That kind of close interaction isn't smart right now, he said.

"You keep contact down to a minimum unless it's necessary," Hovsepian said. "You let the citizens see you still driving around in the neighborhoods. They'll still see you driving and that's going to comfort them."

When first responders do have to interact closely with the public, it's important that they have the right kind of protective gear. Some officers told WGBH News they think they have enough protective equipment. But Rich MacKinnon, a firefighter paramedic in Whitman, said his department doesn't.

"I was talking to my chief just today and he was saying within a week we're going to be out [of] N95 masks, at the rate that we're going now, which we predictably will see an increase in calls within a week as this progresses," MacKinnon said.

MacKinnon said he is hopeful that reports from Gov. Charlie Baker and President Donald Trump of more incoming protective gear are true. MacKinnon is also the president of the Professional Firefighters of Massachusetts, which is pressing state lawmakers to pass a bill that would give first responders the same kind of protections for a COVID-19 diagnosis that they'd get for any other work-related injury, such as paid time off to recover without using sick time. The bill has been introduced in the House and Senate.

And there's a chance MacKinnon may wind up needing those protections himself. He said as he was on a call Saturday night, he found out the patient met the criteria for a COVID-19 case.

"We were already well into treating this patient," he said. "The patient's health really declined. So it was very taxing on the staff that was there, and we had five members that were potentially exposed."

Even with that unprotected exposure, MacKinnon is still working. "And I'll work until I get symptoms," he said.

While MacKinnon isn't showing symptoms, if he does have the coronavirus, he could be spreading it.

"I mean, that is a fear that we have," he said. "But if every first responder that felt like they came in contact with someone didn't go to work, then unfortunately we wouldn't have any first responders right now."