

COVID-19 RESPONSE IN CITIES:

Maintaining Your City's Public Safety and Emergency Response Services

Cities have moved quickly this year to provide many services remotely or at a safe social distance to reduce the spread of COVID-19, but public safety and emergency response present unique challenges. Police, fire, emergency medical services (EMS), and other first responders are responding to routine calls and emergencies that require them to be in closer personal contact with the public than other city employees. In addition, first responders often must cope with residents' mental health challenges layered atop the general stress of the pandemic. To the extent that a city is experiencing significant revenue losses, budget cuts may add further challenges to the provision of these critical services. Consider the following steps for protecting first responders and the general public while ensuring public safety in your city.

1 Prioritize providing personal protective equipment, testing and contact tracing for police, fire, and EMS personnel.

Like healthcare practitioners, law enforcement and other first responders will most likely encounter infected individuals as they carry out their duties. Public safety personnel should take precautionary measures to prevent potential exposure to COVID-19, and city officials should work with public safety departments to ensure that frontline staff have access to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). As COVID-19 cases continue to affect nearly every region of the country, PPE may become less available for first responders in the absence of strong city leadership.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offer

The [City of Los Angeles, CA](#) as well as the [State of New Hampshire](#) recently announced that first responders will receive rapid antigen tests to control spread of COVID-19 among critical workers.

guidance for law enforcement, firefighters and EMS on how to reduce COVID-19 exposure. These federal agencies also offer key considerations to keep public safety operational during the pandemic:

- [OSHA guidance for high-risk industries](#)
- [CDC guidance for Law Enforcement](#)
- [CDC guidance for Firefighters/EMS](#)

In addition to PPE, frequent testing can help identify and isolate COVID-19 cases before they have a chance to spread throughout the workforce and beyond. Rapid tests are slightly less accurate than polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests using nasal swabs, but they are faster, less expensive, and less complex, which makes the rapid tests optimal for large-scale screening in police or fire stations.

Finally, it is important to understand that many states have expanded state laws to include a “presumption” for first responders with COVID-19. In these cases, a COVID-19 diagnosis is presumed to be work-related and therefore claims for medical treatment and lost time are paid by workers’ compensation. A state-by-state overview of COVID presumption laws can be found [here](#).

2 Clearly communicate policies and enforcement procedures via sworn officers and other trusted community members.

City leaders, working in collaboration with top law enforcement officials, have a responsibility to establish clear protocols for how officers are to interact with the community and enforce COVID-19-related rules. Within that context, however, it is essential that police and other first responders embrace their role as visible liaisons who can build trust with the community. These first responders should be prepared to answer questions about testing kit availability, travel restrictions, quarantine and isolation, and personal safety measures (including whom the public should call for such information). The role of law enforcement should be focused on informing the public about current restrictions and encouraging individuals to comply with state and local emergency health declarations.

The [Sonoma County Board of Supervisors](#) recently approved a \$4 million proposal for enhanced outreach to at-risk communities.

It is important to remember that law enforcement and government in general are not always the best messengers for all segments of the population. The same information regarding testing, enforcement, and personal safety that is provided to officers should also be disseminated through local service organizations, churches, immigrant-serving agencies, or other community-based groups.

3 Establish new procedures to promote the well-being of first responders.

Emergency responders and public safety personnel are always under extraordinary strain. This constant stress makes these individuals even more vulnerable to the mental health challenges many Americans are experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as severe natural disasters and continuing political tensions. City leaders can anticipate and respond to these threats by putting in place a plan for critical incident stress management to promote the physical and emotional well-being of first responders and provide support services for them and their families. A key first step is to identify behavioral health resources in your area, including local behavioral health providers, Red Cross chapters, Medical Reserve Corps units, and tele-mental health services, as well as grief and loss resources for first responders and other city staff who may lose patients, colleagues, or loved ones.

Even before the pandemic, the [City of Plymouth, MN](#) became one of many police departments that implemented a “Check-up from the Neck Up” program. The city requires officers to meet with a mental health practitioner at least once a year. The [League of Minnesota Cities](#) has further guidance on similar mental health programs.

- The American Psychological Association (APA) has good information available on its [COVID-19 Information and Resources](#) page such as: [Quickly calming distress and improving mental health \(Psychological First Aid\)](#) and [Updated telehealth guidance by state during COVID-19](#).
- The CDC also provides resources to help first responders cope with stress and building resilience during the pandemic [here](#).

4 Reduce arrests and detention to slow COVID-19 spread in the criminal justice system.

City efforts to alter arrest and detention practices can support social or physical distancing and reduce the transmission of COVID-19. In many communities, these adjustments have been shown to slow the spread of the virus while also reducing high rates of arrest and detention that can disproportionately impact communities of color. Such practices can focus on reducing criminal justice involvement among

non-violent offenders, including those with mental health and substance use disorder issues and the homeless. Taking steps to ensure that arrests and detention focus only on violent offenses can advance the goals of public health and safety as well as criminal justice reform, while protecting frontline law enforcement and criminal justice staff as well.

The independent, nonpartisan National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice recently released a set of [urgent, far-reaching recommendations](#) that call on leaders in law enforcement, the courts, and corrections to expand efforts to reduce harm caused by the coronavirus and improve the justice system's preparedness for future public health emergencies.

The [City of San Marcos, TX](#) passed a city ordinance to compel police to use citations in lieu of arrests for certain misdemeanors. The [Prison Policy Institute](#) cites several similar examples of policies that are aimed at reducing rates of arrest and detention.

5 Review plans for evacuation and emergency sheltering

In addition to their responsibilities for law enforcement and day-to-day emergency management, first responders also are charged with providing aid during hurricanes, wildfires, floods and other disasters that continue to threaten communities across America. In planning for these events, it's important to consider new sheltering options that reduce risks of exposure to COVID-19. Indoor spaces are potential hot spots for virus transmission if physical distancing requirements are not maintained, and fewer residents may find temporary lodging with friends and family based on legitimate concerns about exposure. Information on non-congregate sheltering can be found in this [guidance from FEMA](#). Local leaders should always contact your FEMA region to get guidance and approval for any changes in policy or planning.

Where smaller shelter options are not possible, cities should enforce advanced hygiene protocols. Mandatory temperature testing, mobile handwashing stations, protective equipment like masks and gloves, hand sanitizer stations, and separate areas for individuals with fevers or other COVID-19 symptoms can reduce risk levels. More information can be found at the CDC [guidance on disaster shelter during the COVID-19 crisis](#).

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