



April 6, 2020

## **King County EMS and Seattle Fire Department Strategy to Reduce COVID-19 Illness: Update on Masks**

This communication provides an important update involving strategies to reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission. These updates include 1) masking of healthcare workers throughout their work shift and 2) the related need to extend the PPE supply by decontamination and reuse of masks.

Importantly, core concepts continue to be a priority: EMS providers should practice wellness screens prior to beginning work each day and regularly during the workday, routine decontamination of equipment and stations, meticulous attention to hand-washing and other hygiene, and conscious efforts to achieve social distancing at work.

In addition, we are now recommending additional strategies related to employee masking at work and mask decontamination and reuse. The effort requires a balanced plan that works to continue to protect the employee while working to sustain the supply of masks that is part of this protection strategy.

### Masks in Quarters

Based on updated guidance, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends EMS providers should don a mask while at work to the extent practical. Exceptions to masking include activities such as eating, drinking, bathing, and sleeping. Perform hand-hygiene when removing and reapplying these masks. The choice of mask type is contingent upon supply. Considering current mask shortages, the employee should follow best practices for Do-It-Yourself (DIY) reusable and washable masks to be used in instances where contact with patients and public are unlikely. As supply becomes available, surgical masks can be implemented. The DIY masks must cover the employee's nose and mouth. The objective is to reduce the possible spread of the virus between EMS providers in the workplace, while recognizing the higher exposure potentials are on EMS responses. Thus, the priority to conserve surgical and N95 masks for emergency response for patients with suspected COVID-19.

Ultimately, the end-goal is a common approach that could leverage a reusable mask that provides additional employee protection while also helping preserve the critical supply of N95 respirators and surgical masks. We must allow EMS agencies some flexibility as we work to achieve this common goal of protection from infectious disease.

### Reuse N95 Respirators

King County EMS is also advising that Fire Departments and EMS agencies in King County deploy strategies to reuse N95 respirators as an important means to maintain the availability of this critical piece of personal protective equipment for encounters with patients in less controlled settings than exist at base locations. The appendix provides a primer of approaches that can be used to achieve decontamination. None of these plans is perfect and come with logistical, efficacy, supply, and cost considerations. EMS agencies will need to determine how these considerations affect their choice of strategies. A working group developed the appendix and can be consulted to help agencies move forward with their plan.

There has been excellent sharing of ideas and resources to achieve regional equity and consistent best-practices for the EMS workforce in our region. Hence, we expect that EMS agencies will share their experience and progress as part of the agreed-upon approach to access regional PPE resources as outlined by the King County Fire Chiefs Association. Specifically, King County EMS requests each agency submit a written plan that describes an agency's strategy to reuse N95 respirators.