

Attention Canadian Affiliates

As you are aware, Health Canada has approved the H1N1 vaccine and provincial and local health authorities are now preparing to make the first doses of the vaccine available. The IAFF encourages fire fighters to get the H1N1 vaccine.

Further, we recommend that as front line health care workers who are a part of the nation's critical infrastructure, professional fire fighters should be among the first to have access to H1N1 vaccinations. The IAFF Canadian Office and the six affiliated Provincial Associations have been lobbying the federal and provincial governments respectively on this issue on your behalf.

While the federal government has specified that healthcare workers should be among the first to have access to the H1N1 vaccine, it has so far failed to properly recognize that professional fire fighters, who are first responders at emergency medical calls, are indeed frontline healthcare workers. It also failed to recognize that while it is important to protect the nation's healthcare infrastructure, it is equally important to protect Canada's emergency services infrastructure by ensuring there are enough emergency services personnel such as fire fighters available for duty during the height of a flu pandemic to adequately protect the lives and property of Canadians.

As the IAFF continues to raise this critical point with the Government of Canada with the intention of effecting long-term change to Canada's Influenza Pandemic Plan, please note that in the meantime you may still be able to get your members included in the first tier for H1N1 vaccinations by continuing to raise the issue with provincial or local health board or agency officials, who are making the final determinations about how local immunizations programs will take shape and who will be eligible for the first available doses.

For example:

- Manitoba fire fighters are included in the first tier for H1N1 vaccinations after raising the issue with the Manitoba Government
- Toronto and Kingston, Ont. fire fighters are included in the first tier after raising the issue with their local boards of health

In raising this issue at the provincial and local levels, it is critical to emphasize that fire fighters are frontline healthcare workers and should be included in the first tier for vaccinations, and that during the height of a flu pandemic it is critically important to ensure continuity of service in emergency services such as fire fighting. If possible, get the support of your provincial fire chiefs or local fire chief when going forward with this issue. The added voice will bring added attention to your request.

Post-exposure protocols

The IAFF also asserts that fire fighters who have yet to receive the H1N1 vaccine or who choose not to take the H1N1 vaccine should have direct and immediate access to available antivirals such as Tamiflu, if exposed to the H1N1 virus in the workplace or if exhibiting H1N1 symptoms. Include this in your request to local officials. Under most provincial health and safety acts, the employer has a duty to take every reasonable precaution to protect the worker.

Exposure Prevention

The IAFF recommends the following guidelines for minimizing exposure during a flu pandemic:

Before the Run

- Ensure that you have your PPE readily available (respirators, medical gloves, face/eye protection, gowns or garments)

During the Run

- Assume patients with respiratory symptoms have the flu
- Don your PPE before entering the patient area
- Strictly limit the number of crew members having direct patient contact
- Put a mask on the patient
- Create or promote good ventilation

After the Run

- Properly dispose of/clean exposed PPE
- Sanitize or wash your hands
- Properly clean/disinfect reusable medical equipment
- Decontaminate other equipment and vehicles
- Do not continue to wear contaminated clothing, and do not take any contaminated items, including uniforms, home
- Take care of your physical health (diet, rest)
- If you are exposed, report it

Also

Do not go to work if you are experiencing flu-like symptoms

Finally, if you have any questions about how to best your members' health and safety during a pandemic, consult the IAFF's online Pandemic Flu Guide at <http://www.iaff.org/09news/swineflu.htm> or contact the IAFF Canadian Office at (613) 567-8988.

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