

Fire Fighters Experiencing a Patchwork System of Protection Across the Country During the H1N1 Influenza Pandemic

New Survey Shows Fire Fighters Concerned For Their Own Health and Safety, and Public Safety as a Result

Calling for a Combination of Tools to Protect Them Against Influenza

Toronto, ON, November 25, 2009 – With the influenza A / H1N1 (human swine flu) pandemic now impacting Canada, a new [survey](#) of The International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) found that Canada’s professional fire fighters are concerned about their risk of infection during influenza pandemics – whether mild, moderate or severe. They also are concerned about their ability to maintain critical public safety services during the height of any type of influenza pandemic.

Professional fire fighters protect 85 per cent of the nation’s population and infrastructure and are first on the scene in virtually any kind of emergency, whether it’s a fire, medical call or other type of incident. What many Canadians may not realize is they’re not just putting out fires. More than half of emergency calls are health-related, requiring fire fighters to also administer medical care as front-line healthcare workers.

“We play a critical role in protecting the health and safety of the public,” said Jim Lee, IAFF Assistant to the General President for Canadian Operations and 30-year veteran fire fighter and former District Chief in the City of Toronto. “In a labour-intensive role like ours it’s crucial that we, and other emergency first responders, have the proper number of personnel on the streets to respond to emergencies. The nature of our jobs means we’re in constant contact with the public no matter what kind of emergency call, and during a pandemic this can put us at direct risk of exposure.”

What Are Canadian Fire Fighters Saying?

A new Harris / Decima survey of Canadian members of the IAFF found that:

- 96 per cent believe they are at a higher risk of infection compared to the general population
- 87 per cent are personally concerned about getting infected because of the nature of their work
- 92 per cent are concerned about unknowingly spreading the virus to family and friends
- 76 per cent believe the impact could be serious on loss of life
- Close to one-third (29 per cent) were not confident that first responder operations would continue to operate normally
- 100 per cent felt it important the healthcare system maintain continuity of service during a growing influenza

What Preventative Measures Should Be Taken?

According to The International Association of Fire Fighters, government needs to put better plans in place to protect emergency first responders. The IAFF is calling on government to take action on the following measures:

- Fire fighters should be identified as a priority group in the first sequence to receive pandemic vaccines when they become available (fire fighters and other emergency service personnel have only recently been identified as one of the priority groups to receive the pandemic H1N1 vaccine, and in only a small handful of provinces);
- Prior to a vaccine being available or when vaccine supplies are scarce, giving fire fighters access to antiviral medications for preventative post-exposure use if a fire fighter has been exposed to someone who is infected; fire fighters who choose not to take the flu vaccine once it becomes available also should have ongoing access to antiviral medications for preventative post-exposure use;
- The P100 respirator, with an elastomeric seal.

Higher exposure risks lead to higher rates of absenteeism and a slower response rate to emergency calls. Science-based standards for fire protection specify that in order to adequately protect the public and firefighters in the event of a fire in a two-storey family dwelling, four fire fighters must be on the scene within four minutes and 15 to 17 must be there within eight minutes. And while the addition of fire fighters to priority vaccine lists in some provinces is a good first step, a system of inconsistent protection is emerging across the country.

“A patchwork system of protection is not good enough. A high absenteeism rate in a fire department at the height of a pandemic negatively impacts response times and personnel availability and as a direct result poses a significant threat to public and fire fighter safety,” continued Lee. “We’re seeing three to four times the absentee rates in some areas compared to other years. This means fewer fire fighters available to respond to calls, possibly compromising our response times and ultimately our ability to respond to Canadians in need. We’re asking for back-up measures to ensure we can maintain the same level of care Canadians have come to expect of us.”

Overwhelmingly, Canada’s professional fire fighters (99 per cent) believe government should take all of the precautions necessary to protect emergency first responders during an influenza pandemic.

“Fire fighting is already a dangerous occupation,” added Lee. “Our members risk their lives and their safety every day in order to protect the lives and property of Canadians. If there is anything that can be done to make their job safer, such as protecting them from workplace exposure in the event of an influenza pandemic it should be a priority, just like government has begun to do for front-line healthcare workers. Only a healthy fire fighter can protect the public.”

About the Harris / Decima Survey

A total of 1,712 online surveys were completed among IAFF members from April 30, 2009 to May 15, 2009 to determine their level of concern about potential influenza pandemics and to gauge their expectations for emergency first responder pandemic protection in Canada. The IAFF received an arms-length grant from Roche Canada to conduct the survey.

About The International Association of Fire Fighters

The International Association of Fire Fighters, AFL-CIO, CLC represents 296,000 professional fire fighters across North America, including 21,000 in Canada. Headquartered in Washington, D.C. with a Canadian office in Ottawa, Ontario, the IAFF is a leader in public safety and fire fighter health and safety. For more information about the IAFF, visit www.iaff.org and www.iaff.org/canada.

For more information, contact:

Jim Lee – IAFF Canadian Office
(613) 567-8988