



IAFF CANADA 2011 LEGISLATIVE FACT SHEET

Protecting Public Safety by Ensuring Fire Fighters have Priority Access to Vaccines and Antivirals during an Influenza Pandemic

Background

As the first on scene in virtually any kind of emergency, fire fighters play an important role in society. Stationed throughout Canada's large and small cities, highly-skilled professional fire fighters arrive within minutes of any emergency call with such lifesaving capabilities as fire suppression, search and rescue, vehicle extrication and emergency medical response. Professional fire fighters are Canada's first line of defense in any emergency situation, and are a part of Canada's critical infrastructure.

A key element of fire fighters' ability to provide adequate protection to the public is the ability to arrive on scene quickly and with enough personnel to perform the tasks necessary to bring an emergency under control in a safe and effective manner. Imagine what would happen if suddenly, during the height of an influenza pandemic, 25 to 30 per cent of fire fighters were unavailable for duty due to illness. The results could be catastrophic, especially at a time when Canada's healthcare and emergency response systems are already strained. But this is exactly what could happen in the event of a moderate or severe influenza pandemic, unless steps are taken to ensure that fire fighters are among the first to be protected.

The Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan, developed in 2006, cites fire fighters and other first responders and the essential roles they play in society, but the document does not suggest a priority list for influenza vaccine access. After the H1N1 virus emerged in 2009, the Public Health Agency of Canada further released a Guidance on Vaccine Sequencing to assist provincial and local health officials as they made important decisions about who should get the first doses of the H1N1 vaccine once available. Doctors, nurses and other health care workers are listed at the top of the sequence, in order to protect and maintain the nation's healthcare infrastructure. But the Guidance ignored the need to also protect the nation's emergency services infrastructure during a pandemic.

While the Guidance document prioritized those who perform healthcare functions such as direct patient care and emergency medical services, fire fighters weren't specified by name in the first tier. But they were named in a second tier, which was titled "others who may benefit from vaccination." This was the same tier as the general public. A provincial or local health official looking at the Guidance to see where fire fighters should be in the vaccine sequence would not have readily understood that fire fighters are in fact frontline healthcare workers and that vaccinating fire fighters is necessary in order to maintain critical, lifesaving public safety services during the height of a pandemic.

As first responders to medical emergencies, including calls of respiratory distress, fire fighters are likely to come into contact with infected individuals in the course of their duties and as a result are at an increased risk of exposure and infection during an influenza pandemic.

During the fall of 2009, when the nation was preparing for the second wave of the H1N1 virus, some professional fire fighters were able to convince provincial and local officials that they should receive vaccine priority in order to ensure public safety, but many were not. What resulted was a patchwork of protections across Canada that varied from province to province, and city to city. The IAFF believes that all Canadians are deserving of an equal level of protection in the event of an influenza pandemic, and that the Canadian Government has a responsibility to create a clear, nationwide protocol for vaccine sequencing that considers the protection of all facets of the nation's critical infrastructure, including emergency response. The IAFF also believes that antiviral drugs should be available to fire fighters for prophylactic treatment during an influenza pandemic if they suffer exposure to an individual with suspected influenza

before vaccines are available, or if the fire fighter has chosen not to receive a vaccine.

Over 97 per cent of the MPs and senators asked individually about this issue in April 2010 agreed with the IAFF position that fire fighters should be included in the first tier for vaccinations in order to protect the nation's emergency response system during an influenza pandemic. Responses were recorded from a total of 85 MPs and senators from all political parties.

In the 41st Parliament, NDP MP Libby Davies (Vancouver East) has drafted M-132, a private member's motion that addresses this important issue. M-132 states:

M-132 - June 6, 2011 - That, in the opinion of the House, the government should recognize firefighters as part of Canada's critical infrastructure and ensure that firefighters have priority access to vaccines and antivirals during an influenza pandemic

The IAFF is prepared to support M-132 and supports any other initiative that advances this important public safety issue.

IAFF Position

In the name of public safety, to ensure that critical fire protection and medical first responder capabilities are maintained at adequate levels during the height of an influenza pandemic, the Government of Canada should clearly specify in the Canada Influenza Pandemic Plan and in any Guidance on Vaccine Sequencing issued in response to a future outbreak that fire fighters, as emergency healthcare providers and a part of the nation's critical infrastructure, should be in the first priority group for available vaccines. In addition, antiviral medications should be made available on a priority basis to fire fighters who are exposed to suspected influenza in the course of their duties prior to the availability of vaccines or for those who choose not to receive a vaccine.

While this issue is directed at Health Canada, the IAFF asserts that the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, which is responsible for ensuring the safety of Canadians, should respond to this issue and address the need to ensure that Canada's communities, its citizens and its critical infrastructure remain protected during the height of a moderate or severe influenza pandemic.

IAFF Arguments

- ✓ Fire fighters perform lifesaving duties including fire suppression, search and rescue, vehicle extrication and emergency medical response and as a result are a part of Canada's critical infrastructure
- ✓ As medical first responders, fire fighters are at an increased risk of exposure to influenza cases
- ✓ A study by risk analysis experts concluded that without any precautions, 25 to 30 per cent of fire fighters could be unavailable for duty during the height of a moderate or severe influenza pandemic
- ✓ With 25 to 30 per cent of personnel unavailable for duty, fire departments cannot provide adequate protection to the public, resulting in decreased public safety and increased risks to lives and property.
- ✓ While it is appropriate for the federal government to protect Canada's healthcare infrastructure during an influenza pandemic, it is critically important to protect the nation's emergency service infrastructure
- ✓ All Canadians are equally deserving of adequate protection during an influenza pandemic
- ✓ An overwhelming majority of MPs from all political parties, when asked individually, agree with the IAFF position on priority vaccinations for fire fighters
- ✓ Promoting fire fighters within the vaccination order would not in itself result in added costs, in fact it would prevent costs associated with the potential loss of life and property

For more information about this issue or any other issue affecting Canada's professional fire fighters, visit www.iaff.org/canada or contact the IAFF Canadian Office at (613) 567-8988. The International Association of Fire Fighters represents 298,000 professional fire fighters in North America, including over 21,000 in Canada. The IAFF is affiliated with the AFL-CIO and the Canadian Labour Congress.