

March 27, 2020

## The Coronavirus Pandemic is Upon us, so What are Responsible Employers Doing to Protect Public Safety Personnel?

With the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic coming into view, it is clear this situation is one that disproportionately impacts individual members of the public safety community. Simply stated, our police officers, deputy sheriffs, firefighters, paramedics/EMTs, correctional officers, and dispatchers face greater risk of exposure, and they are obviously just as susceptible to contracting COVID-19 as anyone else.

---

### In this Alert:

- Implementing a "Quarantine Schedule"
- Preparing Accommodations for Isolation and Quarantine

---

[Download Alert PDF](#)

This is not a situation where public safety employees can protect themselves with an increased presence, enhanced force options or traditional tools of the trade. Instead, public safety agencies that work with their labor associations to implement preventative measures will be in the best position to maintain adequate staffing and service levels throughout the course of this extraordinary health crisis. Merely developing contingency plans for reacting to anticipated staffing shortages is not the solution, as it fails to implement strategies to stave off deteriorating conditions and protect individual employees from contracting the virus.

Agencies should not wait until staffing levels are decimated, but need to act now to proactively protect the workforce. While it is impossible to definitively ensure the health and welfare of essential employees who must continue working when the rest of us shelter in place and practice social distancing, with some basic preparation and precautionary steps, employers can promote both the safety of the public and the health and welfare of their personnel.

## IMPLEMENTING A "QUARANTINE SCHEDULE"

While most employees – in both the private and public sector – have been ordered to work from home or granted weeks of paid leave, the public safety community has thus far largely been excluded from such benefits and, in some rare instances, directed to conduct business as usual. Although some jurisdictions have been fortunate to avoid the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic (at least thus far), the “business as usual” approach typically constitutes a failure in management’s threat assessment. Due to the highly communicable nature of the

COVID-19, waiting for an employee to develop symptoms or test positive for the virus is effectively planning to fail, as once the first domino falls, the loss of personnel will outpace the employer's ability to react, likely leading to more critical missteps and miscalculations.

To the extent possible, public safety professionals need to be provided the opportunity to practice the same preventative measures the rest of our communities have been directed to implement as part of their daily routines. Those practices start by reevaluating the staffing and scheduling of personnel to allow for some level of isolation, limiting cross-contamination, and effectively building in quarantine periods where personnel can shelter in place, practice social distancing, care for their families, monitor for symptoms, seek testing, and notify their colleagues of potential exposure risks. These basic health and safety measures are not available with existing staffing plans and levels that rely upon overlapping shifts, shared equipment, and an extensive reliance upon overtime to mask industry staffing shortages.

In applying the principle that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, many law enforcement agencies are getting ahead of the problem by adopting one of several versions of the "quarantine schedule", wherein the departments place an increased emphasis on patrol services, and establish a clear separation of the workforce by dividing patrol into two or three teams that will only overlap once every two to three weeks. Relying on different variations of a 12-hour schedule, a ("quarantine schedule") allows personnel to alternate between periods of providing essential patrol services and periods of isolation and self-quarantine, while maintaining availability to respond in the event of a law enforcement emergency. Should an employee be exposed to the coronavirus, or worse yet, diagnosed as having contracted COVID-19, the quarantine schedule effectively limits the risk and exposure to other personnel and the community, thereby allowing the department to maintain service levels and limit the spread of the virus. While the most effective options may not be easy to implement and may require employers and labor organizations to work out solutions that comply with existing collective bargaining agreements and wage and hour laws, every effort should be made for employers and labor leaders to incorporate the practices that medical experts have recommended for the rest of society into the workplace of public safety personnel.

## **PREPARING ACCOMMODATIONS FOR ISOLATION AND QUARANTINE**

The second component to any basic plan of action is securing accommodations for the isolation and/or quarantine of employees that have been exposed to the coronavirus. In light of the fact that many public safety professionals are precluded from practicing the basic precautions cited as effective tools to limit the spread of COVID-19, and given the risk to the families of public safety personnel returning home after numerous potential exposures to the virus during any given shift, employers should be prepared to provide isolation and/or quarantine accommodations for employees that have been placed at risk because of their continued service to the public.

With hotels experiencing unprecedented vacancy rates, the availability of space is at an all-time high. In order to "flatten the curve" and stop the spread of the coronavirus, every employer should have a plan to provide accommodations for public safety employees who need to isolate or quarantine due to exposure of

COVID-19. While most employees will want to isolate or quarantine at their residence, they should have the option of a hotel room paid for by the employer. While public safety personnel assume a number of risks when signing up for the job, the fear of going home and exposing their families to a highly contagious virus that has been declared a worldwide pandemic was not among the risks contemplated at that time.

As with any other employer, local public agencies need to take steps to ensure the health and welfare of their employees and their families. Failing to do so will likely have catastrophic consequences, as existing scheduling/deployment models are most likely a breeding ground for a virus like COVID-19, and prime to take down far more public safety employees for extended periods of time than anything we have ever experienced. A few precautionary steps can do wonders to promote the health and welfare of not only the workforce, but the communities that every public safety employee serves on a daily basis.

---

**SERVING ALL OF CALIFORNIA**