



COVID-19 is the Incident— the Wildfire is the Incident Within the Incident

By Jaime Laczko

State Fire Supervisor

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

New York State has been hit very hard by COVID-19.

New York State Forest Rangers have had many COVID-19 positive members. The way we look at incidents here in our state as far as our Forest Rangers are concerned is COVID is the incident and any wildfire incident or search and rescue incident is the incident within the incident.

Implementing this mindset we have reduced the number of Rangers who have been infected with COVID-19. We also quarantine Rangers who have symptoms or are awaiting diagnostic test results. Isolation is for individuals who test positive. The terms are not interchangeable.

“I have some Forest Rangers who were asymptomatic and suffered no ill effects. There have been others who had the worst experience of their life.

One Ranger in the Adirondacks told me it was like the virus was probing his body for a way in. It would go from his back, to his neck, to even the bottom of his feet. It was the worst 24 hours of his life. When I heard this, I was taken back. This is a tough guy, in good shape. To listen to him made me realize how dangerous this unseen threat is.

While on assignments I’ve personally encountered three known COVID-19 positive people. I have had the diagnostic test twice and the blood antibody test twice. All negative results.

For the first time ever we are all (worldwide) involved in an incident we can’t see. All we see are the symptoms and, in some cases, not every time. With that in mind, my co-workers now view wildfires, searches and rescues that we respond to in a totally new light.”

Jaime Laczko

Challenges

- Asymptomatic people are a major problem because there is no sign of the disease and it is therefore being spread. I worked in an ICP as an Operations Section Chief (OPSC) with someone who was asymptomatic. The entire incident management team was then tested. From that point forward, PPE was worn—treating everyone as though they had COVID-19 and were asymptomatic.
- Regarding PPE, specifically masks, at ICP, while in travel status with others, or during other non-physical exertion situations, masks work fine. But on the line, we found (like many others), the folks who used masks while physically exerting themselves spent time fumbling with them. It became obvious that common sense had to

come into play and we needed to adapt and fall back to some of our basics like 10-foot line spacing, for example.

- Testing individuals after coming in contact with a known positive or a high-risk COVID-19 assignment: after the person is tested they are placed in quarantine until the test results come back.
- Isolation is used when a person tests positive and then they are retested after the 14 days. Many times, these folks will test positive again, but the ability to spread the virus is greatly reduced (according to experts). Please document all information if you test positive for the virus, because the truth is no one knows what the long-term health ramifications are.

Bottom Line

Following guidelines about social distancing, wearing PPE, adjusting close gatherings (like briefings, AARs, travel, etc.), are a must.

This RLS was submitted by:

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