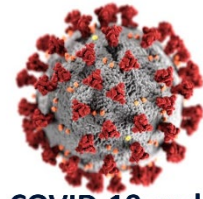


Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: COVID-19 Positive Response—When Employee is on a Distant Off-Unit Fire Assignment

Date: June-July 2020

Location: Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest/Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest



**COVID-19 and
Fire Season 2020 Lessons**
For the latest on COVID-19 visit
[CDC.gov/COVID19](https://www.cdc.gov/COVID19) 

What Happens When Your Employees from Georgia are Exposed to a Positive COVID-19 Individual During a Fire Assignment in Nevada?

Home Unit Lessons – Takeaways – Suggestions for the Future

*This discussion centers around what went well
and what we could do better in the future
to streamline any response should
this type of situation occur again.*

Background

While on a fire assignment on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest in Nevada this June, two firefighters from the Chattooga River Ranger District—on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest in Georgia—were exposed to another firefighter who became sick and ultimately tested positive for COVID-19. They had been working with the Bridgeport Helitack Crew under the “Module as One” concept when they were exposed to the COVID-19 positive individual.

*[To see the RLS on this Bridgeport Helitack Crew COVID-19 incident:
<https://www.wildfirelessons.net/viewdocument/helitack-covid-19-positive-tests-2.>]*

Tests were then administered to the two Chattooga River firefighters, with a positive result for one (Firefighter 1) and a negative result for the other (Firefighter 2). They were quarantined in a hotel for the next 14 days, after which they both met the local health department’s criteria to return home. They arrived back home safely on July 8.

An AAR was conducted on Tuesday, July 14 with the two firefighters, Forest Safety Officer, District Ranger, District Fire Management Officer, and Engine Captain. The discussion centered around what went well and what we could do better in the future to streamline any response should this type of situation occur again.

Lessons

Testing

- ❖ Tests were difficult to obtain. Firefighters were denied testing at the local hospital because they weren’t presenting typical symptoms, specifically no fever, and the hospital was already experiencing a shortage of tests. The local health department, Carson City Health and Human Services, was the only medical facility that would accommodate testing for them based on their first responder status. Even these tests required phone calls from Bridgeport Fire Managers to local health officials.

- ❖ Two salient points: 1) Testing can be denied, even at the height of a pandemic, so you may have to be assertive to seek testing; 2) COVID symptoms are not uniform and may present differently in each patient.
- ❖ During her quarantine, Firefighter 2 began to experience a loss of taste and smell. She was unable to obtain any further tests based on this symptom alone.

During Isolation

- ❖ Logistics went smoothly. The hotel was willing to accommodate isolated/quarantined individuals and food delivery options were available due to the size of the city. In addition, both firefighters used to work with the Bridgeport Crew, so they had a good prior working relationship and felt comfortable reaching out if needed.
- ❖ The county health department in Nevada called daily to check their status. Their home county's health department in Macon, North Carolina also called to check in with them. These calls did not include any medical advice from a medical professional.
- ❖ Firefighter 2's EMT training was invaluable. She monitored Firefighter 1's condition, obtaining a pulse oximeter and thermometer to assist with this process. She also consulted with their family doctor as his condition changed.
- ❖ Both firefighters filed CA-1's early into their quarantine. Firefighter 2's was for exposure to a COVID-19 positive individual and the case manager contacted her after they had returned home. Firefighter 1 had a glitch with the paperwork (see "Takeaways" section below for a possible solution). When he returned home, Firefighter 1 fixed his CA-1 filing. He was able to speak with a case manager within a few days after his amended filing.

Meanwhile, Back on the Chatt-Oconee . . .

- ❖ After hearing about the COVID-positive situation from both firefighters, notifications were made to the District Ranger who then communicated on up to the Forest Supervisor, the Fire and Natural Resources Staff Officer, etc.
- ❖ The District Ranger, Forest Safety Officer, and District Fire Management Officer all also reached out to their counterparts (the local District Ranger, Safety Officer, and Helitack Supervisor) on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. This opened the lines of communication and ensured all were on the same page regarding the current situation and plans for future care. Even though some of these people never had to reach back out again, it was beneficial to know that they could now easily do so.
- ❖ After an initial flurry of phone calls to both firefighters, the decision was made to streamline communications with one person calling to check-in each day. Additional calls for administrative questions, etc. occurred as needed. Email updates were sent out as needed to keep the message consistent for all involved back on the home unit.

Takeaways and Suggestions for the Future

- ❖ Symptoms are not always textbook. Firefighter 1 never developed a fever, and the original COVID-19 positive individual only had a fever for a few hours. Stay home if you're feeling a little "off," even if you seem to be feeling fine overall.
- ❖ Filing paperwork and receiving calls while ill and even while recovering from COVID-19 can be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Have a designated supervisor or point-of-contact handle the administrative processes so nothing critical is missed.
- ❖ Have a medical provider in contact with the individual who is ill to monitor their condition. It is important that whoever is checking in with and monitoring the patient knows the threshold for hospitalization, particularly with an illness such as COVID-19 that can impair the respiratory system. Consider developing a

briefing card of signs and symptoms that require a higher level of medical care and provide any necessary monitoring equipment such as a thermometer and pulse oximeter.

- ❖ It may be a good idea on the host unit side of things to assign an individual with Family and Hospital Liaison training as a point-of-contact.
- ❖ Logistical support outside of a big city will require a lot more involvement (mainly for food) from the host unit or Incident Management Team.
- ❖ Travel home via rental vehicle was preferable to traveling by air. It kept additional exposure to a minimum and allowed for an adjustable travel pace during post-COVID19 recovery.
- ❖ Having the home unit Forest Safety Officer involved from the beginning was extremely helpful, particularly when tracking down answers to COVID-19 administrative questions.
- ❖ The Humboldt-Toiyabe's testing and quarantine/isolation protocols followed county health department guidance. Keeping any Forest and District plan protocols tiered to the local health departments as much as possible simplifies things and avoids unnecessary complications.
- ❖ The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest provided great support. This level of support may vary across different Forests and this type of scenario will also play out differently on a large incident.

This RLS was submitted by:
Fire Management Officer
Chattooga River Ranger District
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest

Do you have a Rapid Lesson to share?
Click Here:

[Share
Your Lessons](#)