



**San Juan County Fire Department**

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**PRESS RELEASE**

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**For Immediate Release**

### **San Juan County Emergency Responders Exposed to Coronavirus During Call**

**Aztec, NM**—Two volunteer firefighters are quarantined for the next 14 days after being exposed to a patient who was coronavirus positive during an emergency medical service call.

Friday, two volunteer firefighters responded to a medical call along with San Juan Regional EMS staff and San Juan County Sheriff's Deputies. Based on questions asked by dispatchers, responding personnel had no reason to believe that the patient was exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19. During the treatment of the patient, the firefighters and deputies were not wearing masks or eye protection. The New Mexico Department of Health Emergency Medical Service Bureau later informed responders that the patient was infected with coronavirus.

"Our service operates with volunteer responders, we cannot afford to lose these responders for two weeks because they were unaware of the risk of infection and could not take appropriate precautions," said San Juan County Fire Chief John Mohler.

Department policy, at that time, only required firefighters wear masks and eye protection if questions asked by dispatchers lead to concerns for exposure to coronavirus. That policy has changed as of Monday. Firefighters on medical calls will be wearing surgical masks, eye protection and gloves. If there are concerns for a coronavirus positive patient, the surgical mask will be upgraded to N95. Additionally, patients on medical calls will be asked to wear a surgical or dust mask during treatment.

If calling for medical assistance, it is important to be honest with dispatchers when asked questions about COVID-19. Dispatchers screen calls to be able to tell responders if they need to wear increased personal protective equipment. This questioning protects our firefighters, emergency medical personnel and law enforcement officers, as well as all of their families.

"It is important for citizens to notify us as soon as they can if they have tested, or believe they may be positive for COVID-19 when they call 9-1-1," said Chief Mohler, "We are still going to respond, it just changes how we respond to those incidents."

Dispatchers have a list of questions asked during every call for service. The San Juan County Communications Authority has recently implemented additional questions specific to the coronavirus pandemic to protect our first responders. This now includes every call dispatched by the San Juan County Communications Authority. A caller will be asked if they or the patient has temperature over 100.4 or feel hot to the touch, if they have chills, difficulty breathing or shortness of breath, a persistent cough or any other respiratory problems such as persistent sneezing, wheezing, or congestion. Based on the answers given, dispatchers can advise responders to wear higher levels of PPE.

Despite the answers to questions by dispatchers, patients will still receive care. The only difference in any call is the level of personal protective equipment worn by responders. Responders want to care for patients in the best manner possible, providing accurate answers will mean we can protect responders, and the community, while caring for patients.



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The San Juan County Fire Department has been in contact with the New Mexico Department of Health and is following recommendations to clean and sanitize vehicles and spaces the firefighters may have been in. At this time, there are no others expected to have been exposed through these volunteers.

The San Juan County Sheriff's Office deputies involved have not worked since Friday.

The firefighters will remain quarantined for 14 days, or until tests show that they are negative for coronavirus. San Juan County Sheriff's Deputies will return to work under the same conditions.

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