

MONITOR & MITIGATE

The Impact of COVID-19 on Public Safety



Communication

Communication during COVID-19: Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced communication challenges among first responder agencies, including:

- Evolving public health recommendations, requiring frequent updates in communications to partner organizations, communities served, and internal stakeholders.
- Coordinating messaging with key communicators working remotely and on different schedules.
- Frequent policy and procedural changes to best equip and protect first responders.

Frontline Responders vs. Leadership Perspective

Along with these challenges, perspectives on effective communication differed significantly between those in leadership and frontline first responders. While supervisors generally perceived that communication was efficient, effective, and clear, frontline responders indicated otherwise. When discussing communication efforts during the pandemic, frontline responders reported that:

- The communication during the pandemic was “very poor” and policy changes due to the virus were disseminated by “word of mouth” (INT. 5762).
- Leadership did not provide rationale for policy changes or information about infectious disease, rather, they were “telling [them] what [they needed] to do and they don’t always have the answers either” (INT. 1252).
- Administrative staff often did not take input from frontline responders on protective measures, despite their experience and risk in the field. Frontline responders resented the one-way nature of communication, saying “information rolls down the chain, it never goes up” (INT. 4300).

IN THIS BRIEF

- ▶ Communication efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ▶ Frontline responders versus leadership perspectives on communication success.
- ▶ Tips for effective communication.

RELEVANT FOR



PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The goal of the project is to measure the impact of COVID-19 on first responders, identify and share best practices organizations can put in place to protect themselves in the short term, and identify strategies to make first responder organizations more resilient to pandemics in the future.

This brief is based on findings from initial interviews with 25 first responders representing 25 distinct departments across approximately 16 states.



Resource Referrals

For project news and updates:

- Visit start.umd.edu/COVIDFirstResponders & second sight-ts.com/covid19-topic-dashboard
- Subscribe to START’s newsletter at start.umd.edu/newsletters
- Follow us on social media with #COVIDFirstResponders

Disconnects between Supervisors and the Frontline

Frontline responders interviewed for this project pinpointed the one-way flow of communication and lack of consideration for in-field perspectives as particularly problematic.

- While frontline responders were in the field, administrative staff isolated themselves in their office or home, making it difficult to communicate effectively. One respondent stated, “I haven’t seen my captain, I haven’t seen my major lieutenants... they’re usually not very friendly” (INT. 4300).
- Although frontline responders were experiencing the stress and risk of the virus firsthand, managers rarely took their input on directives. Though, as one respondent reported, “unfortunately, that’s not new. That’s a department issue. And unfortunately, I see it a lot... that ‘I am the chief and I am the king and I know everything’” (INT. 1779).
- There was a growing frustration that frontline responders were forced to follow orders “from someone that sits at a desk and not taking into account” frontline responder experiences (INT. 3609).

“**To communicate effectively, you have to establish a closed circuit. And in my organization, that circuit only runs one way. It’s never closed going the other way... a lot of it is also given, and not listen to.**

A Frontline Responder in an urban/suburban EMS/Fire department (INT. 3932)

“**How are [managers] telling [frontline] what [they] should and shouldn’t do... they’re not even exposed when you’re at the chief level or higher up.** (INT. 3693)

“**Leaders were totally fine with sending [the frontline] in harm’s way all the time, regularly.** (INT. 1252)



HOW TO HELP FIRST RESPONDERS

Quick Tips

- 1 Create a closed circuit of communication—a two-way flow of communication is necessary considering the risks of COVID-19.
- 2 Communicate explanations for changing policies and procedures to frontline responders considering the ever-changing national, state, and county guidelines and recommendations.
- 3 Consider input from frontline responders who are experiencing the virus firsthand.

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