

MONITOR & MITIGATE

The Impact of COVID-19 on Public Safety



Communication

Communication during COVID-19: What's Happening in Your Department

The COVID-19 pandemic has made communication both more difficult and more important.

- You need to frequently communicate with your personnel about changing protocols for PPE, service delivery, and exposure/quarantine rules to ensure that best practices for protecting your personnel and communities are being followed
- Personnel, especially administrative staff and leadership, may be working remotely or on different schedules, further hampering communication
- Your department also likely needs to coordinate with other departments and agencies, local stakeholders, and the community regarding the COVID-19 response, at a time when in-person interactions are curtailed

Communicating about Changing Policies

- The **rapid pace** of updates and changing recommendations can make it difficult for personnel to know exactly what policies are. As one EMS director put it, *“One and one today is two. But tomorrow [one plus one] might be ‘banana’”* (Int. 2651)
- **Use multiple modes** to communicate the most crucial information—like emails, physical postings in kitchens, entryways, or other high-traffic areas, *and* real-time (possibly remote) conversations at morning or pre-shift briefings
- A **living document**, like an updateable incident action plan, that outlines procedures while drawing attention to changes, is a useful tool that reminds personnel of policies and routinizes change

“**With all those changes taking place and clarification needed, it really helps to have an action plan and the procedures posted in the kitchen...the guys would come in, they grab that, sit down at their morning brief and go over looking for any changes that had occurred.**

Fire battalion chief in a small urban department (Int. 0668)



Resource Referrals

For project news and updates:

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

IN THIS BRIEF

- ▶ The challenge of communicating about COVID-19 policies and procedures
- ▶ How departments successfully communicate
- ▶ Ways to promote two-way communication with your first responders

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 29 first responders representing 29 distinct departments across 16 states.

External Communication

Communicating with others in your region or county, your communities, as well as external stakeholders or partners like local medical authorities, hospitals, courts, jails, or contractors, is also a challenge.

- 1 Other departments and first responder organizations:** Regular, virtual meetings and calls can help ensure that your department is aware of how different policies are being implemented in departments like yours. Coordination with area first responder departments may help cover personnel shortages or offer insights for more efficient, and safer, service delivery.
- 2 Governments, health departments, and other local stakeholders:** Making sure that your department is plugged in to these broader conversations improves situational awareness. In some places, emergency management or public health organizations have regular calls, or may “do a roundtable with police, fire, county officials, city, local...officials on...the status” of the pandemic (Int. 1222).
 - This ensures a more unified response and avoids ineffective or counterproductive unilateral policies, like one police department where, “Everything [in the department is] like, all systems go to continue opening up, even though we’re...as a state shifting back to a more locked down footing” (Int. 3074)
 - This makes sure that you know in advance things like what hospitals are accepting COVID-19 patients and what the protocols are for officers bringing individuals to local courts or jails
- 3 Your community:** Lock-downs and social distancing means that you department probably has more limited interactions with the public for non-essential activities and services
 - In most places, local governments are better situated to take the lead in communicating with the general public about COVID-19 policies
 - However, maintaining a social media presence, modeling good community behavior, and taking advantage of non-emergency interactions with the public are ways your departments can support efforts to communicate with your community about the pandemic

Quick Tips: Two-Way Communication and Soliciting Feedback

- ▶ The pace and severity of changes during the COVID-19 pandemic mean that communication should not just be top-down through your department’s chain of command
 - ▶ Communicating the “whys” of the policies matter. One law enforcement safety officer found himself inundated with “millions of questions” and had “tons of people come to me and say...this is what I’m feeling. This is what I believe...tell me why we’re doing this.” (Int. 5781)
 - ▶ Some departments saw better compliance with new PPE guidelines after addressing complaints about the equipment, such as goggles fogging up or masks that were particularly uncomfortable (Int. 2455, Int. 1222)
 - ▶ Even if your department cannot accommodate first responder requests, **two-way communication can improve first responder morale, better protect personnel and communities through more thorough adoption of best practices, and reduce the burden on personnel and leadership** often tasked with training and enforcing new policies



HOW TO HELP FIRST RESPONDERS

CONTACT

START ►►►

Amy Pate / Barnett Koven
infostart@umd.edu
www.start.umd.edu



Nathan Meehan
info@second sight-ts.com
www.second sight-ts.com

start.umd.edu/COVIDFirstResponders
second sight-ts.com/covid19-topic-dashboard

AUTHOR

Katy Lindquist (START)

This project is funded by the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Social Science Technology Center as Task 2 of “Advance Situational Awareness Capabilities in Support of Targeted Violent and Threat Prevention in the United States” (award #7ORSAT20FR0000082). The views and conclusions contained in the document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the University of Maryland, or START.