

**IAFF DISTRICT 7  
COVID-19 RESPONSE  
AFTER-ACTION REPORT**

**April 2022**



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# INTRODUCTION

## I. INTRODUCTION

### *1. Objective*

The objective of this report is to review the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) District 7 experience responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *2. Events & Participants*

Leaders from IAFF District 7 participated in the compilation of ideas for this after-action report. A combination of individual written reflections, directed activities, and group discussion were used to obtain the main ideas that shape the report and the detailed critiques found herein.

This report captures thoughts and actions that took place from February 2020 through March 2022 and reflects two distinct time periods of response: before the COVID-19 vaccine was rolled out (pre-vaccine) and after it was released (post-vaccine). The pre-vaccine and post-vaccine time periods had distinct differences in successes and challenges per the individuals involved in both time periods during the COVID-19 response in District 7.

### *3. Document Organization*

This document contains two parts (pre-vaccine and post-vaccine) along with this introduction. Each part contains sections that discuss positive outcomes and areas needing improvement derived from individual and group reflections. When available, ideas for how to improve and initiate the most effective response are included as suggestions for future pandemic responses.

### *4. Disclaimers*

This report is an attempt at reconciling opinions and perspectives for use as a learning tool. It may not address all situations encountered during the response effort. The report incorporates and synthesizes ideas applicable to IAFF District 7 and potentially other districts. However, it does not imply that every person who participated agreed on every point or that every point will be applicable at different scales or in different regions. In addition, because the pandemic is ongoing, participants may agree or disagree with items herein as operations continue and inevitably change. Additional after-action briefs should be written as the response progresses and different and new challenges are encountered.

# PRE-VACCINE

## II. COMMUNICATION

### 1. IAFF HQ & District 7

Communication between IAFF headquarters (HQ) and District 7 was extremely smooth. Upon notice of the first case of COVID-19 in District 7 in February 2020, IAFF HQ was immediately engaged with District 7. Initial response from IAFF HQ spanned over long hours and involved weekend work. IAFF HQ supplied the support District 7 requested by engaging them and including AGPs and the GP on meetings. The rapid response made District 7 feel supported. District 7 followed IAFF HQ's recommendations.

### 2. IAFF HQ COVID-19 Team & District 7

As the event progressed, communication remained strong between IAFF HQ and District 7. In particular, the IAFF's COVID-19 team, which was compiled of staff from the IAFF HQ Health and Safety and Fire and EMS Operations Departments, provided invaluable information and support to District 7 leaders. The COVID-19 team was producing material ahead of and more detailed than expectations. This support was invaluable in an evolving situation with high uncertainty. Topics that the COVID-19 team provided support to District 7 on included, but were not limited to, personal protective equipment (PPE), health concerns, and how to protect members. As the first district to respond to COVID-19, District 7 also provided valuable insight to IAFF HQ. Despite these clear operational successes, new terminology could be difficult to grasp and implement.

➔ *Suggestion:* Include glossary of terms in communications.

### 3. District 7

Within-District 7 communications were successful. Using open lines of communication and collaborating local-to-local and state-to-state went smoothly and created a supportive community to assess and react to the changing unknowns of dealing with a pandemic. Everyone adjusted to virtual meetings successfully.

While communications in District 7 were mostly successful, there were some meetings not everyone could attend. This is typical for a response of this ongoing, tumultuous nature, especially when many individuals also work on-call. Ensuring follow-up with key stakeholders who could not attend scheduled meetings to keep all parties current.

### 4. SMART & District 7

District 7 used SMART to communicate to members directly via email. This software worked well to communicate from leadership to local presidents. However, the communication was not always passed on to members by the local presidents. In addition, there was difficulty getting effective engagement/message open rates.

➔ *Suggestion:* Use SMART's reminder and text message capabilities in addition to email features. Send message to all members, not just local presidents. Follow-up with a sample of local presidents to explore why they did not pass messages on to their members.

Locals that used SMART on the local level reported that it provided an effective means of communication.

➔ *Suggestion:* Train local presidents on SMART's capabilities and use cases.

### **III. COORDINATION**

#### *1. Labor-Management*

Labor-management cooperation throughout this operational period was successful. For example, leadership worked to ensure members had appropriate PPE and were protected from undue risks. In addition, leadership was able to coordinate with chiefs to provide planning information and response strategies. The labor team also included partnership with the state AFL-CIO and close work with the State Principal Officers. It was a united front.

#### *2. Stakeholder Engagement and Relationships*

Although it could be difficult at times, District 7 leadership was successful engaging experts, cutting-edge resources and building relationships with these stakeholders. Information was changing regularly, as is expected in this environment. District 7 leaders and IAFF headquarters successfully stayed abreast of the information and learned on the fly. IAFF headquarters and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) were relied on heavily as sound resources and provided concordant guidance.

In addition, District 7 leaders built relationships with local stakeholders including elected officials, the University of Washington, state health, and county health assets. Providing District 7 with these quality sources of information validated operations from multiple sources and increased the likelihood of a successful response.

District 7 was able to share IAFF resources with local stakeholders, thus building relationships and enhancing overall response within District 7 outside of the fire service. Collaboration was effective and showed the high quality of IAFF resources.

➔ *Suggestion:* State and local leaders should continue to build relationships with agencies and stakeholders that may have an impact on their profession and membership.

#### *3. Continuity and Understanding of Leadership Groups*

IAFF headquarters and District 7 leaders maintained consistent communication throughout the response. However, individual messaging and discussion of ideas could often break the continuity sought after by leadership.

Members often did not understand what groups were making decisions. The state organization was commonly confused for political offices. There was also a lack of understanding between what the union was accomplishing versus what the fire departments were implementing. For example, many members were unclear on what group implemented mask mandates and who could enforce them.

- ➔ *Suggestion:* Educate members on the leadership structure of the IAFF, state organizations, fire service, and political offices. Put out resources in short, digestible formats with a defined strategy.

Although District 7 leadership was successful in influencing strategy planning based on IAFF resources and member needs, fire chief organizations could have provided better leadership and worked to match District 7 leaders' efforts.

## **IV. NARRATIVE**

### *1. Media*

The media was a great impediment to successful information dissemination to local members. Both traditional and social media undermined District 7 leaders' work.

Traditional media sought out stories that pitted firefighter against firefighter and elevated voices that were not educated on the facts of the response to equal those that were. While many members knew where to find and how to use reliable COVID-19 information and resources, the traditional media gave them the same or less emphasis than those who used unreliable sources to build a narrative.

### *2. Spin via Social Media*

Social media enhanced the voice of smaller groups, thus bolstering a vocal minority who drove discussion and spread information based on unreliable sources. Some members became "experts" based on non-credible sources, furthering information that disagreed with scientific findings. This spread misinformation and led to people creating narratives based on information that was untrue and opinion-based instead of cited sources.

- ➔ *Suggestion:* Create a District 7 approved list of resources with the resource and a one sentence description easily found on a public website with links to it on social media pages. Keep it maintained and updated.

### *3. Reframing Messaging*

District 7 leaders shared documentation with members that was spun in ways that were not intended. Initially, this occurred with verbal information. Their words would be misquoted and misused. To counter that, leadership used written communications. However, even these were sometimes altered to suit users' perspectives. Bulleted lists were most successful in sharing communications without alteration.

## **V. BEHAVIORAL HEALTH**

### *1. Stress Management*

Stress management strategies were implemented across District 7 at the local level. Many locals were successful in recognizing the situation was stressful and that under the extreme circumstances additional focus would be required to maintain mental health. Opportunities to train outdoors and have socially distanced interactions were two strategies that were implemented to manage stress. Combining stress management with

pandemic restrictions (e.g., social distancing) permitted a more “normal” environment. For example, outdoor activities/trainings enhanced the feeling of community instead of remaining inside and not being permitted in the same spaces as others.

Members often found themselves overworked as they covered others’ shifts during quarantines, responded to high-stress calls without complete understanding of how they or their families may be impacted, and lost a sense of community as social distancing was implemented.

An anomalously high number of firefighters are on leave due to stress-related problems. Losing their sense of community, being overworked, and facing so many unknowns has taken a toll on many members’ mental health.

➔ *Suggestion:* Actively engage IAFF Health and Safety and peer support resources.

## 2. COVID-19 Infection

Leadership worked with legislators, the governor’s team, and others in labor to ensure that members would be covered as duty-related exposure and illness. Members who contracted COVID-19 were offered quality support at the beginning of the pandemic. It was observed, however, that as the pandemic progressed, care for members fighting COVID-19 was de-prioritized.

Often, behavioral health care was emphasized for those who contracted COVID-19 but the remaining members were not similarly served. These others were often working additional shifts and were getting burned out.

➔ *Suggestion:* Actively engage IAFF HQ Health and Safety and peer support resources throughout pandemic and continuously check in on members’ mental health. Focus should be on all members, not just those who are ill.

## 3. Morale

The response was successful in that no District 7 members died from COVID-19. While many difficulties were noted by leadership, they handled the situation objectively, which enhanced their ability to respond.

The difficult nature of the situation led to members’ declining morale and passion for their positions. There was an extremely high amount of burnout and people were more likely to leave the fire service than ever documented previously. IAFF, state, and other events were canceled, which negatively impacted leaders and members because they could not gather, share stories, and collaborate. With morale at this extreme low, it was also observed that motivations for being a firefighter may be shifting. There is increasing importance on serving people in a way that also permits convenience for members’ own needs.

➔ *Suggestion:* Creative, new solutions to improve morale should be generated and implemented. If the paradigm shift holds true, finding ways to support members’ needs as individuals will increase their interest in serving in their positions long term.

# POST-VACCINE

## VI. VACCINE DISTRIBUTION

### 1. *Receiving the Vaccine*

Once available, many members voluntarily received the vaccine quickly. It provided great comfort to members and their families and there were no reported adverse effects of the vaccine by those who received it. As of this report, approximately 85% of District 7 members were vaccinated. Prior to the mandate, approximately 40% - 60% (depending on the state) of members were vaccinated.

### 2. *Tier 1 Status*

Work to include firefighters in Washington's Tier 1 for distribution was successful largely due to union leaders' relationships with state agencies and the governor's office and IAFF materials that were shared with decision makers. However, availability did vary state-to-state and county-to-county and should be considered on the local level.

### 3. *Participating in Vaccine Distribution*

Many members participated in giving vaccines to their communities. There was a lot of available overtime for them to staff vaccine clinics. Unvaccinated members were permitted to staff these clinics, however, this was unsafe due to high exposure and working additional hours during which they would be at risk of infection.

## VII. VACCINE MANDATE AND JOB IMPACTS

### 1. *Opportunities to Bargain*

There were many opportunities to negotiate the specifics of requiring the vaccine within departments, however, they were generally not implemented well. For example, financial incentives could have been negotiated for those who received the vaccine voluntarily. DVP Walsh sent a letter out early in January, but most did not bargain until mandates came out. Many believed the governor would change his mind or that the mandate was not law.

➔ *Suggestion:* Use follow-ups on a more regular basis and conduct a Zoom information session. Use an engagement assessment matrix to identify stakeholders, their current level of engagement, and the desired level of engagement to track which locals may need additional assistance, education, or discussion to understand the circumstances.

### 2. *Exemption and Accommodations*

State leaders and the DVP supported members who requested exemptions from the vaccine mandate and/or accommodations to help them keep their jobs. Through their consistent work and relationships with the governor's office, critical decisions on accommodations were made at the local level, where union officers could be involved in preventing job loss. However, this led to tension between the union and employers.

### 3. *IAFF HQ Legal Assistance*

The IAFF HQ legal team as well as District 7 attorneys provided consistent help throughout the response. They found that the mandates were legal and supported by



previous decisions, including those made by the Supreme Court of the United States. A minority of members wanted to use union resources and funding to fight the governor's mandates, but given the legal team's findings, this was not undertaken. However, leaders did voice their concerns frequently to the governor about mandatory vaccination and how it would impact service and jobs.

→ *Suggestion:* Communicate with membership frequently and openly about legal consultations. Use a communicator who can dissect legal jargon into everyday language and make the communication to members short and clear.

## VIII. MESSAGING

### 1. *Sharing Information*

Much of the information put out by headquarters was used successfully. Although local autonomy to share information is valued, in an emergency it is possible that direct communications from headquarters to members may be helpful. States and locals shared information that enhanced preparation for jurisdictions that had yet to have mandates. For example, Idaho drew on Washington's experience with the vaccine mandate to best respond in their state.

→ *Suggestion:* Consider using a RACI Chart. RACI charts outline stakeholders and their involvement: Responsible – those doing the work, Accountable – those who ensure the work is finished, Consult – those who are experts and could be consulted for information, and Informed – those who need to know the information. Including the right people in these categories and writing them down and sharing them with the group will keep the team on the same page and adequately utilize stakeholders without overwhelming them or letting them slip through the cracks.

### 2. *Communicating with People Hesitant About the Vaccine*

Although they were the minority, people who were hesitant about the vaccine loudly distributed false information. This occurred both on the internet and in private meetings. The union leadership's progress was slowed when they had to address these narratives.

Initially, there was a sympathetic reaction from those who were vaccinated and believed that everyone should be able to make their own choice. However, as time and COVID-19 progressed, this sympathy waned.

IAFF headquarters information accurately described the vaccine and its use and safety, however, many people against the vaccine and masking turned the information around saying that the vaccine did not give them 100% protection against the virus and therefore it was not worth getting. In addition, the speed with which the vaccine was developed was highlighted as a reason not to receive it.

→ *Suggestion:* Emphasize what the expectations of a vaccine are. Use simple analogies such as the quick technological developments of cell phones to communicate how advanced technologies lead to rapid development.

### 3. *Politics*

The political climate of this period made messaging and communication difficult. With national changes in political leadership, as well as rulings about the vaccine mandate in flux and supported/unsupported by people in power, there was a lack of consistency that was nearly impossible to combat.

➔ *Suggestion:* Vet messaging, consult IAFF lawyers and PR teams, and ensure the messaging does not contribute to the divisiveness. Be aware that new methods of communication and technologies are here to stay – social media, text messaging, sound bytes, etc.... Harness these methods in the union's own communication and recognize the opportunities and threats they generate.

## **IX. PREEMPTIVE EDUCATION**

### *1. Union Responsibilities*

Many of the newer members are not aware of what the union does for them, how it functions, and how it is different from government. After the vaccine mandate, more members opted out of the union than anticipated. Despite the union fighting for accommodations or exemptions to save members' jobs, members did not understand the role the union played in that process.

➔ *Suggestion:* Additional information needs to be provided to members throughout their time in the union. Materials outlining union benefits and facilitated discussions could improve understanding of union work versus politics and what members get with their dues. This needs to be done on a regular basis.

### *2. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*

District 7 leaders who participated in generating this report are not a diverse group. Better inclusivity and understanding of how COVID-19 impacted people of different races, genders, cultures, etc... will improve membership support.

➔ *Suggestion:* Consider hiring practices, board memberships, and inclusive panels with diverse voices to improve representation and response.

### *3. Disaster Preparedness*

Disaster preparedness is not the same in every district or between the U.S. and Canada. Districts are more and less familiar with different types and frequencies of disasters. Some districts have more resources than others from headquarters, their states, and their locals.

➔ *Suggestion:* Districts should coordinate about their experiences. Messaging should be consistent and PR resources should be available to all districts at all times. Resources should be shared among districts and countries through mentoring and collaboration.

### *4. By-Laws*

The Washington State Council of Fire Fighters By-Laws do not allow for statewide meeting and setting direction outside of their annual convention. It would have been helpful to have additional dialogue in this setting to address this unique situation.

➔ *Suggestion:* Explore the feasibility of enabling a call for a statewide meeting to establish direction and set priorities.

# CONCLUSION

## X. CONCLUSION

### *1. Summary*

District 7's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was rapid and robust. Leaders enhanced communications and made vital connections enabling effective response. However, they also acknowledge there is room for improvement.

### *2. Moving Forward*

As the pandemic evolves, so must the response. Continued use of CDC and IAFF HQ resources will help with decision making. Communications and relationships with stakeholders including members, District 7 and state leadership, locals, IAFF HQ, state officials, public health entities, and universities should be maintained.

Ongoing considerations must be made for operational readiness. It is important to be aware of and plan for the following:

- PPE prioritization, price gouging, and counterfeiting.
- Vaccine prioritization, boosters, and accommodations.
- Testing options, availability, and prioritization.
- Monitoring long-hauler information, accommodations, and long-term care.
- Legislative opportunities.
- Workers' Compensation and Public Safety Officers' Benefits.