



COVID-19 Vaccinations for firefighters in Nova Scotia

The Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia has made specific written requests in early March to the Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Robert Strang and to Minister of Health & Wellness, Zack Churchill regarding the importance of early COVID-19 vaccination similar to the programs being offered to paramedics and front-line police officers in Nova Scotia and to all firefighters in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

Approximately two weeks later replies were received from staff of both offices (not from Dr. Strang nor Minister Churchill) indicating that there was no perceived need for firefighters to be given any priority for vaccination and that they should expect to be vaccinated along with the general population as they reached the various age ranges being designated. This approach seems particularly concerning since all firefighters in the province respond to calls involving medical emergencies.

Although it was clearly expressed in the letters sent to them, obviously neither Dr. Strang, Minister Churchill, nor their senior staffers understand or recognize how medical first responders and volunteer firefighters provide services in their communities – often independently of EHS paramedics or police.

Dr. Strang categorically stated during the media briefing on Wednesday April 28, and reiterated on Thursday April 29 that he understood that all MFR's in the province had been vaccinated some time ago, along with receiving specific training in dealing with suspected or unknown COVID cases. That is clearly not the case; we know that there are still MFR's in the province who have not even been contacted for their first vaccination, nor fit tested for, or provided with PPE. And even in the best case scenario, the EHS program would only cover six MFR's per registered MFR agency.

This is an extremely frustrating situation; the lack of understanding is disheartening. We will continue to try to educate and inform the new government and would suggest that firefighters across the province inform their local MLA's that we regularly attend emergency fire alarms at nursing homes, long-term care homes, hospitals and schools and respond to motor vehicle collisions prior to, or without assistance from police or paramedics. All of these represent potential, unknown COVID exposures. Although MFR calls are significantly reduced across the province due to the EHS protocol changes, general emergency response calls by firefighters have certainly not been eliminated.

Given our critical role as first responders the sooner all are vaccinated for COVID-19, the better. This is a critical component of maintaining continuity of service delivery by firefighters across the province; that continues to be overlooked.
