



Region 5 Engine COVID-19 Cluster Lessons Learned



July 22, 2021

Background

- On July 6, 2021, the local county public health contacted the Forest Service regarding an employee who had been exposed to a confirmed case of COVID-19. The employee had no symptoms and received negative test results (rapid test and PCR test). Public health advised the employee to quarantine for 10 days.
- No other FS employees were involved in this exposure since they were considered a secondary contact because the employee was exposed outside of work.
- The employee in quarantine impacted the availability of a fire engine during high fire danger, therefore an employee from a different station began working on the engine on July 6, 2021.
- On July 7, 2021, the employee covering for the engine (from the other station) developed COVID-like symptoms and tested positive for COVID-19 on the same day.
- This cluster involves 12 employees, with only 1 vaccinated and one who was in quarantine and not exposed. By July 12, 6 of the unvaccinated employees tested positive for COVID -19. All unvaccinated employees (10) were placed into quarantine. One employee chose to stay in a hotel and all others remained at their residences.

Lessons Learned

- Vaccinations are effective at preventing the spread of COVID; the vaccinated employee did not get sick while 6 of 11 unvaccinated employees have tested positive for COVID-19.
- The intermixing of crewmembers is not consistent with the 'Module as One' concept; the need to staff an engine took precedence over potential COVID risks and led to 2 engines becoming unavailable.
- Unvaccinated employees need to wear masks within their modules and when around employees from other modules; crewmembers used the same COVID mitigation measures from 2020 and did not wear masks around each other, even after intermixing modules.
- Understanding the risk of COVID while on duty may have been normalized due to outcomes in 2020. An unvaccinated employee that turned down the alternate (quarantine) lodging after a case had been confirmed unfortunately spread COVID to multiple other family members, including spouse and child.
- Rapid notification and timeliness of response helped limit further spread and care for employees; the unit established a baseline for infection control by recommending testing for all employees and communicated with employees to stay connected and ensure they were cared for. Immediate contact tracing and closure of facilities to begin cleaning/disinfecting likely reduced the chances of further infection.

Insights and Recommendations

- Vaccinations are effective at preventing community spread and important in keeping you and those you care about safe and healthy.

- ACTIONS: Find local leaders to communicate the value of vaccinations—to protect employees and their loved ones. One of the local fire management leaders has begun to tell his own story on concerns about the vaccine—and why he chose to get vaccinated to help improve vaccination rates. In addition, the unit has now planned to host a vaccination clinic so employees have the opportunity to share that common experience.
- Employee care is paramount in unit response.
 - ACTIONS: Continue to provide employee care at all organizational levels, including daily check-ins for those exposed or sick. Staying connected and communicating with employees in a constantly evolving situation is essential in building trust with employees so they feel they are cared for.
- Continue to emphasize a learning culture to meet the Agency values relating to Interdependence and Safety.
 - ACTIONS: The cluster learning review process is the way to approach these incidents but the messaging has to be more effective in getting to the “boots on the ground” employees.
- Unvaccinated employees need to wear masks, even with other members of their module.
 - ACTIONS: Guidance for wearing masks—and why a mask is helpful—needs to be communicated more clearly and consistently. Updated “module as one” direction needs to be implemented by all fire resources.
- The hard truth is we now know who is fully vaccinated and who is not. This leads to knowing who should have been wearing masks and maintaining physical distance. Communication and accountability has become a critical factor with our guidelines depending primarily on integrity.
 - ACTIONS: Our messaging and how we respond is critically important in preserving our culture of not placing blame but being able to learn from these incidents. Having intentional conversations and dialogue that address the concerns of employees will be instrumental in gaining and/or maintaining our employee’s trust.

“We talk about hard truths in other resource areas and we need to have that same discussion in these situations.” -- Forest Supervisor