

Ed Comeau: This is Ed Comeau, the producer of CRR Radio. Fire departments across the nation are facing unprecedented challenges in responding to the covid-19 pandemic and dramatic changes are being made in how they operate. To help, CRR Radio is launching its series of conversations with people in departments, large and small, to learn what they are doing to plan, prepare and respond. We appreciate everyone taking the time to talk with us and share their experiences. In addition, vision 2020 has created a coronavirus shared resources library, that contains a wealth of information contributed by departments. This site includes policies, procedures, response checklists and a lot more and our goal is to help departments avoid having to reinvent the wheel. It's available at strategicfire.org/coronavirus and if you have anything that you want to contribute, you can also do it through that page as well. Again, the URL is strategicfire.org/coronavirus. And with that, let's get into our show.

And we're talking with Neil Bibby, who's a retired fire chief from the country fire authority down in Melbourne, Australia, right now over Skype, trying to get an idea of what's going on down there. So Neil, can you kind of fill us in what's happening down in Australia?

Neil Bibby: Well, it's like the rest of the world, it's changing daily. As the number of infections are recorded, we're seeing a spike occurring and we're all trying to flatten out that spike. And the only way to do it is to basically go into isolation. And for a fire service, you can't do that. You've actually got to still serve the people.

Ed Comeau: And probably one of the things I should mention is we're recording this on Monday, March 23rd because things are changing almost on an hourly basis in terms of the scope of the incidents and everyone's reaction to it. So what kind of actions are the fire service taking down there in response to all of this?

Neil Bibby: I don't think it's much different to the rest of the world, but the number of firefighters we have that are volunteer firefighters and we've just come out of a horrendous fire season and the new fire season we'll be starting in August and I think it we'll still have this problem then. So we're going to have to look at how we isolate and rollover our crews, in such a way that they separate from each other and also splitting out the crews so you don't have all of the crews from one particular city, into one particular station. So that we're going to have volunteer stations and we're going to have career stations. All training is stopped. All fire inspections have stopped. The EMS is still going, but that's still almost with full protection hazmat clothing on. So we are actually at a stage where we're watching the rest of the world and playing catch up at the moment.

Ed Comeau: You mentioned the volunteers, country fire authority has a lot of volunteers. Can you just give us an idea of the size of the department?

Neil Bibby: The department has 1,300 fire stations with 50,000 volunteers and 2000 career staff. So that's the size of the organization. So when you're looking at social

isolation and we're looking at groups of two or three together, it's just not going to work, you'll have a crew of six on a truck. What we're trying to do is put a crew or three on a truck and then the next following truck will have three on it so that we separate the people out, washing down of all equipment after every event and at every shift change, has now become a paranoia and making sure that your hands are washed. I've never seen firefighters wash their hands so much in all my life. And every time they touch something, they're not allowed to touch their face unless they have disinfectant as well. Night shift, the stations total isolation and a lot of cases where crews live close to the station, they're asked to respond from home.

Ed Comeau: How much do you think it's going to become the norm after all this is over? I mean, obviously everybody's taking these steps in an emergency, but do you think some of this is going to carry over afterwards?

Neil Bibby: I think some of the habits that come out of this, the basic handshake, the continual washing of your hands, the cleanliness, is something that will change society. I also think that large gatherings will make people very, very nervous. And what we have is, and let me use an example, just recently we had a house fire, a very good save, young child saved, where normally you give each other a high five, the firefighters just didn't know how to celebrate a great save like that. It was just an interesting aspect of what is a norm for firefighters.

Ed Comeau: It is going to be a new world after all this is over, isn't it?

Neil Bibby: It is. And I think what's going to happen is the ability to train offline is going to be increased rapidly, particularly in theory stuff, the large number of classes. I think once society gets used to working at home, they won't go back to working in an office.

Ed Comeau: I mean it's going to be interesting to look back in six or 12 months and see what kind of impact this has had and the difference it has made on all of us.

Neil Bibby: Well, it's also going to be interesting to see whether it is only six to 12 months, it's not going to be a year. All of the reading that we do and what happens, the fire services are putting out updates to their people every single day, sometimes twice a day. So they're talking about things that are of interest, that also are a fact as opposed to lots of rumors and stuff to go around. So they're trying to kill those rumors. One of the rumors is that we will have a vaccine within three to four months. The fact is the vaccine won't be around for at least a year, so that means we could be in this situation for a year.

Ed Comeau: Well, we've been talking with Neil Bibby who's the retired fire chief of the country fire authority, down in Australia. And Neil, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us over Skype today.

Neil Bibby: Not a problem Ed, any time.

Ed Comeau: Now, on Thursday, March 26, we're talking with Fire Chief Tom DeMint from the Poudre Fire Authority out in Colorado. And Tom, really appreciate you taking the time to chat with us today.

Tom DeMint: Oh Ed, thanks for having me. Anything we can do to contribute and maybe share information with each other across the nation, I really appreciate using this format to get the word out.

Ed Comeau: So what's happening there in Fort Collins? How are things changing for you guys out there operationally? What are you doing in the stations? How the firefighters doing? What's going on?

Tom DeMint: Well, operationally we've been planning for this ahead of time, like most people watching the Johns Hopkins map when it first showed. Our EMS chief and I were speaking just a couple of days ago about when we were looking at it and less than a hundred people had died. There were just a few thousand that had the disease and it was like, that's really interesting that John Hopkins has stood up this map. And I think if more of us would've said, well, there's some epidemiologist somewhere that takes this pretty serious. So we started checking our stores of N95, things that we started researching CDC, of what they would require, what the requirements would be for PPE, looking at different response profiles. We started working with our medical direction on some of the plans and we tried to set triggers, but it's just been kind of a daily meeting on triggers for how we respond.

So like most people, we do have a shortage of different aspects of N95, were really good. On the compliant goggles with CDC total, including goggles, those we don't have, but we've got enough for our minimum staffing each day. So we've got those and we've got a supply. We have a lot of modified duty people working from home right now that are playing Radar O'Reilly, trying to resource those things. Gowns, we're a little bit short, gloves, of course, we're in good shape. So we're watching that. And I know a common thing that I never thought I would hear a fighter confuse, term of burn rate. What's your burn rate of your PPE? We're watching that burn rate. We've changed our response like everyone else, the dispatcher's asking questions. First it started, have you traveled? Have you traveled to China?

Then it became have you traveled outside the country? Now we don't ask and we're asking have you've been exposed to someone to covid and we're transitioning into do you have these symptoms. And we do what we call five A response, which is something that's built into our CAD system. Giving an alert, it could be an infectious disease. It's been built into our CAD system for a long time, so that can give us the alert. We have a contract ambulance provider from the University of Colorado Health system that they provide our ALS transport. Those cases, they'll go in first and determine if we need other people or if they need other people to help and that's when we gear up and come in. We're still running on our regular medicals that haven't been triaged as such, that they could be a possible five A.

We're wearing the level of protection we believe appropriate for those calls with our masks, our goggles, our gloves. We're being pretty judicious with gowns right now because that's what we're finding in short supply. That's on all our medicals, we've added that extra level of protection and we started staging on large congregate residences. They've stood up a couple of new homeless shelters in city buildings that are closed, just to try to keep the homeless population from interacting with too much of the community and providing them shelter. Because we're still, today's supposed to be warm and windy, tomorrow we have another cold front coming through with snow and freezing rain in that mix. So keeping them protected. But dispatch is asking the staff there to, if at all possible, walk the patient outside. So we can use our distancing as we're all trying to do and also not take anything that we might have in there or anything that might be in that congregate element that they might give to us.

And we're doing same thing with nursing homes. Thought in the nursing homes on those calls is not to expose the nursing homes to something we might know we might be carrying. So that's an extra level of caution that we're taking, that abundance of caution we talk about, that's hard for a lot of first responders or firefighters who taught the first day they went in the academy is you're the point of the spear, get in there and make a difference. So that's kind of hard. And then the other side of that is the fear that our firefighters have that causes me the loss of a lot of sleep, is thinking about our firefighters each day going out there and they're not worried about them getting sick. But it's like I told my staff, one time I fell out of a fire engine, hurt my shoulder, big really dramatic injury, but I hurt my shoulder not very bad. And I came home and my family because I came home with a hurt shoulder, my family's not going to get a hurt shoulder.

But now I get exposed and I don't have symptoms or minor symptoms, I'm still bringing something home to my family. And that's a fear, firefighters are family people. That's one of the reasons they're drawn to this occupation, they like being around people, they like being in that family atmosphere. So they have families, they have strong families and they're worried about taking that home to their family. So a lot of stuff's on my mind, Ed, as you can tell. I've talked for quite a while, but I'll let you get back to the next question.

Ed Comeau: Well no, I mean you actually answered a lot of my questions that I was going to ask in the first place there Tom. That was great. How about the stations, what are you doing to secure the stations? And I'm assuming you probably locked them down by now.

Tom DeMint: Yeah, we have a daily conference call, we work 40 hour shifts, but we still every morning at 8:15, get on all the stations, get on with staff. And right now too, we're going over, we've stood up an incident command team that is running the COVID response. So we get the daily IAP for our response because this is a moving target. One of the discussions was that there was a couple of, I won't say break ins, but we had a police officer and we also had a drive for medical equipment at our fire stations yesterday, that we had committed to those not

coming into the fire stations. Both those policies had some weakness yesterday, we had some folks from other agencies come into the stations that normally do, that had been communicated, but as with all communications, those things don't always go to everybody.

So we had a little bit on that. So we're talking about how we can be a little more secure. Families can't come to the stations. Since health clubs are closed, we had a lot of firefighters wanting to go to the closest station to their neighborhood to work out. At this point right now we are telling firefighters they can only work out at their station, that way anything that they've been exposed to within that environment, stays kind of within that environment. We're really focusing on those things. We've got one of our hazmat guys who's just super, super smart and has done a lot of research on protecting the hard surfaces in the stations and how to clean the stations and he's been working on a video and we've gone to bleach solutions. We were fortunate to get a pallet of Clorox and whoever thought you would be on a podcast saying we were fortunate to get a pallet of Clorox, so we can make our own solutions because of the wipes and those things are in short supply of course. Things that we're doing probably consistent with everybody else.

But [inaudible 00:14:42] that the firefighters are talking about, our doors are to the base from the stations. They're not positive latch so you can just push the door and go. So we have a couple things, is we've got to keep the doors clean and push with your butt to open that so that you're not contacting with your hands. And I think there's going to be some good stuff that comes out of this down the line for how we deal with infection control in the fire service. I think we've taken it seriously, but now we're going to start really taking it seriously. Even if COVID went completely away, which we know it never will now, but if it went completely away we would have this better sense, even during the cold and flu season. So keeping the stations clean and keeping them locked down is a bit of a challenge, but we're making it happen.

Ed Comeau: And that kind of leads to another question I wanted to ask you. Looking down the road six months, 12 months, or even longer, what kind of impact do you think this is all going to have long-term on the fire service? Like you just said, we're not going to be doing business as usual going forward.

Tom DeMint: No, I don't think there's going to be, once supply chains get stood back up and we know what those supplies are that we won't have, the shelves in our warehouses are going to be really full of N95s, they're going to be full of gowns, Tyvek gowns or other patient care gowns. There may be departments carrying more pappers then carry them now and make those available. There may be, we've got bunkers basically since Ben Franklin got us all cranking, we've had some kind of bunker gear for fighting fire. And I said, don't be surprised what comes out of this, there's not some core sort of protective ensemble like bunker gear that we start wearing on medicals. We've always just wore our uniforms that we're the fire service, but that could change to some degree.

I don't know it would be to the point now where it all looks, so many people looking like Dustin Hoffman in *Outbreak*. It's crazy. But I think some of that's going to change and I think it really, really is going to open our eyes as a fire service, of how we deal with infectious diseases. Not just COVID, but every chief that's listening to this, has looked at staffing during the cold and flu season and sees those days that your staffing is severely impacted, you've got a lot of overtime and it's because we've been pretty cavalier. We've gone into areas where those bugs probably are and some of them are even corona viruses, not this one, but they are corona viruses and they're catching people and now they're calling in sick for a shift or two because they've got the crud that they probably caught at work.

Ed Comeau: So how are your firefighters handling all this? What's been the reaction among the troops to this whole pandemic that's happening?

Tom DeMint: The willingness to serve as is undying. I mean that part is just fantastic. The desire to get out and treat and take care of people. However, there is a fear, like I said, the fear of if I catch this at work, I take it back to my family or if it's on my clothes or it's on my skin. So there's that worry. There is a concern for the safety of others for me doing my job, to put it in the context of what a firefighter's thinking and for someone who's committed to the safety of others, that's very concerning to them. And so that's what's setting on their minds. When us fire chiefs go to bed at night, we're first thinking about their safety and the community safety. But then we're also thinking oh my goodness, we are two weeks into basically no sales tax being collected in our community. We're thinking about those things, but they're thinking about the safety of their families, it's a very personal thing to them. So protecting them as best we can and giving them confidence and that protection is essential.

Ed Comeau: Well we've been talking about chief Tom DeMint from the Poudre fire authority out in Fort Collins, Colorado, about what they're doing out there. And Tom, I just really appreciate you taking the time. I know you've been going crazy out there just trying to keep up with all this and wishing you the best of luck and hope you all stay safe.

Tom DeMint: Thanks Ed. And to everybody listening, I know you're doing those 12, 13, 14, 15, 18 hour days. Hang in there. We will get through this. It takes a community to do this. It's the people that will make this happen. And when I look back at, I wasn't around, not by far, but I wasn't around during World War II, but when you look at World War II two and you look at 9/11 and now you look at this, some of the biggest things that have ever impacted our country, it was the people that came together to pull us up and pull us out. So that's what's going to make it work. I think we've got some good people telling us about social distancing. We've learned a lot about that. But follow that and we're all going to get through this together and as we always have as Americans, we'll come out stronger from it.

Ed Comeau: I couldn't have said it better. Thanks a lot of Tom.

- Tom DeMint: Thank you Ed.
- Ed Comeau: And now we're talking with Corey Lewis, who's a firefighter and local union president with the Richmond, Kentucky, Fire Department, about what they're doing down there at Richmond Fire. So Corey, what's the story going on down there?
- Corey Lewis: So I think as many fire departments across the nation, we've begun to really work towards a COVID-19 plan and what that looks like in our model. So we early last week, I think, around on the 17th, we kind of rapidly put a situational plan and an operational response plan together. We have restricted access to our fire stations. We've canceled all public events. Canceled all public education. We've made fire inspections, have gone to complaint driven or immediate life safety hazard issues. We've done a variety of response module changes. So employees are coming back, [inaudible 00:21:00] in the station twice daily.
- Our employees are taking their temperature three times a day, when they arrive, midway through the shift and before leaving shift. And they're documenting that to ensure that we don't have a spike in temperatures that may would then lead or be a precursor to the virus itself. We've limited all kinds of walk-ins into the station and we've prohibited any non-essential travel of our fire stations. We've even gone as far as limiting the number of people that can go, crews when they go to the grocery store, the number of firefighters they can go shopping. So two firefighters have to stay in the apparatus while one firefighter goes in and does the grocery shopping.
- Ed Comeau: So I mean the real idea is just to limit potential exposures, that's what it sounds like, right?
- Yes. So in a very strange way, we've tried to limit our interaction with the general public outside of emergency settings and even inside the station we've tried to limit our exposure to other employees. So we're asking other stations to not come have dinner at another station. Supplies are being set out on the front aprons of our supply station and those are being picked up so that those firefighters don't have to enter into the station. So not only oo general public as what we're trying to limit possible exposure, we're trying to limit exposure to our employees on even employee to employee contact.
- Ed Comeau: So are you doing social distancing in the station itself?
- Corey Lewis: Absolutely. So our firefighters in the morning meetings are encouraged to be six feet apart, as opposed to sitting right beside each other in recliners. We tried to distance those recliners. We've even had them remove chairs from the kitchen table so that they can put distance between them and their other employees, just to set in practice those good behaviors, so hopefully that they carry over as well outside of the station, for our employees.

- Ed Comeau: How about citywide, what kind of differences is happening in the city government?
- Corey Lewis: So our local government has enacted our continuity of government plan. What we have done is pre-identified about 50% of the workforce citywide, that does not [inaudible 00:23:19] 50% of the police or fire departments, but 50% of the city government and those individuals have gone home for two weeks. That's in an effort to keep those individuals safe and healthy. In the event the employees that are working come down with the virus and have to be off for an extended period of time, we have competent people that can continue filling those roles at local government, be it finance, HR, codes and planning and other areas of local government.
- Ed Comeau: What kind of activity level are you seeing? Is it going up, going down, staying the same?
- Corey Lewis: Just from a perception piece, I don't have actual numbers, we have seen a decrease in the amount of EMS calls that we are responding to. We're not seeing the number of motor vehicle collisions that we would normally see. So we've seen a reduction in our town of the college students our local university, Eastern Kentucky University, went to an online model. All students have moved off campus and will remain that way through the duration of the semester. So we don't have that influx of students. We don't have that influx of cars on the road. We don't have that influx of traffic in and out of town every day, so we're seeing that reduction.
- In the state of Kentucky bars and restaurants have been closed to only curbside and delivery and then effective at 8:00 PM tonight, the governor has ordered all retail outside of essential retail, to be closed. So we've continued to see a drastic reduction, excuse me, of cars on the road, which is leading to less motor vehicle collisions, less calls for service, not as many people obviously wanting to go to hospital just to be seen if they're not extremely ill. So we've seen a reduction in those EMS calls for assistance.
- Ed Comeau: And I probably should've started off by mentioning that we're recording this on Monday, March 23rd because the story is just changing on an almost hour by hour basis. In Massachusetts here, the governor is doing the same thing tomorrow, Tuesday at noon, retail's being shut down. We're being advised to stay in the home, there's no stay at home order, but we're just seeing this sweep across the nation, same sort of tactics for everybody.
- Corey Lewis: Our governor has enacted a hashtag, healthy at home and has highly encouraged anybody that is not considered essential, if you can work from home, to work from home. And so we're trying to adhere to that. I think we're seeing the general population do that. We've got pockets of people that may not be doing that, but as a whole, I think the state of Kentucky is adhering to the amount of information that's coming from the governor and his declarations to shut down business and try to get everybody to stay at home to reduce the

spread of the covid-19 virus. You mentioned information, it was impressive to me to see the amount of information that started coming out, oh what, Thursday a week ago and then how it evolved. The information that we were getting just in the morning had evolved into different information in the afternoon and I've never seen the amount of information coming out change so quickly in my 16 year career.

Ed Comeau: And I do have to say thanks because a Richmond fire department, through Corey, is one of the contributors to the new online library we're creating, of shared resources, policies, procedures and things like that, at the vision 2020 website at strategicfire.org/coronavirus. Where if you're looking for a policy or procedure related to this, you may be able to find something there that you can just download and use. Or if you have something to share, like Richmond fire department, you can contribute right there on the website. So Corey, thanks a lot for sharing that information with us.

Corey Lewis: Well let me say, [inaudible 00:27:17] vision 2020, work as a repository of that information. We're fighting a battle and an emergency that we've never seen and proportions we've never seen before and so to have that ability to bounce things off of what other people are doing and have that ability to book and learn from other people, I think it will make our fire departments across the country more effective and efficient in the manner in keeping their people safe and continuing to provide their service to their community.

Ed Comeau: Well, we've been talking with Corey Lewis, with the Richmond Kentucky fire department about what's going on down there. And Corey thanks so much for taking the time to chat with us today.

Corey Lewis: Thanks for having me.

Ed Comeau: You've been listening to a special edition of CRR Radio, focusing on what departments across the country are doing in response to the covid-19 pandemic. I also want to remind you of the coronavirus shared resources library that contains a wealth of information relating to policies and procedures that you might find helpful. Or if you have something you want to contribute, you can do it all at strategicfire.org/coronavirus. CRR Radio is a production of vision 2020 and it's produced by me, Ed Comeau and edited by Rich Palmer. Be sure to subscribe and follow us on Twitter and Facebook @strategicfire. Thank you for listening.