

Ed Comeau: Hi, my name is Ed Comeau from CRR Radio. Here at CRR Radio we're putting out a series of shows that are conversations with fire departments across the United States and around the globe about how they are planning, preparing and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Today's show is the fourth in the series and features conversations with the UK and Poland.

Ed Comeau: I'd also like to remind our listeners about the online library that we're building at Vision 20/20 of procedures and protocols from fire departments related to the pandemic. Our goal is to help you have to avoid reinventing the wheel and you can find it at StrategicFire.org/coronavirus where you can also upload anything that you might have that you feel would be useful to others as we face this global pandemic. And now let's get into today's show.

Ed Comeau: And today on Monday April 6th we are talking with Chief Fire Officer Phil Loach from the West Midlands Fire Service over in the UK. Phil, I really appreciate taking the time to talk with us today.

Phil Loach: And hello again, Ed. Always good to talk to you and your listeners on Community Risk Radio.

Ed Comeau: And as I mentioned today is Monday, April 6th and these things are just moving incredibly fast. When I look at the Johns Hopkins dashboard, as of this morning there's 1.3 million cases around the globe, 73,000 fatalities. Here in the US we're up to 347,000 cases, over 10,000 total deaths at this point. And in the UK you have 52,000 cases with total deaths of 5,383 and as we were just mentioning off the air here, your Prime Minister has just been admitted in ICU. So it's really haven't quite the impact, isn't it?

Phil Loach: Well, absolutely. I think that the figures coming from around the world are absolutely staggering just how many people are being affected by this virus and we don't think that we've actually reached the peak of it yet. We think we're a week to 10 days away from that in the UK and it'll be reaching the peak at different times in different areas of the UK.

Ed Comeau: So let's talk a little bit quickly about what you are doing in terms of planning for all this. As you mentioned, you haven't reached the peak yet and neither have we. So what sort of things did you put in place to try to prepare for this and plan for it before we start getting into some of the more operational issues.

Phil Loach: Well, in terms of nationally, I think the initial approach that the UK government took was to try and appeal to people's discipline to observe the social distancing measures that are so well documented and to recognize that this virus was going to pass through kind of our communities in a way that we'd probably, none of us in our lifetimes seen a virus before.

So in terms of planning we initiated through our, in what the UK they call local resilience forums, and linked to a piece of legislation called the Civil

Contingencies Act which brings agencies together to start planning for various scenarios. We've then also got the opportunity to declare, if we think we need to, a major incident in different areas of the UK. That has been done in almost, well in the vast majority of areas of the UK, and that brings the formation of a strategic coordination group of which their fire services [inaudible 00:03:43] responder also plays a key role in.

So along with government guidance, public health, England guidance and the scaling up of arrangements like that, we've ramped up that plan to deal with this as the virus has become more and more widespread.

Ed Comeau: What specific things are you doing operationally across the fire service and also down at the station level itself to try to be able to respond to this but also protect your firefighters and make sure that they're ready to respond as well?

Phil Loach: Well, I mean as I hope that you would expect of every chief fire officer, the safety and wellbeing of the firefighters and, indeed, the wider group of staff that make up a fire and rescue service is right up there as the top priority for myself. Practically and operationally we've issued a raft of key but really pragmatic guidance for firefighters that takes the government level advice, the Public Health England advice, which is generated at a population level, and so to apply that in a fire service setting. Whereas we want cleanliness, hygiene, appropriate use of PPE, and where we are having difficulties in operating the two meter social distancing, we're also trying to put in other safety mechanisms to ensure that any member of the workforce that feels that they've come into contact with somebody with the COVID-19 virus or suspect they have the symptoms themselves, we are advising them to isolate themselves from work with the absolute confidence that there is no potential for this to be dealt with in anything less than a positive way for their welfare, which has worked really well for us.

Ed Comeau: Over here in the States we're having a very hard time getting PPE, the masks, the gowns, the gloves, the eye shields, all that sort of stuff. Are you facing the same problems over there in the UK?

Phil Loach: Yes, absolutely, Ed. So the supply line, which I think is the kind of general generic term we're using in the UK, it is very difficult for us to get the PPE in the form of protective masks, certainly the respiratory elements of the personal protective equipment, the less it is around the respiratory systems. So we've got a good supply of nitrile gloves. We do come into close contact with people, both in an emergency response situation and also when dealing with the most vulnerable in our community, so obtaining the amount of PPE that we need is a challenge for us also.

Ed Comeau: What kind of impact do you think this is going to have long term on the fire service? I mean, prior to this many of the firefighters, all the firefighters, let's be honest with you, would go on these things, I know I certainly did, and you don't really take the steps that we're taking nowadays. Do you think it's going to have

that kind of lasting impact, that response protocols in the future are just going to change because of what they're facing?

Phil Loach:

It's almost unthinkable at the moment that it's not going to have a lasting impact. Even if you take it just outside the fire service kind of environment for a second, in the UK we've just started to come out of 10 years or more of what is called austerity, which has put downward pressure on the financing of public services and the fire service. Now there's being so much investment in dealing with the impacts of COVID-19, it's hard to imagine that it's not going to have a significant impact on public services.

Now without feeling that this is in any way political and it's not meant as political, but the fire and rescue service's readiness to step up and work outside of its normal environment, we hope is going to stand us in good stead in showing the fire and rescue service is absolutely an asset to public services and that ability to adapt and respond to different environments. For instance, the fire services are being asked up and down the country to engage with the most vulnerable in our communities, as perhaps not been seen before.

We're also being asked to participate on the movement of bodies, which is a slightly more macabre area, but the fire service is stepping up to that. And we're even working on and preparing for, which is slightly different to in the US, how we may work on behalf of and with ambulance services up and down the country. So this is indeed creating a new environment for the fire service and one that, once we started doing that, it can be difficult to imagine how we won't amend and adapt to ways of working in the future.

The one other aspect is in terms of taking a digital approach to working. You know we place a lot of stock in the UK on carrying out checks in people's homes, supporting them to be safe from fire and other incidents and even a wider range of subjects. And we do that normally by visiting their home. Now we're adapting some of our digital ways of working to be able to do that online. So we're not there physically with them, but we can walk them around with their smart phone or something else to look at potential hazards in the home, ask them questions about their behaviors to help them form fire escape plans, nighttime routines, ensure they've got working smoke alarms. So again, I think it starts for you to see and think, "Well, we'll be working in this type of digital way more commonly in the future."

Ed Comeau:

How are the firefighters holding up and reacting to all this? I mean, as we've been talking about, it's a whole new world and it's going to be a new world going forward. How are the firefighters doing?

Phil Loach:

Well, firefighters are some of the most adaptable people that you'll see in any sector and industry. So in terms of adaptability, firefighters are really stepping up to the mark. Of course, they've got their own concerns about their own families and what they're being exposed to. That's why it's really important that we do get those risk assessments and personal protective equipment right, that

they are put within the right system of work to allow firefighters to embark on minimizing the impacts of COVID-19 whilst retaining their ability to respond to what would be the core incidents that they'd respond to anyway.

We're also putting in place additional mechanisms about management of mental health and wellbeing. Firefighters are likely to come across even more kind of distressing incidents than they would have seen before. So they are responding really, really well and they're responding really well against a backdrop of believing that they weren't getting the best deal in society in terms of some national things in the UK. But all that's been set aside. The sector's unified. The sector's working together with chief fire officers with their respective governance models and employers and also with the unions and have indeed come up with a tripartite agreement about how we'll engage to ensure that we can deliver additional activities to support all other agencies in a safe, assertive and effective way.

Ed Comeau: And we have to remember, too, that life goes on. I mean certainly we're all focused on the COVID responses right now but there's still fires, there's still car accidents. These things are still happening but are you seeing a reduction of that kind of activity happening now that everybody's sheltering in place?

Phil Loach: Well, the spikes are going in kind of obviously the two directions. So we're actually seeing a reduction in road traffic collisions because there's less traffic on the road. The weather has started to get a bit better in the UK so we're seeing an increase in outdoor fires, which in itself wouldn't be a kind of massive increase in risk but when the firefighters are out in the community they do gain quite a lot of attention. So the things about social distancing is an added complexity to fighting fires and dealing with incidents. In terms of fires in the home, we're seeing no significant spikes in incidents as of the first couple of weeks of the measures taken by government in restricting movements.

But the fact is risk has gone up. Risk has gone up significantly in the form of having more people at home for longer periods of time. You wouldn't need anybody to understand that that means risk is going up. We haven't seen necessarily a spike in incidents in that area, but we have seen a couple of interesting areas. Carbon monoxide incidents are on the increase. Society itself that wants to show support and inclusion for agencies like our national health service, we are putting candles in the window and things like that, which we understand people want to show their support but the need for heightened safety means that we're being even more vigilant.

Ed Comeau: Now, you're very active in the National Fire Chiefs Council. Looking down the road, what kind of changes do you think on a very high level might come out of all of this across the nation? So that when the next one comes and we all know there will be another one at some point in time, what are you and your peers going to be talking about, do you think?

Phil Loach: Well, what I really feel confident in saying, Ed, is that it seems to have become commonplace that we are talking more regularly about having unprecedented incidents. The absolute tragedy of Grenfell Tower, now coronavirus, weather-related incidents with really excessive flooding, are all what are being described as unprecedented and they're all different incidents in their own way, but what seems to becoming more common is that we're having more unprecedented incidents. So I think the need for us to work as a sector together beyond our immediate localities of 43 English services, 50 UK services, which is minuscule compared to the number of services in the US, but the need to work together under the auspices of mutual aid, shared capability is inevitably bringing change to our service.

The reemphasizing of the need of good command and control at incidents, the different techniques for dealing with emergency incidents, these are all things that are rising up the priority list for the National Fire Chief Council. And some of your listeners may recall that I've previously spoken around the community risk program. The community risk program continues to evolve and become the central plank to forecasting, predicting and projecting the risks in the future in the UK and what part the fire service will play in them.

Ed Comeau: Well, we've been talking with Chief Fire Officer Phil Loach from the West Midlands Fire Service in the UK about what's happening over there right now. And Phil, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us. I know you're incredibly busy over there and we wish you nothing but the best of luck as you're facing up to this just like everybody around the world is right now.

Phil Loach: So thanks, Ed. It's always good to share ideas, thoughts and I hope this prompts thoughts and ideas, anything that can be shared back the other way from our US colleagues to those of us in the UK. We have a good solid relationship in a number of areas and I hope that this continues, and if anybody has any further questions or would like to pass anything back the other way, then we'll be glad to receive that, Ed. Thanks for the opportunity to talk about it, Ed.

Ed Comeau: And joining us now on CRR Radio is Tomasz Zweglinski. He's the head of the Internal Security Institute at the Main School of Fire Service in Warsaw, Poland. And Tomasz, I really appreciate you taking the time to join us today.

Tomasz Zweglinski Thank you very much for inviting me. This is a pleasure for me just to be able to share some experiences from Poland.

Ed Comeau: Well, today is a Wednesday, April 1 and I really need to say that on each of these interviews because things are just changing so rapidly. And I'm looking at the latest statistics as of today. Worldwide, according to John Hopkins dashboard, there's 877,000 total cases that have been confirmed and 43,537 total deaths around the globe.

Ed Comeau:

Poland, what is the situation in Poland right now? What's happening there? We'd like to just get kind of the perspective on what's happening with the fire service in your country.

Tomasz Zweglinski

Perhaps I will start with general things. Since you mentioned the statistics, so for Poland for now it's like more than 2,000 already ill people and more than 30 fatalities because of the coronavirus so it seems to be a little bit better than in Western countries like in Italy or in Spain. However, of course there the numbers are growing quite rapidly as well here. So just going back to it to your question and the fire brigade engagement and response to that virus, what do we do? Simply it's we have a supportive role to the other institutions, agencies which have a leading role in responding to the coronavirus, of course, this is the sanitary and hygiene agency as some other.

From the fire brigade perspective, the supportive role is mainly that we just, for example, on the country borders we are checking the temperature of the people coming back to Poland or just visiting Poland. The visits to Poland right now are forbidden so mainly we are talking about the people who are coming back to Poland. And there the border guards and police and also fire brigade is being used for checking each and every person who is crossing the Polish border from all directions.

Secondly, we also provide the logistical support to the hospitals and, for example, just putting up tents in which we organized kind of points where initially the patients are being checked just to keep them outside the hospital till the moment where we are not sure about that, what is the situation of each particular patient being transported or coming to the hospitals.

In Poland we just appointed in each province in each voivodeship, we have 16 of them, there are special hospitals which are dedicated just to admit the coronavirus patients. So mainly we support these hospitals, but also the other as well with this logistical support like tents and so on. Surely, since we have some limitations in leaving the houses and flats for Poles and other people standing and staying in Poland. In some cases we also organize crisis communication in a way that we simply are circulating around towns and cities and passing through the announcements and warnings informing the society about the situation and reminding them that this is in their interest to stay at home as much as possible, of course. So just this crisis communication is also part of our job here in Poland.

We have a fire brigade which is a nationalized system what means that we have one fire brigade, professional fire brigade, for the whole country, which is supervised by the Minister of Interior and Administration. And in frames of this agency, of this institution, we have specialized chemical and rescue units, chemical rescue fire brigades and this one do decontamination, for example, in facilities, mainly in the facilities which are supervised by the Minister of Interior and Administration. And also decontaminate fire vehicles, if it's needed. For

example, these are the main issues I would say which come to my mind right now, as it comes to the professional fire service.

But we have also the volunteer, very, very big volunteer fire service movement here. We cooperate with them very, very closely in one system which is called the National Fire and Rescue System. And these volunteer firefighters are mainly operating in small towns and villages in Poland. And they have also some extra tasks like, for example, providing first need items for those who are staying on quarantine in their homes. In each community we just appointed at least one fire station which is just dedicated for this purpose, to serve the citizens bringing them, providing them like food or any other items, disinfections, items which they need at that time when they are obliged to stay at home. So more or less 14 days as it is recommended by our government when somebody is staying on quarantine.

Also what we do in some cases we also prepare the disinfections liquid, made mainly of ethanol, of course, and that's being done by the chemical units and then this liquid is distributed to hospitals in very urgent cases, if somewhere is a shortage of that but it doesn't happen so often.

And I think one more which should I add is the state fire service, which is this national fire brigade of professional firefighters, we have also almost 200 respirators. What we did right now, we offered the ambulance service that we can just provide them with these respirators, if it's needed. And as far as I know for now there is more than 40 of them needed by the ambulance fire service because I think it's also worth mentioning that in Poland we have a separate service which is fire brigade and separate ambulance service. We each are supervised by two different ministries. Anyway, cooperate very, very closely as you can hear that we are just providing them these respirators on their request and these respirators are being used right now for the medical services.

Ed Comeau:

Here in the United States essentially they've locked down the fire stations. They're taking a lot of steps within the fire stations to protect the personnel themselves to make sure that they don't become infected. Are similar steps being taken over there in Poland?

Tomasz Zweglinski

We are not closing fire stations. It's not the case because in our opinion, of course, the coronavirus is right now a dominant threat which we are dealing with. However, it does not mean that the other threats, the other hazards, disappeared when the coronavirus virus appeared. So, yeah, we keep fire stations opened. Of course in parallel to that, we just organized quite a lot of preventive steps and even though the fire firefighters in Poland are quite aware about the biological threats because since 2017 by the legal regulation, we are also an agency which is responding to this type of threat.

So we had more than two years in practice, even more than this two years, from the formal introduction of this regulation. We dealt with biological threats like H1N1 and the other [inaudible 00:25:37]. In general, I would say the firefighters

are quite aware about the prevention measures in case of biological threat, nevertheless we, of course, increased these measures and especially for the volunteer fire services.

Also state fire service, we just launched the guidelines, how to prevent on the individual level in case of responding coronavirus but also other calls which are not directly connected to the coronavirus. But as a matter of fact it could happen that somebody is already in the flat where we respond is ill, then of course we have to take it into consideration and so that's why we produced the guidelines for volunteer fire services and disseminated all over the country to remind our volunteer colleagues how to prepare for that on the individual safety level.

Of course we provided disinfections materials in each fire brigade and we broadly disseminate information that if there is a call to fire brigade or 1-1-2 which is the European number when the call is for if somebody needs some assistance or help in any other incident, our operators are asking about that. If the flood, the place where we go is, is there somebody who is infected or somebody who is on quarantine just to know it in advance and prepare adequately to the situation in each single emergency call.

Ed Comeau: Really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us, Tomasz. I mean you've given us great insight as to what's happening over there in Poland. And we've been talking with Tomasz Zweglinski who's head of the Internal Security Institute at the Main School of Fire Service in Warsaw, Poland. And Tomasz, really hope for the best for you and for everybody in Poland. Thank you so much for taking the time.

Tomasz Zweglinski Thank you very much. Stay healthy and all the best to you. Thanks for inviting 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 20/20 and it's produced by me, Ed Comeau, and edited by Rich Palmer. Be sure to subscribe and follow us on Twitter and Facebook at StrategicFire. Thank you for listening.