



# Region 5 Crew COVID-19 Cluster Lessons Learned



July 8, 2021

## Background

- An Interagency Hotshot Crew (IHC) finished a 14-day assignment with 18 crewmembers and arrived home June 22, 2021 (the IHC had 2 additional crewmembers who returned early and were not exposed); no employees were aware of exposure or had symptoms. The IHC was off duty on June 23-24, 2021 for mandatory rest.
- On June 24<sup>th</sup> a crewmember developed a fever and took the initiative to get a COVID test immediately; the test returned a positive result the same day.
- Contact tracing identified all 17 other crewmembers were close contacts within 48-hours prior to the onset of symptoms. All close contacts were other IHC crewmembers (during travel home) and no other personnel were identified.
- Of the 18 crewmembers who returned from assignment on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 3 were fully vaccinated and returned to work on June 25<sup>th</sup>. The remaining employees (15) have not returned to work; the sick employee was put into isolation and the remaining close contacts on the crew were told to self-quarantine for 14-days by unit leaders. The 2 crewmembers who returned early (1 vaccinated) were not impacted.
- The forest required testing for all exposed crewmembers who were not fully vaccinated. Five additional unvaccinated crewmembers have tested positive (6 total cases in the cluster); all remaining unvaccinated crewmembers have received a negative test and remain in quarantine consistent with CDC guidelines.
- One crewmember (who tested positive) lives with an employee from another IHC. The employee from the other IHC chose to quarantine prior to the housemate's positive test (i.e., that employee is now in quarantine and has limited potential exposure by staying home).
- Public health did not provide guidance to exposed employees (the local counties did not do contact tracing or issue orders for exposed crewmembers); the complexity is heightened by the employees living across at least 5 counties with different public health organizations.

## Lessons Learned

- Vaccinations are effective at preventing the spread of COVID; none of the vaccinated employees got sick while 6 of the unvaccinated employees have tested positive.
- Employees did not think they needed to be vaccinated since their precautions in 2020 had kept everyone healthy; the crew superintendent was vaccinated and encouraged other crewmembers to do the same but most crewmembers chose not to because they felt the risk was low. Since this incident, 2 additional crewmembers have gotten vaccinated.
- The 'Module as One' concept likely contributed to this incident; crewmembers within the module used the same COVID mitigation measures as in 2020 and did not wear masks around each other (they did when around members of the public or other modules).
- Fire crews travel between states where COVID regulations and culture differs; the IHC was in contact with members of the public during travel—and in some (e.g., Arizona) they saw no real COVID precautions being implemented.

- Employee awareness of COVID-19 and personal integrity kept this incident from having a much bigger impact; the first employee was tested the same day as the symptoms appeared and the rapid response kept others from returning to work. In addition, the housemate of an exposed employee (who later tested positive) chose to self-quarantine from the beginning of the incident to prevent risk to another IHC crew.
- The unit did a great job caring for the employees and providing guidance, options, and direction; the supervisor of the crew communicated with all impacted employees daily, tracked information about testing/results, and provided employees with clear understanding of what to expect regarding testing and quarantine.
- The crewmembers understood the risk of getting COVID while on assignment but may have normalized the risk due to outcomes in 2020; employees who were not vaccinated and who turned down alternate (quarantine) lodging after the initial confirmed case had been exposed and returned home with COVID-- inadvertently spreading COVID to 3 family members in 3 households.

## 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 new ways to communicate the value of vaccinations—to protect employees and their loved ones. This needs to include sharing reviews like this one (e.g., share this story in the fire community, make the review easily accessible). Identify vaccination opportunities for employees, such as continuing to provide vaccination location information and “work trips” to get vaccinated. Explore opportunities for the unit to host a vaccination clinic in conjunction with a local clinic, public health, or other medical professionals.
- Employee care needs to remain a top priority.
  - 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 around Interdependence and Safety.
  - ACTIONS: Recognize employees who take quick action to prevent spread of COVID to other resources and who openly share their stories to improve the safety culture.
- 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.

*“We can’t resource our way out of this, it’s about trust.” -- Forest Supervisor*