



Region 5 Fuels COVID-19 Cluster Lessons Learned



June 11, 2021

Background

- On May 14th a fuels module member developed COVID-like symptoms; the person received a positive COVID test on May 16th.
- Contact tracing identified 10 close contacts (7 other fuels crew members and 3 additional employees who worked in the building).
- All of the close contacts were encouraged to get tested for COVID-19 and advised to quarantine (although 4 had been vaccinated it was not used in the decision). One unvaccinated individual lived in barracks and moved to a hotel on the 16th.
- A second individual (the supervisor of the module) tested positive on May 17th. Two additional cases were confirmed later that week (4 total in the cluster); none of the vaccinated employees tested positive or showed any symptoms. At the time of the review (June 2), one of the sick employees had returned to the office and others were teleworking.
- One of the four individuals was contacted by county public health, two were contacted by state public health, the fourth individual was never contacted by any public health department.

Lessons Learned

- Vaccinations are effective at preventing the spread of COVID; the 4 vaccinated employees did not get sick while 4 of the 7 unvaccinated employees ultimately tested positive.
- COVID policies
 - Mask guidance was not perceived by the affected employees as a requirement; no one on the module wore a mask when meeting together indoors on May 12th.
 - Quarantine guidelines for the state are different than CDC and it may not be clear which to follow; exposed employees were directed to quarantine 10-days based on Region 5's implementation of the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) guidelines. Mask requirements are based on CDC not CDPH highlighting a potential source of confusion in the future.
 - Fully vaccinated employees were required to self-quarantine; the Forest had chosen not to consider vaccination status of employees in making quarantine decisions due to concern about treating employees differently.
 - Exposed employees were not required to be tested by the Agency; employees were encouraged to be tested on their own (i.e., there was no decision to require testing).
- Employee care needs to remain a top priority when employees are exposed or sick; the fuels module supervisor checked in on employees on a regular basis and provided meaningful support for those impacted.
- Quarantine housing (hotel) for those in barracks limits risk to others in barracks; the initial decision to remove the exposed crewmember from the barracks into a hotel was a good call since that crewmember ultimately became symptomatic and tested positive.
- Units may experience fatigue in managing incidents like the pandemic; the local forest IMO has been staffed by most of the same people for 15 months and may need an infusion of employees who can offer a new voice and perspective to Forest leaders and employees.

- Roles and communication
 - Employees work 7-days per week and reporting/assistance needs to be available; the module supervisor could not get in touch with the Ranger or Staff Officer to report the initial case on a Sunday. The best decisions were made at the time but those involved lacked critical information on processes and procedures. The local line officer was informed of the situation the following day.
 - Units need to clarify who will do contact tracing; contact tracing was performed by the first line supervisor (who was also exposed) and individual employees shared with others they interacted with. Other units may not have been aware their employees were exposed.
 - Units need to clarify how exposed employees will be informed and confidentiality upheld; news of the cases was shared on social media and some employees had concerns about privacy.
 - The role of the forest and district needs to be clear; the District took the lead on management of the cases and communication from forest leadership did not engage the district to inquire on status or offer assistance.

Insights and Recommendations

- Vaccinations are effective at preventing community spread.
 - ACTIONS: Specifically identify vaccination opportunities for employees, such as continuing to provide vaccination location information and “work trips” to get vaccinated. Identify if the unit could host a vaccination clinic in conjunction with a local clinic, public health, or other medical professionals.
- Units need consistent and clear messages from local leaders on requirements and expectations.
 - ACTIONS: We recommend the Forest consider a “Safety stand-down” or other engagement led by local leaders. The engagement may need to specifically identify expectations of supervisors for how to implement requirements (such as masks). The Region 5 CERT would be available to assist, if requested.
- Communication protocols need to be identified before an incident occurs, including after hours and on weekends when some employees are working.
 - ACTIONS: Roles and responsibilities need to be clear on who needs to know about COVID symptoms, confirmed illness and/or exposure needs to be identified. This includes identifying who does contact tracing, who makes decisions on quarantine needs (e.g., hotels and food), and who notifies exposed employees (on the unit or on other units).
- Employee care needs to remain a top priority.
 - ACTIONS: Continue to provide employee care from the direct supervisor where possible. Discuss role of higher-level supervisors in supporting the local leaders. Offer Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) to employees impacted to determine any needs.
- Manage employee fatigue.
 - ACTIONS: Consider changing members of the local COVID organization to give rest to those involved long-term and provide fresh perspective.