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Lamorinda fire agencies in solid shape to confront pandemic

By Nick Marnell

Officials from both Lamorinda fire agencies stressed that their ability to deliver emergency medical care during the COVID-19 crisis has not been compromised, assuring residents that proper protocols are in place to halt the spread of the virus among both emergency personnel and district residents.

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District has expanded its cleaning and decontamination of fire stations, apparatus and turnout gear, and has ordered a large supply of gloves, masks and gowns for use by personnel on emergency calls. "Residents can be assured that we are taking extra precautions to prevent exposure to the coronavirus, both to ourselves and to the patients we treat," Chief Dave Winnacker said.

If MOFD employees show flu-like symptoms - cough, fever, headache - they are tested, and if positive for COVID-19, are isolated at home or at a district shelter. Through the last week of March, no MOFD suppression personnel had tested positive for the coronavirus.

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, an agency more than five times the size of MOFD, announced that 18 of its employees had been tested through late March, with 12 confirmed as negative, two isolated off-duty awaiting results, and four testing positive. Those four remain off-duty and await a return date based on federal guidelines. ConFire had instituted emergency dispatch protocols and personal protective equipment protocols for added safety early in the crisis.

"It is very understandable for the patients we treat to have many concerns about exposure to the coronavirus but, in our view, treatment by well-protected first responders should not be one of those concerns," said Peter Benson, ConFire medical director.

Both districts said that the pandemic has not imperiled day-to-day operation. According to ConFire spokesman Steve Hill, the district is fully staffed for the foreseeable future, with volunteers taking overtime assignments. "People need not panic over the lack of emergency medical services," Hill said.

MOFD will add four new firefighters to its roster in April and Winnacker said he does not expect any immediate problems with district staffing.

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