



# Considerations for Response

## Incidents Involving Mass Gatherings and Large Crowds During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented our nation's first responders with numerous unprecedented challenges. Fire departments across the country have quickly innovated and adapted to new protocols that address the safety of firefighters and EMS providers while ensuring that all interactions with our communities are professional and in adherence to patient care and operational policies and directives.

The role of the fire service during the COVID-19 pandemic is unchanged. However, it is more important now than ever to maintain and strengthen community relations that reflect sensitivity, compassion, and understanding. Our communities are coping with multiple adverse impacts due to COVID-19, including illness, loss of life, loss of employment, economic downturn, anxiety, and significant disruptions to routine. During this challenging time, the fire service can help educate our communities, maintain confidence in government, and heighten safety and resilience.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the fire service must be prepared to respond appropriately to all incidents, including mass gatherings that have public safety implications. In the case of mass gatherings, it is important to recognize that the First Amendment offers certain protections to citizens and the right to gather. Any event with crowds may represent a threat to our communities and to first responders as an avenue for COVID-19 spread or for violent extremists and others that may seek to promote misinformation or acts of violence. Our posture must be adaptive and coordinated with our law enforcement, emergency management, and public health partners. Safety must always prevail.

**This document has been developed to provide guidance to IAFC members to address potential gaps they may encounter when responding to incidents involving mass gatherings and large crowds during the COVID-19 pandemic.** The aim is not to develop new policies, rather, to provide useful considerations to address the unique challenges that may be encountered during incidents that may take place in the climate of the COVID-19 pandemic. A few considerations follow.

### 1. Maintain situational awareness.

- a. As new information is developed regarding COVID-19, stay informed.
- b. Maintain awareness of local mass gathering events, and public reactions (including disturbances and unrest).
- c. Monitor the climate and sentiments in the community. Is it largely peaceful or are tensions increasing? Are individuals or groups present at mass gatherings that seek to incite or carry out disruptions or violence? Indicators frequently exist prior to violent eruptions.
- d. Maintain channels of communication with law enforcement or fusion center partners regarding threat information.
- e. Share information as appropriate with field commands and other personnel.
- f. Be alert to the presence of cyber threats disguised as legitimate sources of information.

### 2. Unified Command is the recommended framework for developing comprehensive incident objectives and strategies.

- a. The command structure for incidents involving mass gatherings and large crowds tend to be law enforcement centric. However, in this COVID-19 pandemic environment, a Unified Command will contribute to the development of comprehensive incident objectives and strategies to best meet the needs of community members and first responders by factoring

social distancing guidelines, modified patient care directives, and other priorities. The development of a single unified Incident Action Plan (IAP) will go a long way in anticipating the unique needs of incidents in this climate.

- 3. Provide unified messaging and consider developing a Crisis Communications Plan.**
  - a. Communities need and expect accurate and timely information during a crisis. Depending on the nature of the situation, first responder agencies should be prepared to provide prompt and accurate information and direction, utilizing effective information channels.
  - b. A Joint Information System (JIS)/Joint Information Center (JIC) can be developed, virtually if necessary, to develop and manage a Crisis Communications Plan.
  
- 4. Adhere to social distancing guidelines at all incident locations, including the Incident Command Post (ICP), Staging Areas, and Treatment Areas.**
  - a. ICPs and other command and coordination locations should have a larger footprint to allow for recommended social distancing.
  - b. The ICP may need to be protected by yellow (fire line) tape, and access points designated to discourage uncontrolled access.
  - c. Access points to the ICP may need to provide PPE (i.e., facemasks, gloves, etc.) for staff that arrive without such items. Hand sanitizer should also be readily accessible.
  - d. Signage may need to be developed in advance stipulating the need for social distancing.
  - e. Members in Staging Areas should remain with their companies and maintain social distancing and use of PPE in all interactions with other first responders.
  - f. Treatment Areas should have a larger footprint to allow for social distancing.
  - g. Facemasks or oxygen masks may need to be placed on all patients to reduce exposure.
  
- 5. A Safety Officer should be assigned to review the IAP for safety implications, develop a Medical Plan, monitor social distancing and PPE practices, present safety messages, and suggest adjustments as needed to prevent unsafe acts.**
  
- 6. Identify unsafe areas during mass gatherings and incidents involving large crowds.**
  - a. Maps or diagrams may be useful to identify areas that may be densely populated and not safe for the sustained presence of fire personnel.
  - b. Take advantage of available aerial footage of the incident area (e.g., news media coverage).
  
- 7. Consider needed adjustments to Rescue Task Force (RTF) operations.**
  - a. If an incident develops that requires the use of RTFs, modifications may need to be made to provide for social distancing and additional PPE (e.g., facemasks, etc.). No modifications should be made that would deprive fire or EMS personnel of law enforcement protection within a Warm Zone.
  
- 8. Ensure that emergency/gross decontamination provisions for first responders are in place that harmonize with the guidance of departmental and public health authorities.**
  - a. It may be necessary to prepare for the presence of individuals or groups that may attempt to throw possibly contaminated substances at first responders. If indicated, put in place provisions for rapid decontamination.

**9. Avoid developing guidelines that depart from or that are not in harmony with existing national and local policy and directives. Below are examples of existing guidance.**

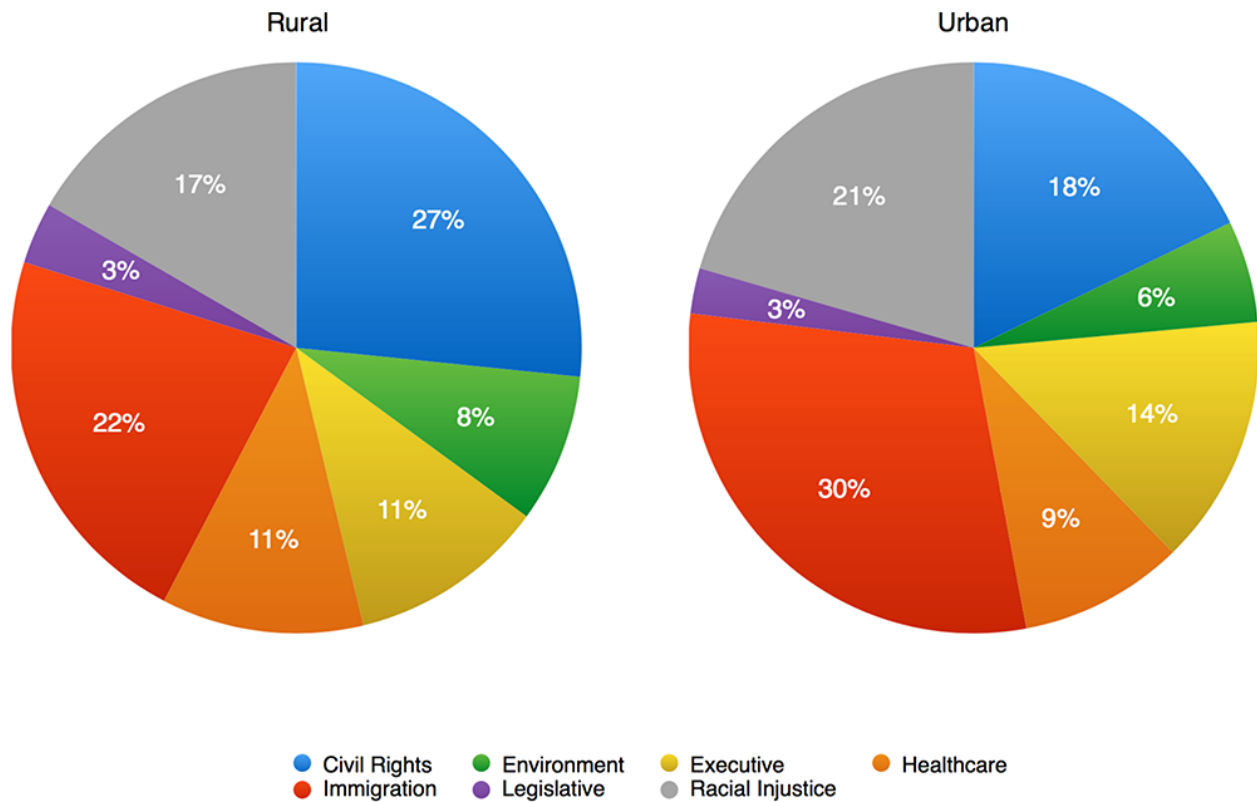
- CDC: [Get Your Mass Gatherings or Large Community Events Ready](#)
- CDC: [What Firefighters and EMS Providers Need to Know about COVID-19](#)
- CDC: [Use of PPE When Caring for Patients with Confirmed or Suspected COVID-19](#)
- FEMA: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Pandemic Mass Casualty Management](#)
- USFA: [Info for First Responders on Maintaining Operational Capabilities During a Pandemic](#)
- USFA: [Maintaining Fire Department Capabilities During a Pandemic](#)
- USFA: [Maintaining Emergency Medical Services Capabilities During a Pandemic](#)
- IAFC: [Position – Active Shooter and Mass Casualty Terrorist Events](#)

The practice of professionalism, compassion, and sensitivity are vital in the service we render to our communities and go a long way in maintaining peace.

## THIS IS NOT JUST AN URBAN ISSUE

Studies have shown that protesting issues, including immigration, civil rights, and racial injustice, are not limited to urban areas and that all fire departments must be prepared to respond appropriately.

**Most Commonly Protested Issues in Rural and Urban U.S. Counties**



Source: Count Love Project, (Leung and Perkins) Boston University

