

# **Firefighters as First Responders on the Frontline of fighting the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Greeting Honourable Members

I, the President of the Southern African Emergency Services Institute have been made aware of the plea and concerns regarding Firefighters not being issued with protective masks and gloves to protect them from the virus when they are sent into dense population areas to fight fires.

I believe firstly that this competency rests with the dominant Local Government Municipal Sectors and falls outside the jurisdiction of the Southern African Emergency Services Institute as the Professional Body to answer for and or to compel compliance.

However in the spirit of good governance and to advance of the strategic goals of the Southern African Emergency Services Institute to disseminate information to the members and public, I will confirm and say that members holding the SAESI Professional Designation: Firefighter Practitioner of South Africa [FFP (SA)] or the NQF Level 4 Occupational Certificate: Firefighter are trained on the Management of Hazardous Materials and Dangerous Goods. The Hazardous Materials Operations Level covers Decontamination Set Up and includes the donning and doffing of various levels of PPE. I believe that these skill sets are adaptable to engage with this viral threat.

Our Professional Firefighter ought to be reasonably aware that the protection of eyes, nose and mouth remain critical in mitigating this COVID-19 threat whilst responding to and engaging in multi-types of emergency situations daily. I am aware that all fire helmets are provided with face visors that supports threat reduction. The impracticality of wearing a fire helmet for 12 and 15 hour shift is equally noted.

My personal assessment about this COVID-19 threat to Firefighters weights greater within the workstations over emergencies scenarios, I say this in considering the social practices of shift workers through the sharing of resources and facilities as evidenced within the Correctional Services.

My observation of Infection rate of locked inmates against the free moving Warders and staff confirmed the effectiveness of the national containment strategy of Lockdown and restricted movement and exposed the R(0) vulnerability involving uncontrolled travel and social interaction within the shift worker environment.

The way forward requires smart and innovative solutions that change our behaviour towards self-preservation. The goal here is not to touch our facial area or expose ourselves to face to face contact within less than one meter.

I am equally aware of the multitude of resource challenges facing Local Government during this Lockdown period together with the planning underway for risk reduction and response against the pandemic spread as predicted by the authorities having jurisdiction.

In saying that, I am pleased to note that some Firefighters are innovating solutions in this time of scarcity of PPE by adaptation of basic resources to protect themselves in some Cities and will suggest that SAESI members be encouraged to use our platforms to share these ideas among the fraternity to maintain resilience to face the difficult journey before us.

As the President of SAESI, in my video message to members posted on the social platforms made a call to the Fire and Emergency Services fraternity to build their immunity by maintaining their fitness and well-being so that they can be there to respond to the “call for help” of our citizens.

In having this opportunity to respond in this matter I urge all Firefighters in the country to break the chain of virus exchange at the point of contact with inanimate objects shared with other worker colleagues through sterilization before use, to protect the routes of entry by shielding our face from our hands, to focus operational practices on decontamination protocols during shift changes and return from incidents and maintain social distancing during travel, response and within work stations.

I remain committed as President of SAESI to persevere towards Professionalization of the Fire and Emergency Services.