

BULLETIN

Firefighters who refuse flu shot can don masks; Region's fire departments offer options to protect public safety

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Times Colonist (Victoria)

Expect to see some Greater Victoria firefighters wearing surgical masks this flu season.

Greater Victoria fire chiefs have endorsed a policy patterned after one used by the B.C. Ambulance Service, in which members who choose not to get flu shots are required to wear surgical masks when attending to ill people, the elderly or when entering patient care facilities.

The requirement to wear a mask will be in effect only during flu season, which runs from late November through March.

First responders who have been vaccinated will wear an identifier such as a distinctive rubber wrist band.

The policy does not require members to wear the masks when they are on first responder calls such as a car crash, Oak Bay Fire Chief Gerry Adam said.

"It's only when they go into a supported services-type building, like VIHA-run extended care, such as Oak Bay Lodge, or if they're going into some place where there are elderly. That's where we'll be wearing the masks," Adam said.

"When they go on a first-responder call to a motor vehicle accident, no, the guys won't be wearing masks then."

The policy has been adopted by several Lower Mainland departments.

Saanich first responders started wearing the masks on certain calls beginning Dec. 1, said deputy chief Frank Macdonald.

"It mirrors the policy that's in place for the ambulance service. We go hand in hand with the ambulance service and use a similar means of protection for both the public and our employees," Macdonald said.

"The surgical masks are really designed to protect patients from any possibility the responder may expose the patient to any influenza-type virus," he said.

Esquimalt Fire Chief David Ward said his primary concern is safety.

"To me, as a fire chief, it's important to keep my members safe as well as the public safe," Ward said.

"It's not something that's intrusive to members. It's their decision if they want to receive a flu shot."

Some public-sector unions balked at a similar policy, introduced this summer by B.C. health officer Dr. Perry Kendall, requiring health-care workers who had not been vaccinated to wear masks.

The government said it launched the mandatory program to protect patients as fewer than 50 per cent of workers in some health settings were being vaccinated against the flu.

Three unions, the Health Sciences Association, Hospital Employees' Union and B.C. Nurses' Union, launched grievances over the policy.

That prompted the province to back off, saying it would work toward voluntary compliance from workers in the first year of the program.

It's estimated about 8,000 people die from the flu or its complications every year in Canada.

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