



Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of **Health**

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Via email: [Darren.Klemm@dfes.wa.gov.au](mailto:Darren.Klemm@dfes.wa.gov.au)

Dear Commissioner Klemm,

## **VACCINATION AND MASK USE FOR DEPARTMENT OF FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES PERSONNEL**

Thank you for seeking advice regarding the vaccination of Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) personnel and the wearing of masks by unvaccinated personnel.

I would first like to acknowledge that the DFES workforce represents a critical workforce, whose role in protecting our community and responding to emergencies must be safeguarded. It is vital to ensure all possible risk mitigation measures are in place to minimise the potential of COVID-19 transmission to them and to the WA community.

Transmission of COVID-19 in the DFES workplace has the potential to cause serious illness in DFES staff, their families and members of the community. By the nature of their close interactions with the community, the DFES workforce may potentially be exposed to COVID-19 cases either knowingly or inadvertently. By the nature of their work, DFES personnel work closely with vulnerable groups, often in environments where limited controls may be in place that would reduce the opportunity for COVID-19 transmission to occur. Consequently, vaccination represents an important intervention for preventing transmission of COVID-19 to the DFES workforce and to vulnerable groups with whom the workforce interacts.

The Delta variant strain of the SARS-CoV-2 virus has become the dominant strain in Australia, leading to several outbreaks including the current large outbreaks occurring in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria. The Delta variant is significantly more contagious than previous strains of COVID-19 and there is emerging evidence that it leads to more

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severe outcomes, with nearly double the hospitalisation rate of those with the Alpha variant. People who have not been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 are most at risk.

Both vaccines provide excellent protection against the Delta variant, and, as demonstrated in the current NSW and Victoria outbreaks, serious disease is largely confined to the unvaccinated or partially vaccinated and is impacting more severely on younger age groups than previous variants. The vaccines also significantly reduce the rates of infection and subsequent spreading of the virus.

When the COVID-19 vaccination program was introduced by the Commonwealth in early 2021, vaccine supplies were limited and therefore directed towards priority groups for vaccination. Critical and high-risk workers, including fire and emergency workers, were deemed to be in the 1B high priority group for vaccination, as they were at increased risk of exposure, and being infected with and transmitting SARS-CoV-2 to others. As a result, all frontline fire and emergency service personnel were provided with access to the COVID-19 vaccination in Phase 1B of the vaccine rollout, which commenced in WA on 22 February 2021. Recent data from approximately 3,600 DFES employees suggests that current vaccination rates of frontline workers are estimated to be 80%, being 57% fully vaccinated and 23% partially vaccinated.

Strategies to increase voluntary vaccination rates should continue to be employed and you now should consider the use of masks for those staff who are not yet vaccinated. Where staff are not vaccinated, the most effective way to reduce exposure to COVID-19 is to maintain physical distance from each other, which is often not possible or practicable during DFES work. Where optimal physical distance can not be maintained or assured, the use of masks is an important adjunct to distance and vaccination.

As outlined in advice from the World Health Organization (WHO), SARS-CoV-2 is mainly transmitted by close personal contact (via respiratory droplets or aerosols) or via contaminated surfaces. The WHO advises that the virus spreads mainly between people who are in close contact with each other, typically within 1 metre (short-range). A person can be infected when aerosols or droplets containing the virus are inhaled or come directly into contact with the eyes, nose, or mouth. Masks are disposable or reusable devices that create a physical barrier between the mouth and nose of the wearer and potential contaminants in the immediate environment. If worn properly, a mask helps to block large-particle droplets that may contain viruses and bacteria, keeping it from reaching the wearer's mouth and nose. Masks may also help reduce exposure of the wearer's saliva and respiratory secretions to others. Therefore, it is practicable to mitigate or eliminate exposure to COVID-19 through the wearing of masks. The benefit forms the basis of the mask mandates that are required during lockdowns or at various levels of restrictions.

While vaccination remains the most effective intervention for prevention of disease, the use of a mask is a simple and effective way to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19. I therefore support the requirement for unvaccinated personnel to wear masks during their work in mission critical areas of DFES. Masks should always be used as part of a suite

of measures to suppress transmission, such as physical distancing and maintaining good hand hygiene.

Community transmission would present an immediate risk to unvaccinated DFES workers and to the business continuity of this essential service. If an outbreak was to occur, unvaccinated staff would be left vulnerable to infection and severe disease and represent a potential threat to the community in which they work. If an outbreak was to occur in a regional or remote setting, this could present significant community risks, including to vulnerable Aboriginal communities.

Therefore, I am of the view, as the Chief Health Officer, that, for the reasons outlined above, the continued encouragement of vaccination of DFES workers should be prioritised. In addition, the immediate implementation of a mask mandate for unvaccinated DFES workers working in frontline emergency response workplaces, or areas that support those workplaces, or those working in frontline or frontline support roles (both voluntary and service employees) should be used, as this will further protect DFES workers and the public.

Yours sincerely



Dr Andrew Robertson  
**CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER**

17 September 2021