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## **CORONAVIRUS AND OTHER AEROSOL-TRANSMITTED DISEASES POSE MAJOR RISK FOR SAFETY WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES**

**BY: SCOTT A. O'MARA**

The State of California Department of Industrial Relations, under the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health, has previously issued protocols that embrace exposures to the newly-found coronavirus, which has been identified as a major societal program. CalOSHA acknowledges that this type of virus could pose a danger to California workers and their families, and other through its airborne passage.

Prior to the identification of the coronavirus, a protocol was established for aerosol transmitted diseases. The protocol addresses workers in particular areas of employment, including hospital workers, paramedics, emergency medical service providers (such as firefighters and other emergency responders), etc. Another area of concern involves employees engaged in police services, such as the transportation of individuals suspected of possibly carrying aerosol transmitted diseases, as well as services provided in conjunction with health care and public health operations. Other exposures to the coronavirus may occur in prisons, jails and correctional facilities, as well as homeless shelters.

It does not take a great deal of understanding of the exposures which safety officers face to recognize the potential risks they have relative to aerosol transmitted diseases like the coronavirus. Employers must establish an aerosol transmittable disease exposure control plan, which should contain numerous elements. One of the most significant elements requires the control plan to list all job classifications in which employees have occupational exposures.

It is easy to realize that safety officers in particular have a wide range of exposures which may subject them to aerosol transmittable diseases like the coronavirus. These exposures include such activities as containing and controlling resistive individuals, extracting prisoners/inmates, walking suspects back to the officer's vehicle and having them collapse, working as a firefighter/paramedic trying to revive someone and bring them back to life, chair carry, stretcher carry, etc. And if the coronavirus continues to evolve to a greater disease process, its impact on our communities will increase, as will the significant exposures which safety members already have.

As part of the aerosol transmittable disease exposure control plan, employers must implement a source of control to minimize the exposures which workers have, and inform them as to the source of the control measures. The protocol mandates that employers will have in place a procedure to contain and control the transfer of individuals who may be carrying an aerosol transmittable disease so as to eliminate or minimize healthy employees' exposure to infected individuals. Furthermore, based on the recognition that the aerosol transmittable disease will continue to be present in a room and or vehicle, where an infected individual has been held, a protocol to cleanse the area must also be in place.

Transportation of prisoners and sick individuals in a vehicle allows the coronavirus to maintain a presence in the vehicle. Therefore, cleansing such vehicles from the disease following the transportation of infected individuals is of paramount importance to anyone who may travel in that vehicle thereafter. According to California Code of Regulations, Title 8, §5199 – Aerosol Transmissible Diseases, every control plan must contain:

The procedures the employer will use to ensure that there is an adequate supply of personal protective equipment and other equipment necessary to minimize employee exposure to ATPs, in normal operations and in foreseeable emergencies.

There is also discussion regarding simple protective actions which employees can take, such as washing their hands, wearing gloves, cleaning and disinfecting contaminated surfaces.

Again, it does not take much expansion of thought to recognize the value of containing and controlling individuals who may be infected, and the necessity of cleaning any potentially infected items and areas. For example, consideration must be given to ventilation systems in various facilities, and the potential for transmittal of the coronavirus through this means. If the air in an infected area is recirculated, it must be routed through a filtering system. Simple things such as doors and windows in vehicles also need to be cleansed.

There is also discussion regarding the following:

Law enforcement or corrections personnel who transport an airborne infectious disease case or suspected case in a vehicle need not use respiratory protection if all of the following conditions are met:

- i. A solid partition separates the passenger area from the area where employees are located. [*Obvioulsy, this type of separation is not present in most transportation.*]
- ii. The employer implements written procedures that specify the conditions of operation, including the operation of windows and fans.

This mandate requires an individual within the organization to set up employee standards. Again, these guidelines and standards are set forth in C.C.R., Title 8, §5199 – Aerosol Transmissible Diseases. This section indicates specifically that it has application to employers who have employees with occupational exposures to infectious diseases spread by inhalable particulates and droplets. It further states that covered employers are required to protect their employees from infection by establishing and implementing a set of written procedures.

The complexity of the control plan is of such magnitude that “employers are required to designate one person to have overall responsibility to administer this plan”. In addition, employers must ensure that the designated person “is knowledgeable in infection control principles and practice . . .”.

If an employer is either not aware of or does not acknowledge this mandate and the significant risks to which safety members may be exposed, this lack of awareness or acknowledgment needs to be identified and corrected, NOW.



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