Australian Government

Department of Home Affairs

COVID-19 Interstate (Fire, Emergency and other Essential Services) Deployment Protocol

Version 2 – November 2021

Authority

This version (Version 2) of the Protocol was endorsed by the Commissioners and Chief Officers Strategic Committee on 28 October 2021 and approved by the Australian Health Principal Protection Committee (AHPPC) on 8 November 2021.

Review and updates to version 1 of the Protocol

The Protocol has been reviewed to ensure the intent of the Protocol to facilitate movement of emergency and essential personnel includes not only the movement of emergency personnel outlined in version 1 but under certain specific circumstances facilitate interstate deployment of personnel who provide essential services in response to any disaster/emergency during the high risk weather season. The review and update to the Protocol aims to improve the ability of jurisdictions to manage the consequences of natural disasters in a COVID environment as Australia embarks on reopening its domestic borders where agreed aligned to the National Plan.

Updates to Version 1 of the Protocol include:

- clarifying the definition of emergency support personnel to include certain specialists in relief and initial recovery activities, who undertake immediate preparations for or in the immediate relief and response to a natural disaster or emergency;
- identifying return quarantine requirements based on jurisdictions Public Health Orders;
- consideration of COVID-19 vaccination status of personnel meets jurisdictional requirements (as vaccines were not available when the first version of this Protocol was written); and
- use of jurisdiction COVID-19 tracing apps to assist cross border movement.

This Protocol considers responding emergency personnel and emergency support personnel who undertake immediate preparations for or in the immediate response, relief and early recovery to a disaster or emergency. These movements are to be managed through collective administration and exemptions based on individual circumstances and possible risks determined by the jurisdiction receiving, and sending the resources. Consultation with AHPPC advised that vaccinations for the class of personnel identified in this protocol are highly recommended in preparation of being deployed.

The Protocol does not provide an overarching national exemption from state/territory health orders.

Rationale

While the inter-state movement of emergency personnel has not been identified as a source of community transmission of COVID-19 to date, it may be a critical component in managing natural disasters and emergencies including bushfires, floods, cyclones, and associated relief and recovery efforts.

Any movement of people across borders to provide emergency assistance needs to be risk-managed and balanced concerning the safety of the emergency and emergency support personnel and the broader community but ensure that the movements are not unnecessarily impeded.

This Protocol is intended to support the safe and rapid response to emergency response situations following both formal and informal requests between states and territories. The Protocol specifies the minimum responsibilities of Sending Jurisdictions, Receiving Jurisdictions, Transiting Jurisdictions and emergency personnel. Relevant COVID-19 Safe Plans may modify or create additional responsibilities.

A consistent, time measured and risk-based approach applied across Australia will reduce the complexity of inter-state movement for emergency personnel and ensure compliance, whilst minimising potential vectors for transmission of COVID-19. This Protocol considers responding personnel when deployed in a team, unit or module, to be managed through collective administration and exemptions.

Ongoing regular communication between Emergency Management Australia, states and territories, emergency service agencies, the Australian Defence Force, Police, health agencies or any other personnel that are required to be deployed to provide emergency assistance in each jurisdiction will be critical to ensure the currency and seamless implementation of this Protocol. Fire and emergency service agencies are to adhere to the *Arrangement for Interstate Assistance – Fire and Emergency Services* including the *Temporary COVID-19 Supplementary Principles*, *AFAC NRSC Interstate Deployment COVID-19 Plan*, *NAFC NRSC Aviation Deployment Plan*, associated Operating Plans and jurisdictional COVID-19 Safe Plans. All other agencies and bodies are to adhere to respective interstate deployment agreements and any bilateral arrangements.

For the purposes of this Protocol, emergency personnel include those who perform volunteer or paid duties, deployed by a Sending Jurisdiction to a Receiving Jurisdiction for the purpose of emergency management and activities for the protection of life, property and the environment. Emergency personnel includes deployments made by the Australian Defence Force and aerial resources contracted by the National Aerial Firefighting Centre (including air and ground crew responsible for the provision of aerial firefighting or emergency support). Essential personnel also includes certain essential support personnel; any personnel deployed to assist relief and initial recovery activities such as personnel from Services Australia, recognised charity organisations, and specialist staff and technicians involved with emergency preparation and remediation in critical infrastructure areas including telecommunications, power, energy, and health as well as general insurers and associated supply chains*.

including but not limited to; assessors, loss adjustors, engineers, claims specialists, builders and tradespersons

Emergency personnel covered by this protocol are to ensure they carry relevant and valid official identification, or evidence that confirms their identity and emergency response/relief/recovery duties/deployment. Vaccinations for these personnel are highly recommended.

Guiding Principles

This Protocol introduces additional requirements for the deployment of emergency and essential support personnel. The Protocol has been developed to assist jurisdictions risk-manage any potential spread of COVID-19 brought about by inter-state movement. The Protocol encourages liaison between relevant jurisdictions in relation to Public Health Order requirements, Emergency Management Directions and any other arrangements required to ensure the effective management of personnel deployment.

Deployment and exemption processes will be dealt with in bulk rather than individually, where appropriate.

- The Protocol complements existing arrangements, including the Australasian Arrangement for Interstate Assistance and associated Operating Plans.
- This Protocol does not replace existing bi-lateral agreements that provide for response operations by agencies across state borders. The Protocol is designed to support COVID-19 Safe Plans developed by Receiving Jurisdictions.
- Enforcement activities will be by individual jurisdictions to the extent provided in any applicable Public Health Orders and Emergency Management Directions.
- Each jurisdiction is responsible for the development and implementation of their own COVID-19 Safe operating plans for managing COVID-19 risks in the course of operations.
- Infection prevention and control is the responsibility of all personnel, and is achieved through common sense and vigilance in an environment promoting hand hygiene, physical distancing and correct use of COVID-19 specific Personal Protective Equipment. Vaccinations are highly recommended to prevent infection.
- Appropriate measures must be developed and implemented to ensure tracking of all personnel to facilitate contact tracing if required.
- The implementation of this Protocol should expedite and not unreasonably impede the movement of emergency and essential support personnel.
- Deployment and exemption processes will be processed within 72 hours of lodgement by emergency personnel.

Responsibilities

Below are COVID-19 related responsibilities to be met by Sending Jurisdictions, Receiving Jurisdictions, Transiting Jurisdictions and emergency personnel in any inter-state deployment.

Sending Jurisdiction (providing emergency personnel):

- Sending Jurisdictions are responsible for providing deployee details and gaining and confirming group exemptions to quarantine and border crossing restrictions for personnel returning home from deployment.
- Sending Jurisdictions are to ensure deployed personnel have the required pre-deployment health checks (including confirmation of COVID-19 vaccination status and COVID-19 testing where required in line with the public health orders of the receiving jurisdiction), and operational and medical (COVID-19 specific) briefings, and must take reasonable steps to ensure emergency personnel meet the requirements of this Protocol. This may include Rapid Antigen Testing where required.
- Sending Jurisdictions are responsible for providing the travel itinerary to the Receiving Jurisdiction. This is to include a minimum of: confirming health requirements and exemptions to quarantine and border restrictions in Transiting Jurisdictions where necessary, pre-organised break and meal points, and pre-organised accommodation (in Transiting Jurisdictions where necessary).
- Ensure measures are taken to minimise unnecessary contact with persons outside of travel and the incident response; such as pre-determined rest and meal stops during transit; restricting activities during rest days.
- Identifying base-line return quarantine requirements and arrangements with deployees prior to deployment (especially important for deploying volunteer emergency personnel).

Receiving Jurisdiction (receiving emergency personnel):

- Operations are to be conducted in accordance with a COVID-19 Safe Plan. For fire and emergency services, the requirements of Appendix C of the AFAC NRSC Interstate Deployment COVID-19 Plan are to be met.
- Receiving Jurisdictions are responsible for applying for and confirming exemptions to quarantine and border crossing restrictions, and confirming individual COVID-19 vaccination status and testing requirements (if any) for incoming emergency personnel in bulk.
- Receiving jurisdictions will pay the quarantine cost of the deployee on return to home jurisdiction if quarantine is required under the public health orders of the sending jurisdiction.
- Create and maintain an environment that facilitates and promotes adherence to the principles of physical distancing and hygiene.

- Receiving Jurisdictions are responsible for providing the travel itinerary home to the Sending Jurisdiction. This is to include a minimum of: confirming testing and vaccination requirements and exemptions to quarantine and border restrictions in Transiting Jurisdictions where necessary, pre-organised break and meal points, and pre-organised accommodation (in Transiting Jurisdictions where necessary).
- Appropriate measures must be taken to minimise unnecessary contact with persons outside of travel and the incident response; such as staggered meal and break times, accommodation appropriate to contain and separate jurisdictions.

Transiting Jurisdictions:

- All states and territories will, subject to Public Health Orders and exemptions, allow movement of emergency personnel between Sending Jurisdictions and Receiving Jurisdictions in either direction that may be required subject to compliance with this Protocol.
- Work with Sending and Receiving Jurisdictions to advise any vaccination and/or testing requirements and identify suitable rest, meal and accommodations options during transit.
- Sending and Receiving Jurisdictions are to confirm itineraries with Transiting Jurisdictions, to ensure unnecessary contact is minimised.

Emergency Personnel:

- All emergency personnel being deployed may be required to produce evidence of their COVID-19 vaccination status and be subject to a COVID-19 test prior to deployment (only if required) by a Receiving Jurisdiction or Transiting Jurisdiction. In addition, personnel must not be exhibiting any signs or symptoms of COVID-19, as described in the Department of Health's Coronavirus (COVID-19) health alert[1], or be a close contact of a person with a positive COVID-19 diagnosis or who is awaiting the results of a COVID-19 test.
- Emergency personnel must apply their best effort to maintain records of close contacts using applicable transiting and receiving jurisdiction COVID-19 tracing apps and by 'checking in' using QR codes or other means.
- Personnel must comply with all Public Health Orders and Emergency Management Directions in force in that jurisdiction.
- This Protocol considers personnel when deployed in a team, unit or module, to be managed through collective administration and exemptions.

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[1] https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert

Public Health Orders and Emergency Management Directions

Public Health Orders and Emergency Management Directions in the jurisdiction where personnel are deployed may change on short notice. These must be followed by all people in the jurisdiction. This includes any deployed personnel present in that jurisdiction at the time.

Implementation approach

Receiving Jurisdictions are responsible for developing and implementing COVID-19 Safe Plans. These plans must be provided to the Sending Jurisdiction with the Request Letter or as soon as practicable thereafter.

Changes to requirements and information for emergency services

Prior to implementing any changes to requirements that differ from this Protocol, jurisdictions are to consult with other governments through the National Coordination Mechanism. This will ensure any new requirements can be implemented quickly, and strong compliance achieved.

Work Flow

Annex A provides the work flow diagram of this protocol.

Emergency Management Australia

Joe Buffone
Director General Emergency Management Australia

COVID-19 Interstate (Fire, Emergency and other Essential Services) Deployment Protocol

Receiving Jurisdiction

Request for assistance submitted

Letter to detail:
COVID-19 plan
Personnel conditions
Travel arrangements

Assistance letter sent

Receive, brief and deploy assisting jurisdictions

Resources no longer required. Return to home jurisdiction

Tasking and Coord

COMDISPLAN Commonwealth assistance

CCOSC Teleconference

Relief and recovery, Insurance Council

Provide oversight

Action any further requests

Sending Jurisidiction, or agency organisation

Request confirmed Agencies confirm ability to fill

Agency to deploy

Personnel identified and approved

Personnel muster Pre Deployment breifings

Deploy

Personnel arrive at home jurisdiction

Personnel return

COVID-19 Requirements: Personnel Conditions as per Receiving Jursidiction

Adhere to ongoing COVID-19 arrangements

Complete relevant quarantine as per local health exemptions