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Our Ref: MW/sll

20 March 2020

Robin Swann MLA
Minister for Health
Private Office
Department of Health
Castle Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3SQ

Dear Minister

Coronavirus Testing: Fire Service Personnel

I am aware that you will currently be considering all options to ensure the continued smooth running of all vital public and emergency services through the coronavirus outbreak. One issue being considered will be the matter of testing those public sector workers who are required to come into contact with the public whilst discharging their duties. We believe such a testing programme must be introduced as early as possible. The provision of testing to NHS staff will be central to any testing plan. It is also clear that there will be other groups of workers who will need to be part of any such programme. In our view this must include fire and rescue service staff. This would need to include Firefighters, Emergency Control Staff and support staff.

Due to the nature of our work Firefighters and Control Staff are at an increased risk of contracting the virus. Those with mild potential coronavirus symptoms - a continuous cough or fever - have been told to self-isolate for seven days, with 14-day isolation for households in which someone is ill. This is already causing significant staff shortages to affect operational response with many more being predicted. Yet so far, no priority testing for fire service staff has been made available. Testing capacity, instead, is currently being focused on patients admitted to hospital - with those self-isolating at home not tested.

Priority access to tests for frontline Firefighters and Control Staff will be vital to avoid exacerbating workforce shortages by forcing many fire service staff to stay off work, potentially unnecessarily. Not only would our members who test negative be able to safely return to work, significantly reducing the burden on fire & rescue service resources, but it would also significantly reduce the risk of any infected frontline staff potentially transmitting the virus to vulnerable members of the public. Individuals who test positive would also be safe in the knowledge that they would not catch the virus again, making both negative and positive results useful in any emergency planning and resourcing.

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I would therefore ask you to consider urgently providing the resources and funding necessary to make the early testing of all fire and rescue service staff an immediate priority. Further to this, and by way of the same reasoning, I would request that Firefighters and Control Staff are included in any priority, key worker groups to receive vaccination as and when any vaccination is developed.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack', written in a cursive style.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary