



COVID-19: Law Enforcement's Role in Enforcing Public Health Protections

Educate Yourself. Stay Informed. Be Safe.

With the outbreak of an infectious disease, officers may be required to respond to calls for service related to public health orders, mandatory quarantines, and the protection of medical resources. This information is meant to help police departments better understand their authority in such situations, along with methods to reduce risk and exposure.

Types of Public Health Orders:

- Curfew – regulates times during which a person is required to stay indoors.
- Social distancing – maintaining distance between people to avoid the spread of disease.
- Quarantine – restricts the movement of people who show symptoms or are potentially infected by a disease.
- Self-quarantine – the voluntary act of putting oneself in quarantine.
- Isolation – separates sick people from those who are not.
- Shelter-in-place (stay at home) – requires individuals stay in a safe, non-public location (home) except for essential activities and work, until told otherwise.

How to Prepare for Public Health Related Enforcement Activity:

- Provide frequent, accurate, and timely information to the public regarding enforcement orders. Effective partnerships between the police and communities will ensure higher levels of compliance, especially regarding voluntary quarantine and social distancing.
- Ensure proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and develop enforcement plans that limit risk and exposure to disease.
- Provide officers with appropriate contact information to public health personnel should they encounter an individual demonstrating symptoms.

- Ensure coordination between police departments and sheriff's offices. With many courts closing to the public and moving to a virtual environment, this may allow police departments to leverage resources from sheriff's departments and other agencies.
- Local police departments will be called upon for first response during a pandemic but will be expected to coordinate with other jurisdictions and municipalities.

Protection and Security:

- Provide training to officers to ready them for modified calls for service, such as those related to the protection and security of medical resources, and the enforcement of quarantine orders. Consider creating a Public Health Response Team that includes officers from different units.
- Officers may be required to provide duties outside normal calls for service regarding the protection and security of medical resources to include:
 - Guarding distribution chains and distribution sites of protective equipment and supplies from the strategic national stockpile.
 - Providing protective services to hospital emergency rooms, temporary treatment shelters, and triage centers during patient surges.
 - Providing additional preventive patrol or other measures to targets of opportunity resulting from the emergency (such as pharmacies and supermarkets), to include hoarding and price gauging of critical medical resources.
 - Providing added security to critical infrastructure components (such as utilities and telecommunication facilities).



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Enforcing Public Health Orders and Quarantines:

- Shelter-in-place (or stay at home) orders are issued at the state or country level but sometimes may come from local governments. Law enforcement has not typically had to engage in enforcement of public health orders in the past. Agencies should work closely with their public health partners at the state and local level to gain a clear understanding of the specific order(s) and penalties for violations as well as how best to respond to violations at the local level.¹
- In the United States, local police officers generally have the authority to enforce existing quarantine or shelter-in-place orders. As the virus spreads, officers may be called upon to help in the enforcement of public health orders and quarantine efforts.
- Should a person fail to comply with a quarantine order, the responding officer holds legal precedence to enforce compliance. The officer should maintain a copy of the order and a clear understanding of how it is to be enforced.
- In the event that someone appeals a public health order, be prepared should the court proceedings occur outside of the physical courthouse, via videoconferencing or other technology.

Absence of Public Health Orders:

- In cases where a quarantine order does not exist, but a person is symptomatic, or is perceived as having contracted the disease, swift action is necessary. Officers should work with public health personnel to assess the medical state of the individual. Laws for imposing quarantines vary, so check your own state or country's laws and procedures. [The National Conference of State Legislatures has published the State Quarantine Laws and Regulations in the United States.](#)

- In the United States, the Federal government may impose isolation and/or quarantine based on the authority it's granted in the Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the CDC is authorized to detain individuals carrying communicable diseases, in some cases. Officers should work with the CDC and federal resources to obtain an emergency quarantine order, if applicable.²
- Quarantine laws vary across the globe. Consult the applicable rules and regulations within your country, state, and/or jurisdiction. [INTERPOL COVID-19 Pandemic Guidelines for Law Enforcement](#)

Additional Resources:

[IACP Organizational Readiness: Ensuring Your Agency is Prepared for COVID-19](#)

[COVID-19 Response Policy: Considerations Document](#)

[What Law Enforcement Personnel Need to know about COVID-19](#)

[CDC Legal Authorities for Isolation and Quarantine](#)

[WHO Considerations for quarantine of individuals in the context of containment for coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#)

[Communication and Public Health Emergencies: A Guide for Law Enforcement](#)

[State Quarantine Law and Regulation published by the National Conference of State Legislatures](#)

1 https://bja.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh186/files/Publications/PERF_Emer_Comm.pdf

2 <https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/aboutlawsregulationsquarantineisolation.html>