

# SAR Operations during Disease Outbreaks

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This job aid provides guidance to adjust Search and Rescue (SAR) operations during a communicable disease outbreak, such as the 2020 SARS-CoV2 pandemic. Strategies that governments recommend to resolve disease outbreaks may not be compatible with traditional close quarter base or rescue operations. Search tasks may be compatible with government recommendations since they are smaller groups of responders working outdoors - with a few exceptions. This job aid provides minimum recommendations to use enhanced personal protective equipment and adjust SAR operations (see Table 1 following page).

Consider consulting with local public health officials for recommendations, especially if there is known disease in your community or SAR volunteers are coming from areas with greater disease transmission rates. Utilize teammates with medical licensures to provide additional guidance.

**Policy Recommendation:** SAR teams should not allow any member who is not feeling 100% well to respond a mission. Any responder who develops symptoms during a mission should be sent home.

**Practice Recommendation:** SAR teams should consider disease vulnerability of participants in close quarters rescue operations during pandemics. If there is an adequate number of members who may be less vulnerable, then they should be preferred to participate.

## PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

**Masks** (all types): To be worn in close quarters when social distancing is not possible. Cloth/homemade masks are likely adequate to protect

others in close quarters work.

**Upgraded masks** (i.e., N95 or surgical): should be worn by personnel working with in close quarters with a person who is ill in any way (e.g., subject, family). Some mask types require fit testing.

**Face shields:** Unlikely to be needed except by the person(s) working directly with a very sick subject.

## STRATEGIES TO ADJUST OPERATIONS

**Social distance:** Take a cue from retail operations when establishing base. Increase the distance between working areas at base. The area you set base up at will need to be bigger than you are used to. Set up discrete areas for each base function. Move functions outside of command vehicles and limit the number of people who go in and out. Put space between Ops section and field team leaders getting briefed and debriefed. Plan for and enforce social distancing in staging, briefing, and feeding areas.

**Accommodations:** Provide hand sanitizer and hand washing stations. Places that rent portable restrooms also rent portable hand washing stations. Team members can bring potable water and soap and set up a handwashing station on a tailgate. Use sanitizing wipes and cleaners to regularly clean surfaces. Establish a cleaning routine at base.

**Shared equipment:** Plan to avoid shared equipment. When possible have everyone use their own radios and GPS units. Assign equipment to a responder for the duration of a mission (not each task). Provide sanitizing wipes to clean equipment when returned.

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**Table 1: Suggested protective methods for various Search and Rescue activities**

|   | Avoid carpooling                 | Social distancing                | Provide hand sanitizer, sanitizing wipes | Masks: all types                     | Provide handwashing stations (rentals or created/homemade) | Reduce base/searcher contact time, increased time allowed to accomplish tasks | Increased use of smart phone apps to transfer information wirelessly | Face shield, other physical barrier  | Masks: upgraded (N95 or surgical) | Keep personal items personal, avoid or reduce sharing of items and equipment | Longer GPS cables, placemarkers, barriers, other measures to create space | Relocate functions off site (remote support) |
|---|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|---|--|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Mobilization/Demob (incident, task)       | Best practice, easy to implement | Best practice, easy to implement | Protective practice, use as possible     | n/a                                  | Protective practice, use as possible                       | Protective practice, use as possible  | n/a  | n/a                                  | n/a                               | Protective practice, use as possible   | n/a   | n/a  |
| Staging area                              | n/a                              | Best practice, easy to implement | Best practice, easy to implement         | Best practice, easy to implement     | Best practice, easy to implement                           | Protective practice, use as possible  | n/a  | n/a                                  | Non-traditional but protective    | n/a  | n/a   | n/a  |
| Family interview/support                  | n/a                              | Best practice, easy to implement | Best practice, easy to implement         | Best practice, easy to implement     | Non-traditional but protective                             | Protective practice, use as possible  | Non-traditional but protective                                       | Non-traditional but protective       | Non-traditional but protective    | n/a  | n/a   | Non-traditional but protective               |
| Briefings (e.g. command staff, general)   | n/a                              | Best practice, easy to implement | Best practice, easy to implement         | Best practice, easy to implement     | Best practice, easy to implement                           | Protective practice, use as possible  | n/a  | Non-traditional but protective       | Non-traditional but protective    | n/a  | n/a   | n/a  |
| Planning/Operations (PLOS) Section        | n/a                              | Best practice, easy to implement | Best practice, easy to implement         | Best practice, easy to implement     | Best practice, easy to implement                           | Protective practice, use as possible  | Non-traditional but protective                                       | Non-traditional but protective       | Non-traditional but protective    | Protective practice, use as possible   | Protective practice, use as possible                                      | Best practice, easy to implement             |
| Assign/debrief field team leaders on task | n/a                              | Best practice, easy to implement | Best practice, easy to implement         | Best practice, easy to implement     | Best practice, easy to implement                           | Protective practice, use as possible  | Non-traditional but protective                                       | Non-traditional but protective       | Non-traditional but protective    | Protective practice, use as possible   | Protective practice, use as possible                                      | n/a  |
| Search: quick response tasks              | n/a                              | Best practice, easy to implement | Protective practice, use as possible     | Non-traditional but protective       | n/a  | Protective practice, use as possible  | Non-traditional but protective                                       | n/a                                  | Non-traditional but protective    | n/a  | n/a   | n/a  |
| Search: area searches, canine tasks       | n/a                              | Best practice, easy to implement | Protective practice, use as possible     | Non-traditional but protective       | n/a  | Protective practice, use as possible  | Non-traditional but protective                                       | n/a                                  | Non-traditional but protective    | n/a  | n/a   | n/a  |
| Rescue: Non-technical litter carry        | n/a                              | Best practice, easy to implement | Protective practice, use as possible     | Protective practice, use as possible | n/a  | Protective practice, use as possible  | Non-traditional but protective                                       | n/a                                  | Best practice, easy to implement  | n/a  | n/a   | n/a  |
| Rescue: semi-technical and technical      | n/a                              | Non-traditional but protective   | Protective practice, use as possible     | Protective practice, use as possible | n/a  | Protective practice, use as possible  | Non-traditional but protective                                       | n/a                                  | Best practice, easy to implement  | n/a  | n/a   | n/a  |
| Medical (non invasive wilderness)         | n/a                              | Non-traditional but protective   | Protective practice, use as possible     | Protective practice, use as possible | n/a  | Protective practice, use as possible  | Non-traditional but protective                                       | Protective practice, use as possible | Best practice, easy to implement  | n/a  | n/a   | n/a  |

**Be patient:** Give searchers and base personnel time and space to do their job under different conditions. Permit extra time for field teams to complete tasks and return to base. Give base personnel extra time to complete their tasks and interact with each other.

Consider wireless methods to transfer data from GPS units. Some mapping softwares have companion apps for smart phones. Consider leveraging these capabilities. Otherwise provide long cables for use between computer operators and field GPS units. Don't share personal equipment.

At base, plan to avoid sharing pens, stationary, highlighters, staplers, computers, and other or other high use items. Either have base volunteers bring their own equipment, or portion out supplies to individuals.

**Reduce base/searcher contact time:** Can field team leaders be briefed/debriefed by handing off maps, etc then returning to six-foot spacing to provide the remainder of needed instructions? Can functions be done over the phone or radio?

**Communicate:** Team dispatchers should communicate adjustments to be followed upon arrival at base. Manage expectations. Use signs at base as reminders. Communicate early and often.

**Use off site support:** Sometimes referred to as remote support, many planning functions can be outsourced to teams of people at home who can develop task assignments, analyze GPS data from searchers, and develop the search strategy. Have a single point of contact, communicate often, and make sure you can share data between the base and folks working remotely.



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