

Massachusetts Nurses Association Statement in Response to State “Guidance Regarding Requesting Personal Protective Equipment”

Any Effort to Conserve PPE by Lowering the Standards for Nurses Jeopardizes the Safety of Staff & the Public

Every Effort Must be Made to Access and Distribute Proper PPE Now to Avoid Continued Spread of Covid-19 Going Forward

The Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA), which represents nurses and health professionals working on the front lines of the Covid-19 pandemic, has serious concerns about the impact of the guidance issued by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to all providers. The guidance calls for conservation of personal protective equipment (PPE), and says, “DPH and MEMA are only able to serve as a bridge when an entity has a critically low supply. The Commonwealth is not able to supplant the normal supply chain for PPE.”

MNA nurses and healthcare professionals are alarmed by this guidance for three main reasons:

1. We are concerned based on experience that some hospitals and other providers will use this directive to withhold the type of PPE necessary for nurses to properly protect themselves from COVID-19 or force nurses to accept a lower standard of PPE, thus exposing themselves and their patients to further spread of the virus.
2. The state guidance appears to signal a lack of resolve by the state to do what it can to establish the supply chain of PPE that is needed.
3. The state does not indicate its position on frontline healthcare workers using donated PPE. The MNA is calling on hospitals to allow staff in contact with patients to use donated N95 masks and other appropriate PPE if it is otherwise not available or provided by facilities.

“Other countries have earlier experience with the virus and have made it clear that to combat this virus effectively you must provide every frontline nurse and healthcare worker the protective equipment they need to care for COVID-19 patients, protect themselves and forestall the further spread of this pandemic,” said RN and MNA President Donna Kelly-Williams. “We must protect those on the front lines of this outbreak now, or we will see a dramatic reduction in our nursing and healthcare workforce that will devastate our ability to fight the coronavirus. Hospitals across the state have already engaged in dangerous practices of withholding needed PPE, or forcing staff to utilize lower standard PPE. The CDC has further compromised the situation by lowering the required standard of PPE. We fear this guidance from the state will only encourage some of our hospitals to continue these practices.”

The MNA points to what occurred in Italy, where even with the proper PPE, 30 percent of the nurses were infected and compromised. If we allow an erosion of standards, that number here could be much higher and dramatically compromise our ability to respond to the coming surge in Covid-19 patients.

As to the state’s claim that it cannot supplant the supply chain for PPE, the nurses of Massachusetts believes the state, as well as the federal government needs to act now to create that supply chain. On the state level, all power must be exercised to work with private sources to immediately produce PPE, and on the federal level, the President needs to fully implement the full powers of the Defense Production Act, even if it means nationalizing industry to provide PPE now.

Nurses are alarmed by the response to the plight of our patients and our communities in the face of this crisis. As such, the MNA and other nursing organizations have taken it upon themselves, with the help of other organizations, unions and benefactors to acquire and distribute PPE for nurses, yet in too many instances, our hospitals have forbid nurses from accessing this PPE.

“If we do not put protective equipment in the hands of our nurses now, then when?” said Kelly-Williams. “If we wait too long, conserving equipment for some future time, this outbreak will overrun our hospitals and spread even further throughout our communities. All levels of government must act boldly, and all healthcare facilities must have a more powerful sense of urgency in preparing for and combating this pandemic.”

The MNA is recommending universal precautions so that all frontline healthcare workers are protected and help limit the spread of the virus. Hospital directives against mask wearing are in contradiction to what infectious disease experts know about COVID-19 and the experiences of healthcare workers in other places like Washington State and Italy that have encountered the deadly spread of the virus.

- [A study in the journal Emerging Infectious Diseases](#) shows more than 10% of patients become infected from somebody who has the virus but does not yet have symptoms.
- [Japanese researchers looked at 634 passengers](#) who tested positive for COVID-19 on the Diamond Princess cruise ship. They found that 17.9% of these passengers were asymptomatic.
- Dr. William Hillmann, associate inpatient physician director at Massachusetts General Hospital, [told the Guardian](#), “A significant proportion of people who are totally asymptomatic are contagious for some portion of time. We just don’t know [for how long] at this point, because we don’t have the kind of testing available to screen for asymptomatic infections.”
- [A study of COVID-19 cases in China in the New England Journal of Medicine](#) found that even among patients who required hospital admission for treatment of COVID-19, fewer than half (44%) had fevers at the time of presentation.

MNA PPE Recommendations

Despite the CDC’s change in its PPE guidelines during the outbreak, the MNA maintains that healthcare workers should be provided the PPE under previous CDC guidelines and World Health Organization standards.

More information can be found at www.massnurses.org/COVID-19.

From [MNA Letter to Gov. Baker on March 24, 2020](#):

“The shortage of PPE is widely known at this point. Our health care workers are being put in the position of caring for their patients without the proper supplies to protect themselves and their patients. Over the past several days, we have worked with many groups to collect and distribute disposable N95 masks to frontline health care workers providing direct care to patients, but there are still not enough. And while the public’s generous offers of hand-sewn masks are appreciated, these are not appropriate for frontline health care workers. The N95 masks have micron filters made from melt blown fabric. This is necessary to filter out sub-micron particles. Homemade surgical masks do not offer this level of protection. Instead, for those providing direct patient care, we should be focusing on increasing the supply of N95 masks as well as Power Air-Purifying Respirators (PAPRs) which safeguard health care workers against contaminated air. The benefit of the PAPRs is that unlike N95 masks which should be disposed of after each use, the PAPRs can be safely cleaned and reused

“Beyond the shortages, however, there are additional concerns that must be addressed. Protective clothing including scrubs and gowns should be donned and doffed on location to reduce the risk of spreading the virus outside the health care facility. Showers should also be made available on site to health care staff. And given the shortage in paper gowns, we recommend that cloth gowns be utilized, as they can be laundered after each shift just as scrubs are laundered.”