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COVID-19 pandemic - A provisional summary of the measures adopted by the Italian National Fire and Rescue Service to guarantee the continuity of the technical emergency services

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Introduction

In Italy, The COVID-19 pandemic has started in January 2020 and has made it necessary for urgent technical emergency services to adapt the general organization and emergency management procedures to the requirements for personnel protection and service continuity.

This document summarizes the main measures that the CNVVF (Corpo nazionale dei Vigili del Fuoco - National Fire and Rescue Service - partner of the EU funded Coordination and support action FIRE-IN¹ and of the EU funded innovation action IN PREP²) has adopted to guarantee the continuity of the emergency services and the functioning of the administrative structure necessary for this objective. For this purpose, the first part of this document indicates the acts adopted by the President of the Council of Ministers and the Head of the Department of Civil Protection, which indicate the main phases of the COVID-19 emergency from a regulatory point of view.

The second part reports the measures adopted by the CNVVF from the very beginning of the emergency until the date of publication of the present document. A final discussion explains some aspects of the organization of the CNVVF that have been particularly involved in the implementation of such measures to tackle the COVID-19 risks.

¹ <https://fire-in.eu/it>

² <https://www.in-prep.eu/>

The document has been closed on April, 15th, so it has to be considered a provisional summary, since the ongoing state of emergency could determine new significant measures.

Chronology of the general provisions

By the resolution of the Council of Ministers of the 31 January 2020, Italy has declared the state of emergency at the National level for six months in response to health risks associated with the COVID-19 outbreak. From that date, various restrictions have been put in place to mitigate the spread of the virus. In particular:

- on February 21st, the Minister of Health published an ordinance "*Additional prophylactic measures against the spread of infectious disease*" imposing mandatory quarantine for those who had been in contact with people tested positive for COVID-19, active surveillance and home stay for those who had been in the risk areas in the previous 14 days, with the obligation to report to the local health authorities;
- on February 23rd, a Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers imposed the quarantine of more than 50,000 people from 11 municipalities in Lombardy (the Lodi area) and Veneto. With the same Decree the work from home has been authorized (so-called "smart working" or "agile work") for all employment relationships in derogation of ordinary rules;
- on February 25th with the Prime Ministerial Decree "*Further implementing provisions of the Decree-law dated February 23, 2020, No. 6, containing urgent measures regarding the containment and management of the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19*" events and competitions have been suspended in all the municipalities of Emilia Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Lombardy, Veneto, Liguria and Piedmont regions. Furthermore, with the same Decree numerous other activities were suspended on the National territory.
- on February 25th with the Decree of the Head of the Civil Protection Department (O.C.D.P.C.) n. 639 - Civil Protection "*Additional urgent civil protection interventions in relation to the emergency relating to the health risk connected to the onset of diseases deriving from transmissible viral agents*", with which the necessary measures were taken for the purchase of personal protection;
- on March 9th, 2020, with the Prime Ministerial Decree "*Further implementing provisions of the Decree-law dated February 23, 2020, No. 6, containing urgent measures regarding the containment and management of the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19, applied to the entire national territory*", most measures previously applied only in the so-called "red zones" have been extended to the whole country, putting all Italian people in lockdown. Moreover, the CNVVF has been entrusted, in support of the police, with the necessary interventions for the implementation of the restrictive measures imposed by the Decree;
- on March 11th, 2020, the Prime Minister signed a new executive decree causing further restrictions within the nationwide lockdown, by closing all commercial and retail businesses except those providing essential services;
- on March 22nd, 2020, another Prime Minister's Decree halted all non-essential production, industries and businesses in Italy.

Summary of the provisions adopted by the CNVVF

Below, we summarize the content of the most significant provisions issued by the CNVVF, pointing out that the complete list is available on the official website of the CNVVF ³

- on January 28th, the Chief of the CNVVF, with circular letter n. 2667 has communicated the recommendations of the World Health Organization to all the territorial divisions of the CNVVF in order to reduce exposure of employees to health risks and limit contagion;
- on January 31st, the Coordination Office for Healthcare and Legal Medicine, with note no. 2403 has provided all the central and territorial structures of the CNVVF with further details regarding the prophylaxis of contagion from infectious disease COVID-2019;
- on February 11th the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. 3325, recalled the National procedures for the transport of patients in high bio-containment, highlighting that the interventions of assistance with the presence of the CNVVF for the technical escort for transport are activated through the competent Prefecture;
- on February 23rd the Chief of the CNVVF with circular no. 4414 issued further and more targeted provisions on the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19;
- on February 26th, the Chief of the CNVVF with Decree n. 54, established the permanent Observatory for the COVID-19 emergency, in order to monitor the evolution of the epidemiological situation on the National territory and report its developments to the Chief of the CNVVF;
- on February 27th, the Central Directorate for Training, with note no. 7684 has ordered abstention from all CNVVF participants to any kind of training courses, until further notice, from returning to their homes if they fall in the regions subject to limitations pursuant to the Prime Minister's Decree indicated above, namely Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia;
- on February 28th, the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. 4947 issued the guideline relating to "Management of operational risk connected to the COVID-19 emergency" which constitutes a reference for peripheral operating structures of the CNVVF for interventions to be carried out within the areas of exclusion and movement restrictions (quarantine) pursuant to Legislative Decree n. 6 of 23 February 2020 and the related Prime Minister's Decree of February 23, 2020 or in the presence of people with COVID-19;
- on March 3rd, the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. 5123 of the issued guidelines for the accompaniment of asymptomatic trainees to their homes;
- on March 6th, the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. 5312 issued further provisions regarding the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19, also with reference to the adoption of incentive measures for the use of flexible working methods;
- on March 6th, the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. 5405 of 06/03/2020, issued the guideline for planning the measures to be taken to ensure the continuity of the rescue devices of the central and territorial structures of the firefighters;

³ http://www.vigilfuoco.it/asp/download_file.aspx?id=28918

- on March 8th, the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. 5419 in light of the provisions of the Prime Ministerial Decree of 8 March 2020, provides further indications to the Central Departments, Regional Directorates and Provincial Commands, recommending, among other things, that the staff in service in the red zones may regularly go to the workplace from their home or residence;
- on March 9th, the Central Management for Logistic and Instrumental Resources, with note n. 7826 of 09/03/2020, has issued possible solutions for use of IT work tools also outside the Department's intranet, in order to encourage the activation of flexible methods of carrying out the work performance, including the so-called agile work or smart working;
- on March 11th, the Head of the Department, with note no. 7267 recommends that the Regional Directorates and Provincial Commands take action to acquire data on the location of cases of contagion and quarantine on the territory of competence;
- on March 12th, the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. 5793 issued an updated guideline on the management of the operational risk connected to the emergency in progress and ordered that, for shift workers with patterns 12/24 - 12/48, the working time should adapted to 24/72 shift patterns until 25 March 2020;
- on March 16th, the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. 6003 modified and integrated the guideline on the management of operational risk connected to the COVID-19 emergency;
- on March 17th, the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. 6088 issued a circular to the Regional Directorates and Provincial Commands containing general measures to guarantee the service and minimize the opportunities for contagion, extended agile work also to operating personnel not included in the rescue device. Indoor and non-remote training activities were suspended;
- on March 19th, the Central Directorate for the emergency, with note no. 7993, has issued a procedure for the sanitation of the external areas of the service locations through the use of the Forest Fire-fighting modules mounted on the VF vehicles. In this regard, an explanatory video of the operations has been published;
- on March 19th, the Central Directorate for the emergency, with note no. 8005 of 19/03/2020, provided clarifications on the application of the guideline, issued with note no. 6003 of 16.03.2020, to the aerial component of the CNVVF to allow the regular operational use of aircraft in compliance with aeronautical procedures and flight safety criteria;
- on March 20th, the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. 6333 issued a circular containing provisions on the processing of personal data in the emergency context pursuant to the Ordinance of the Head of the Civil Protection Department of 3 February 2020, no. 630 and ex art. 14 of Legislative Decree March 9, 2020, n. 14;
- on March 20th, the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. 6339 provided the Regional Directorates and Provincial Commands with the guidelines on the support of the CNVVF to Municipalities in the context of civil protection activities related to the COVID-19 emergency;

- on March 24th the Central Directorate for the emergency, with note no. In order to limit the presence and movement of VF personnel at airport offices, DCEMER 8374 has temporarily redefined the level of protection in terms of rescue and fire protection services in some airports on the National territory.
- on March 25th, the Central Directorate for the emergency, with note no. DCEMER 8481 announces that a special IT portal has been set up, which allows the real-time updating of the personnel absence data related to the current health emergency;
- on March 26th, the Coordination Office for Healthcare and Legal Medicine, with note no. 6570 provided clarifications regarding the performance of the assessment test for COVID - 19 positivity to the staff of the CNVVF, the procedures for sanitization of the workplaces and the use of the disposable filter mask;
- on March 27th, the Coordination Office for Healthcare and Legal Medicine, with note no. 6634 has communicated that the Medical Director and Executive staff of the VF role will provide, upon request, support and indications throughout the territory to the Doctors in charge, to the competent doctors of Regional Directorates and Provincial Commands as well as and to employers regarding the provisions of the circulars issued, in order to guarantee the necessary coordination and homogeneity and application of the identified health measures;
- on April 7th, the Central Management for the emergency, with note no. DCEMER 9431 issues indications for the reduction of exposure to COVID-19 for the staff of the Flight Departments.
- on April 14th, the Chief of the CNVVF, with note no. DCEMER 9917 modified and integrated the guideline on the management of operational risk connected to the COVID-19 emergency;

Discussion

The National Fire and Rescue Service is made up of approximately 44,000 units, of which 36,000 professionals and 8,000 volunteers. It performs urgent technical emergency services and firefighting services in the whole Country (with the exception of the Valle d'Aosta region and the autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano). The CNVVF also makes use of its air service for technical assistance and forest fire prevention activities, with 12 offices.

The working hours of professionals, who operate in 103 provinces with around 1,000 operating offices, is divided into four shifts that normally observe the 12/24 - 12/48 patterns, that is:

- 12-hour day shift
- 24 hours off
- 12- hour night shift
- 48 hours off

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the CNVVF has reacted promptly to the need of protecting the firefighters and guarantee the continuity of the services.

Among the significant number of measures adopted, the most significant can be summarized as follows:

- the definition of new operating procedures to limit the risk of contagions in rescue operations through the use of personal protection devices, including those already in use for HAZMAT interventions;
- the definition of the rules for the management of cases of personnel who found themselves in close contact with people who tested positive for coronavirus and of staff with symptoms that could be traced back to coronavirus;
- the use, wherever possible, of multiple vehicles for rescue operations, in order to limit the number of firefighters in the same vehicle;
- the modification of the working time, which has been set on shifts of 24 hours of service and 72 hours of rest (instead of the previous 12 service (day)/24 rest– 12 service (night)/48 hours rest), to limit the movement of staff to go to the places of work and also limit the number of contacts in the passage between shifts;
- the use of work from home for the administrative staff. Such measure, which was used in few cases before the pandemic, has compelled to enhance in few days the external access to the platform which hosts the most of the applications used in administrative services, on order to allow a number of contemporary accesses hundreds of times compared to the previous period;
- the limitation of the presence of firefighters in the fire stations, also in relation to the halving of rescue calls during the lockdown. Such limitation has been enforced allowing the service to the minimum number of firefighters needed to compose the rescue teams (normally, five units).

Conclusions

In the period from 27 February to 15 March 2020, the operational rescue procedures and the administrative management model, that has connotated the structure of the CNVVF for decades, has been deeply modified to guarantee the continuity of rescue service during the ongoing severe pandemic in Italy.

The halving of the emergency calls received by the CNVVF control rooms during the lockdown period has allowed to keep the minimum number of staff in service in the fire stations reducing, together with a number of other operational and organisation measures, the probability of infections in such workplaces.

Moreover, the remote work organisation for the administrative resources, that only seldom had been used before, has been set up in few days, with a severe effort of the information technologies area of the CNVVF and has allowed the rescue services to work.

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