

# “Fit” for Duty

October 31, 2014



Johanna Gilstrap fits a respirator on a CDC staff member. *Photo by Mandy Mills.*

While CDC staff head across the country and around the world to battle Ebola, staff at CDC headquarters are working feverishly to make sure those very responders are safe and prepared for their public health mission.

One of the critical tasks is making sure they know how to safely put on and take off their personal protective equipment, or PPE.

“Our most important job is preparing CDC staff to perform their normal job duties wearing PPE correctly,” says Alaric Denton,

environmental safety officer, Environment, Safety and Health Compliance Office (ESHCO), Office of Safety, Security and Asset Management (OSSAM), MSEH, REHS/RS (LCDR, USPHS). Denton is the Respiratory Protection Program manager, Industrial Hygiene and Safety Team Deployment PPE/safety liaison. It’s a long title for a big job. “My jobs here at CDC end up affecting almost every deployee going out, through DEOC or their normal PPE/safety requirements. We have to contact and talk to every DEOC deployee.”



Alaric Denton says, ““Our most important job is preparing CDC staff to perform their normal job duties wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) correctly.” *Photo by Mandy Mills*

It’s a daunting task during this unprecedented Ebola epidemic, involving CDC’s biggest response ever, Denton explains. “I believe this has been one of CDC’s toughest deployments and I can’t say enough about the hard work that DEOC has done to coordinate and bring the logistics aspects working to move all these people into the Ebola theater. I’m always impressed by the logistics aspect of deploying personnel; I was in the Navy and deployed many times. Look at the work on the supply side, getting deployees their phones, PPE, plane tickets, living quarters; I believe they are some of the unsung heroes of deploying people for these events. For us in the respiratory program, it means ramping up our gear, replacing equipment (computers and fit test machines) to keep up with deployment demands. We also have to fully stock our respirators to keep up with demand, which involved thinking ahead and working with the warehouse or vendors to get us the supplies we need. This kind of deployment push impacts us tremendously. When a big push comes to get deployees out, we have to really step up our game to get the extra folks ready for deployment. As the deployment liaison/PPE SME, it means a lot of phone calls with people who have questions about what gear they should take, how much they should take, and how to wear it, when to wear it, etc. I get calls from all over the country and the world on what PPE I would recommend.”



And while Ebola is top of mind in the news and around the globe, CDC’s other public health missions keep on going too, explains Johanna Gilstrap, MPH, CHES (LCDR, USPHS ), who also works in the Environment, Safety and Health Compliance Office as program coordinator of the Respiratory Protection Program. “Responses such as Ebola, MERS-CoV, and H1N1 significantly increase the volume of employees coming through to be fit tested. We have to be flexible to accommodate people who are deploying within a few days while continuing to provide services to our regular respirator users, such as the laboratorians.”

Johanna Gilstrap says, “I never tire of hearing what people are working on; the scope of work being done at CDC continues to fascinate me.” *Photo by Mandy Mills*

Gilstrap says her job is rewarding—day in and day out. “I enjoy knowing that our program supports the many CDC-ers who are on the frontlines making a difference in so many areas of public health,

domestically and abroad. Whether they are laboratorians, epidemiologists, or animal caretakers, they are all performing vital functions for the agency. I never tire of hearing what people are working on; the scope of work being done at CDC continues to fascinate me.”

And while it’s always fascinating, these days it’s faster and more furious than normal. “The challenge is to make sure everyone gets in for their fittings quickly,” says physician assistant Karen Forbes, also with ESHCO. “We’re all in this together. We’re all a team, working together.”

Forbes continues, “It reminds me a lot of the H1N1 response. That was a challenge; things were changing so quickly, with new information coming in all the time. It’s the same with Ebola, and the need is so great.”

It’s a critical job,” she continues. “We want to make sure deployees are going out safely, make sure they are healthy, and have everything they need. We’re on call. They can always call one of us to ask questions or get information. It’s scary out there, and while we can’t control what happens in the field, we can make sure they go out healthy and have their immunizations.”



Gilstrap fits CDC Director Tom Frieden with a respirator before his trip to West Africa earlier this year. *Photo by Mandy Mills*

The sheer volume of people coming through is a challenge, notes Gilstrap, who fit CDC Director Tom Frieden with a respirator before his trip to West Africa. “We had to go through several makes and models before finding a respirator that fit. Everyone follows the same steps, from Dr. Frieden on down. Anyone who must wear a respirator to perform work-related duties must be enrolled in the Respiratory Protection Program. It’s mandated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. (You can find more information at this [website](#)).

About 700 people come through the Respiratory Protection Program each year, and that number has gone up with the Ebola

epidemic. The volume of people presents yet another challenge, notes Denton. “I need to make sure to give my best no matter how many times I’ve said the same thing or trained on the same thing that day or week.” But according to Denton, the rewards are great. “I really appreciate talking to all the different employees at CDC who come in for fit testing. It gives me a chance to talk to people about their jobs, what they want to accomplish, where they came from and where they are going. I think I like to hear about where they come from most of all and what brought them to CDC. I get a chance to meet people from all over the world: Nigeria, Algeria, Argentina and Moldavia, Russia, Japan—you name it, we’ve got employees from there and I get to talk with them.”



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It’s all in a day’s work, but it takes extra effort in the midst of the huge response, notes Denton. “It takes up so much of our time thinking and planning, and getting ready for events. We are on call and have to carry phones with us wherever we go and have to be ready. We usually fit test between 600 and 800 people per year. Fit testing can sometimes be the easiest part of our jobs; the hardest part is keeping up with emails and working with people trying to make appointments. Johanna and Karen and I have several jobs that we do besides the fit testing. We enjoy talking with people and training people and that is what keeps our minds in the program. We get to know the people we see every year and that is very rewarding.”

He adds some final thoughts, good ones during this especially busy public health mission. “I would like to remind people to be patient in these events. Many of us have been deployed many times and are used to the hurry up and wait routine. We all need to keep cool, be patient and be positive. CDC will get it done. I’ve deployed six times since I started working with the USPHS, and CDC does a great job of deploying people. Lastly, be safe and come back safe.”

This *Inside Story* by Kathy Chastney

Article provided by LCDR Alaric Denton