What is Peer Support?

Peer support for public safety employees is the provision of emotional support by individuals who share similar experiences with the individual who has experienced a trauma and/or crisis. The services offered encompass a wide range of care. Peer support specialists, as referenced in this report, are not behavioral health clinicians and are not certified under current statutory peer support specialist training requirements that apply to individuals working within the behavioral health system. Peer support for public safety employees as described in this report includes pre-intervention education, interventions, and referral to professional care as needed by the public safety employee. Subject matter experts recommend the use of the [Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) Model](#), which encompasses all levels of the services provided.

In the context of this report, peer support specialists are those colleagues who have experienced many of the same traumatic critical incidents and have been trained to recognize signs and symptoms of distress among their peers and provide help to others in their profession. Services can be provided immediately after a critical incident or at any time an employee shows the need. Peer support specialists are trained to recognize when an employee should be referred to a mental health clinician for more complex treatment. A peer support program should enhance existing employee wellness programs and psychological services, but not replace them.

> *"A peer support person (PSP), sworn or civilian, is a specifically trained colleague, not a counselor or therapist. A peer support person is trained to provide both day-to-day emotional support for department employees as well as to participate in a department's comprehensive response to critical incidents. PSPs are trained to recognize and refer cases that require professional intervention or are beyond their scope of training to a licensed mental health professional."*
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> *International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)[1]*

Peer support can also be utilized as the first level of contact for first responders after a critical incident. The triage process allows participants to debrief and defuse the emotions they are experiencing as a reaction to the incident with trained peers who understand from first-hand experience. Peer support programs should be the first step in employee assistance coupled with further services from an employee wellness program if available and the staff member feels comfortable utilizing their services and other employee health benefits. Kentucky House Bill 562 enacted in the 2022 Regular Session allows first responders to take 48 hours of leave after being involved in a critical incident. Providing responders with peer support during this time and upon their return to work can be a critical first step in ensuring they seek the help they need.

Kentucky Revised Statue 65.1591 defines "peer support participant" as a public safety employee who receives services from a peer support specialist. **"Peer support specialist" is a public safety employee designated by the public agency to provide peer support counseling who has received training in both peer support counseling and in providing emotional and moral support to public safety employees who have been in or exposed to an emotionally traumatic experience in the course of employment.** "Public safety employee" means an individual employed by a public agency who serves as first responder in hazardous and potentially life-threatening situations, such as a law enforcement officer; firefighter, whether paid or unpaid; telecommunicator; emergency medical services provider; emergency management professional; or coroner. Public safety peer support specialists are not

certified, nor are they licensed to provide individual or group therapy services. There should, however, be a credentialling process that ensures they've received appropriate training, passed background checks, and are aware of available resources to ensure they have the skills to support their colleagues.