



Need for Public Safety Peer Support

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), public safety employees, also commonly referred to as first responders, are at higher risk, compared to the general population, for psychological harm from the inherent traumatic incidents faced at work. “High-stress scenarios, threat of personal injury, and inability of any single person to save everyone can take a toll.”ⁱ Public safety employees frequently respond to such critical incidents as abuse, neglect, death, suicide, and other traumatic events, and some may benefit from support to manage the stress that results from these types of situations. In recent years, Kentucky has experienced several natural disasters and mass casualty events that also highlight the needs for these services.

Research published in the *International Journal for Environmental and Public Health* shows that 60% of police officers reported being involved in **five or more** critical incidents within the last year, and 75% reported a critical incident in the last month.ⁱⁱ Additionally, 90% of firefighters reported a critical incident during the year, with an average of six over the course of a year. This increased exposure to traumatic events puts first responders at higher risk for developing symptoms of anxiety, depression, substance use disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as experiencing suicidal ideation and attempting suicide.

In addition to being at higher risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder, first responders have a high likelihood of experiencing secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue. Secondary traumatic stress in first responders can present as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, lack of motivation, and emotional numbing behaviors.ⁱⁱⁱ

Often there are barriers to seeking behavioral health services within the culture of public safety programs. In a 2020 survey of first responders, researchers found that the main barriers to accessing help were fear of appearing weak, fear of a confidentiality breach, lack of information, and negative experiences with therapy. When first responders were asked their biggest motivation for seeking help, they answered that reading another responder’s personal account or talking to a peer is especially helpful and affirming. “Knowing that other people are there dealing with that same stuff. You can bounce ideas off each other, see what’s worked in their situations and what hasn’t.”^{iv}

Providing trained teams of peer support specialists who understand and empathize with shared experience is a powerful tool to help reduce stigma surrounding mental health services, provide greater access to care, create a more supportive organizational structure, and ensure a healthier workforce. According to the National Association for Mental Illness ([NAMI](#)), peer support among emergency service personnel is critical in the delivery of behavioral health services and ensures first responders don’t feel as alone in their experience while also increasing their readiness to respond to critical incidents in their communities.

ⁱ 2018, May “First Responders: Behavioral Health Concerns, Emergency Response, and Trauma” *SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center Supplemental Research Bulletin*

ⁱⁱ Horan, Kristin A, Marks, Madeline, Ruiz, Jessica, Bowers, Clint, Cunningham, Annelise (2021, November) “Here for My Peer: The Future of First Responder Mental Health” *International Journal of Environmental Res Public Health*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Burnett, Harvey J (2017, Sept.) “Revisiting the Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, Compassion Satisfaction, and Resilience Connection Among CISM Responders”

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244017730857>

^{iv} Jones, Sara, Agud, Katherine, and McSweeney, Jean (Vol. 26) “Barriers and Facilitators to Seeking Mental Health Care Among First Responders: “Removing the Darkness” *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31509058/>