

Firefighter Mental Health and Well-being



Provide comprehensive mental health and well-being resources, including those focused on suicide prevention, for all fire and EMS personnel.

Issue

An increasing number of firefighters die by suicide, experiencing mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress, contracted from exposures they suffered while delivering emergency services to the public. There is a lack of culturally competent mental health and wellness specialists to assist firefighters, and local Employee Assistance Programs are ill-equipped to assist first responders.

Firefighters and other rescue personnel develop post-traumatic stress at a similar rate to military service members returning from combat, according to an August 2016 study from the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. It reveals that approximately 20 percent of firefighters and paramedics meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress at some point during their careers¹ compared to a 6.8 percent lifetime risk for the general population. The connection between PTSD and traumatizing rescue work is clear.

The number of firefighter suicides is estimated to be at least 100 per year. According to the "Ruderman White Paper on Mental Health and Suicide of First Responders,"² the suicide rate for firefighters is 18 per 100,000 compared to 13 per 100,000 for the general public.

Impact Areas

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program Changes

In 2022, Congress recognized the impact of post-traumatic stress on our nation's first responders by passing the Public Safety Officer Support Act (PL 117-172).³ The legislation expands the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) program to cover public safety officers who die as a result of suicide under certain circumstances or are permanently and totally disabled as a result of traumatic self-inflicted injury.

Nevertheless, the federal government has a responsibility to do more. Congress should establish grant programs funding peer-supported mental health and wellness programs within fire departments. Resources should be available to health care providers, highlighting best practices for addressing post-traumatic stress among public safety officers. Accurate data on the prevalence and causes of post-traumatic stress and suicide with the fire service must be collected. According to evidence-based research, mental health awareness campaigns provide effective intervention methods. Our collective responsibility is to provide those who serve with the tools they need to help themselves and each other.

Data, Mental Health, and Traumatizing Rescue Work

The FBI launched the Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection on January 1, 2022⁴ to help improve understanding and prevent suicide among law

enforcement officers. We applaud this effort, and a similar data collection model is needed at the U.S. Fire Administration.

It is our position that we need to provide mental health and wellness resources and suicide prevention initiatives for all firefighters. Like other injuries, early detection, access to culturally competent mental health specialists and proper screening can help reduce the effects of post-traumatic stress. Many insurance providers cap the costs related to mental health and wellness assistance, and treatment centers for mental health programs are often out of the reach of the average firefighter.

More Information ▶



There is hope



Talk with us.



¹ <https://www.iaffrecoverycenter.com/blog/trauma-firefighting-and-ptsd/>

² https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/the-ruderman-white-paper-update-on-mental-health-and-suicide-of-first-responders/

³ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/6943/text/>

⁴ <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/law-enforcement-suicide-data-collectionProvide>