

RISK SIMPLIFIED

RESOURCES

International Association of Chiefs
of Police (IACP):

[Peer Support Guidelines](#)

[Mental Wellness of Police Officers](#)

International Association of Fire
Fighters (IAFF):

[Ten Steps to Build Your Peer
Support Program](#)

[How to Recruit Members for your
Peer Support Team](#)

QUESTIONS

[Email PRISM Risk Control](#)
or call 916.850.7300

First Responder Peer Support

by Sarah Bruno, ARM

It is estimated that on average a police officer will witness 188 critical incidents over the course of a career. A critical incident can be defined as any event that has a stressful impact sufficient enough to overwhelm the usually effective coping skills of an individual. This includes events such as: officer-involved shootings, child abuse, vehicle accidents, death or serious injury of a co-worker, and gruesome homicides. Over the last 3 years, suicides outnumbered line of duty deaths for first responders. Peer support programs are an effective first line of defense when an employee is seeking help.

A peer support program is made up of volunteer employees, trained to provide day-to-day confidential support for their colleagues, as well as after a critical incident. This might include: hospital visitation, substance abuse issues, relationship and family issues, career-related issues, or any other personal crisis. The program provides support from someone who knows exactly what it is like to be a first responder — they are familiar with jargon and do not require an education or censorship.



If a peer support program is already in place, consider what steps might be taken to increase utilization and awareness. This should include regular outreach to all levels of staff and their family members to establish presence and credibility. If a program is not in place, consider implementing one. According to the IAFF, the following 10 steps are key to a successful peer support program:

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- Obtain needed buy-in
- Identify a peer support team leader
- Recruit your peer support team
- Develop your peer support team
- Identify a behavioral health clinician to provide oversight
- Train your peer support team
- Develop a referral network
- Conduct regular outreach
- Maintain your peer support team
- Evaluate your impact



It is important to remember that team members are not trained mental health professionals, instead they are trained to recognize and refer those cases that require a professional. It is recommended that a licensed mental health professional is available for team member consultation, training, and program oversight.

Some agencies across the country have put together regional peer support programs, with team members coming from adjacent agencies across a physical area. A regional team might be made up of members across varying first responder services as well (police/sheriff, fire, emergency medical services, dispatchers, etc.). For smaller departments this concept has many benefits including financial - the administrative and financial burden is shared, and added confidentiality - the peer who answers is likely not from your agency.



There are some known barriers that prevent first responders from utilizing mental health services in general. These barriers include concerns about repercussions in the workplace, fear of being seen as weak, and being accustomed to providing help instead of receiving it. Ensuring you have the right members on your peer support team is essential to easing these barriers. Team members should be trustworthy, respected, and someone who officers feel they can confide in after a stressful day or when facing a personal crisis. The agency should address confidentiality in the peer support program policy, granting peer support teams confidentiality within the department with the exception of threats to self, threats to others, and child/elder abuse. When these challenges are addressed, many agencies find their peer support programs to be successful and well utilized.

For additional questions, please contact [PRISM Risk Control](#).