Illinois Firefighter Peer Support: Answering the Call for Help

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# Table of Contents

Illinois Firefighter Peer Support: Answering the Call for Help................................................................. 1

Authors Note.................................................................................................................................................. 2

Certification Statement................................................................................................................................ 4

Abstract....................................................................................................................................................... 5

Introduction ................................................................................................................................................ 6

The Call for Help.......................................................................................................................................... 7

Effects of Occupation-Related Stress....................................................................................................... 7

The Mental Health Stigma ......................................................................................................................... 9

Answering the Call in Illinois .................................................................................................................... 11

The Mission of the ILFFPS ....................................................................................................................... 11

How the Program Works............................................................................................................................. 12

Future Goals of the ILFFPS ..................................................................................................................... 13

Legal Aspects of the ILFFPS ................................................................................................................... 14

Surviving as a Charity............................................................................................................................... 15

Confidentiality........................................................................................................................................... 15

Summary.................................................................................................................................................... 17

Works Cited................................................................................................................................................. 18
Certification Statement

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed: Joseph E. Vish

Date: April 16, 2019

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

-Maya Angelou
Abstract

Firefighters and paramedics have a unique profession. They answer calls for help. While this line of work can be gratifying, it can also take a mental toll on those who choose to expose themselves to the tragedies and suffering that are an unfortunate part of life. However, who answers the responder’s call for help when life in this career becomes overwhelming? In Illinois, first responders can turn to the Illinois Firefighter Peer Support (ILFFPS) team for assistance. Here, these brave men and women can seek counseling and emotional assistance. Just as emergency responders have sworn their service to the public, the ILFFPS has sworn their support these responders.
Introduction

Firefighters and paramedics are dispatched to render aid and assistance to people who experience pain, suffering, and loss every day. During the course of their careers, these brave first responders spend countless hours risking injuries and even their lives to carry out their responsibilities. In doing so, emergency responders are exposed to many life events that can be difficult to forget and emotions that can have a substantial impact on their professional and personal lives. Not only does this daily exposure to tragedy take a toll on their bodies, but it can also have a profound impact on their minds.

The negative impact that this career choice can have on the responder will vary between individuals. Each can be affected in a number of different ways. From loss of sleep to substance abuse, to depression, to possibly even suicide, firefighters and EMS responders are at an elevated risk of poor occupational mental health.

However, one thing is certain- all firefighters and paramedics have various ways of coping with the stress that they experience over time. Some responders are more successful at coping with this occupational stress than are others. It is important to understand that each responder is human and each is unique. Different events affect each of them in different ways. Unfortunately, there are times when the coping mechanisms fail and the responder can begin to slide further into a state of mental and emotional distress.

When responders are the ones who need assistance, resources are available. Many areas offer peer support groups to provide firefighters and paramedics with direction, counseling services, and substance abuse programs to help them through difficult times in their lives. In Illinois, emergency responders can turn to the Illinois Firefighter Peer Support (ILFFPS) group
for support. The ILFFPS offers a wide variety of assistance programs for the state’s men and women who chose to put others before themselves.

The goal of the ILFFPS is clear; to give help to emergency responders who feel they cannot deal with certain emotional matters alone. Mental health assistance can be difficult at times for both the responder and those who are providing the services. Just as our responders have taken an oath to serve the public, ILFFPS has sworn to help Illinois responders. Unfortunately, many moral, ethical and legal boundaries are inherently present when dealing with these types of delicate and confidential situations.

The Call for Help

Firefighters can suffer from occupational mental health issues at any time during their lives. The signs and symptoms of a responder in need can vary. These indications may or may not be visible to those close to the responder. Some suffering from the initial stages of mental health fatigue may not be aware of it themselves. What is important is that responders learn the signs of distress so that they can become self-aware and recognize signs that they may be suffering.

Effects of Occupation-Related Stress

The continual stress of being a first responder can be immense. The ability to recognize how job-related stress affects firefighters and paramedics is the first step to mental improvement. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, author and retired U.S. Army states, “Unchecked extreme stress is an emotional and physical carnivore. It chews hungrily on so many of our members with its razor-sharp fangs and does so quietly, silently in every corner of their lives. It affects their job
performance, their relationships and ultimately their health” (Gagliano, 2015). Not only does this stress have a direct impact on the professional life of the responder, but it will also certainly have an impact on his or her personal and private life. Firefighters witness more trauma than the average person does and such experiences can adversely affect life both on and off the job, including relationships with spouses, family, and friends (Davies, 2017). The results of this impact can show in many different forms.

Emergency responders may begin to suffer from sleep disorders. Difficulties sleeping and lack of adequate sleep while on duty are contributing factors. When responders are over-tired, compassion and empathy are often first to go (McCallion, 2012). A lack of quality sleep will affect job performance and increase the likelihood of errors. As the fatigue of the responder increases over time, sleep disturbances can have a much more significant impact on everyday life. Various sleep disorders are common symptoms of mental health problems.

As the mental condition of the responder deteriorates, the ability of the responder to deal with the stressors in his or her life diminishes. This can lead to a diverse list of other mental health issues. The responder can suffer from mild to severe forms of depression. Depression symptoms can include persistent sadness, anxiety, and loss of interest in pleasurable activity. If not treated promptly, depression can lead to much more serious issues including compassion fatigue and burnout. Cumulative effects of depression will compound as time progresses and the responder goes without treatment. In some cases, firefighters and paramedics can suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the Journal of Occupational Health, about 20 percent of firefighters and paramedics have PTSD (DeGryse, 2017). This exposure can be from direct experience of the trauma or from witnessing the trauma to others (Bradley, 2017). As the first called to the scene of such emergencies, responders are exposed to horrific and
traumatic emergency scenes. Many of the images and emotions present during responses of this type can have a lasting negative effect on those who are called to help.

Another direct result of occupational related stress is in the form of substance abuse. Responders may turn to occasional or frequent drug or alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism. High-risk behaviors that impact psychosomatic well-being are prevalent in professional firefighters, which require environmental and individual-based health promotion interventions (Carey, 2011). This can cause a further decline in the mindset of those who attempt to self-medicate emotional distress.

Ultimately, if not treated correctly, these mental health issues can worsen and cause the responder to take his or her own life. Suicide rates have been on the rise for first responders. More lives are being lost in emergency services to suicide than in the line of duty. In 2018, 103 firefighters and 140 police officers committed suicide, whereas 93 firefighters and 129 officers died in the line of duty (Hayes, 2018). In a 2015 Florida State University study, nearly half of the firefighters surveyed had thought about suicide, 19.2 percent had suicide plans, and 15.5 percent had made attempts (DeGryse, 2017). It has become apparent that the mental well-being of emergency responders is suffering. Though treatment is available, some first responders are hesitant about accepting program assistance.

The Mental Health Stigma

Finding assistance is critical for those suffering from one or more of these mental conditions. Unfortunately, many fire and EMS responders are hesitant to seek out professional support. Firefighter culture dictates that mental health disorders are a sign of weakness, vulnerability, and failure. Mistrust of a member who admits to these problems is possible, as
fellow firefighters may feel the person is not stable and a risk to their own personal safety on calls (Henderson, 2016). Firefighters may feel that they will lose the respect of their co-workers or possibly even their job if they were to seek assistance. This makes it difficult for a responder in need to begin the initial steps toward counseling and therapy sessions.

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) are available through the employer. Responders may be wary of using such programs due to the affiliation with the workplace. Emergency workers may feel uncomfortable or unsure of the confidentiality associated with such programs. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) teams are usually dispatched for individual incident response only. Firefighters may not feel relaxed or prepared to speak with a mental health care professional immediately after a traumatic event. Others may not feel comfortable speaking with someone who has never felt the emotions that come with being a member involved in EMS.

Fortunately, many geographical areas have developed peer support groups to help firefighters and paramedics reach the mental health assistance resources they may desperately need. Peer support groups differ from EAPs and CISM teams. Peer support will offer many of the same types of professional services offered with the other programs but has the added component of the firefighter/paramedic peer. Having someone as a peer in the network can help make those looking for assistance feel more comfortable and relaxed. Conversations with members in the same career field and that have lived through similar experiences give the peer support group added appeal for those uneasy about seeking assistance. Peer support groups often have an added level of anonymity. A firefighter or paramedic may feel much more comfortable looking for help from an agency not directly connected with his or her employer. Having a peer that can relate to the difficulties and challenges of being in emergency services may make it easier for some to benefit from the support.
Answering the Call in Illinois

For the firefighters and paramedics of Illinois, help is now available. In 2013, the Illinois Fire Fighter Peer Support (ILFFPS) Team was an idea that was born in the basement of Bolingbrook (IL) Fire Station 5. Matt Olson, the founder of the organization, went through a difficult time in both his professional career as a firefighter and in his personal life. Due to this experience, Matt felt the need to develop a program for firefighters and paramedics where they could discuss their feelings with other firefighters and paramedics.

The Mission of the ILFFPS

The Illinois Firefighter Peer Support group offers fire service members mental, emotional, and physical support. The goals are to help facilitate a culture within the fire service that allows fire service members to make it safe to talk to one another and ask for help when it is needed (ILFFPS, 2016). The purpose of the program is to prevent and/or lessen the potential negative impact of stress upon a member by providing support, information, and assistance when necessary. The focus is to educate firefighters and paramedics about their own mental health and to assist each of them in a quest for emotional wellness.

Olson also sees a need to redefine “toughness” in emergency services. He says “Strength is not carrying a burden to the point of suicide. Strength is someone who asks for help”. Growing up in the family of a Chicago firefighter, Matt has seen how the definition of toughness has changed over the years. One of the goals with the program is to lift the stigma that keeps many in this career field from opening up about their feelings.
These goals can only be achieved through continued conversations. These continued conversations allow those affected to feel comfortable with their peer over a period of time, much like a sponsor to someone in a substance rehabilitation program. Peer support is not to be considered a substitute for therapeutic services as peer supporters are not trained as mental health professionals (ILFFPS, 2016). Though numerous types of professional assistance references are available through the ILFFPS, the focus is on the peer aspect. However, peer supports do have access to and work in conjunction with clinical consultants who are licensed mental health professionals specially trained in working with the fire and emergency services. As the conversations continue, the goal is to assist the member back to a feeling of emotional wellness.

**How the Program Works**

Responders can contact the peer support group and request assistance for basically any type of personal situation. The goal of the support group administrators is to match each individual looking for assistance with a peer supporter who may share similar experiences or one that would be a good “match” for the responder. Certain attributes may be requested by the responder when looking for a peer. For example, if the responder in need is currently going through a divorce, he or she may request a peer supporter who has also gone through a divorce. This will allow more of an understanding and common ground between the peer and the responder.

Once the call for help is received, ILFFPS administrators will make the match and provide the contact information to both the peer supporter and the responder. Once a peer connection has been established, the administration of the program no longer continues any type of involvement. No records are kept and there is no peer database of personal information. The
relationship is strictly between the peer and the peer supporter. This aids in keeping with the confidentiality policy established by the program. Support group administrators may be re-contacted should a different peer supporter be requested if the peer relationship expectation is not met.

Some have contacted the ILFFPS in direct a search for professional help. Since there is a strong working relationship with the ILFFPS and professional mental healthcare workers, responders can look to the support group for referrals. The peer support team will search for counselors and therapists that will most accurately fit the needs of the responder. A list of recommendations will be made available to the responder. This database of professionals exists within the ILFFPS. Many of these mental health workers are specially trained in dealing with firefighters and paramedics and their unique profession. Though the main purpose of the ILFFPS is the availability of a peer supporter, the group also acts as a reference for responders looking for specialized mental health care.

*Future Goals of the ILFFPS*

The ILFFPS has grown exponentially since its inception only a few years ago. This is due to the success of the program and the reception of change to many in the fire and emergency services. As the stigma surrounding responder mental health shifts, programs such as this will continue to grow and branch out their services.

Program founder Matt Olson believes that this program will see continued success. Educating current firefighters is already underway through classes offered by the group throughout the state. However, one goal is to insert the topics surrounding responder mental health into basic firefighter training academy curriculums. Exposing new recruits to mental
health issues in the fire service is the first step into creating new behaviors of how mental health issues are recognized and treated. Though many of the lessons taught at this level may not be relevant at the time, they give the recruits the foundation needed to deal with such issues during their future careers. Awareness of mental health conditions will be instilled in the future of the fire service, as will resources to contact for future assistance.

Another goal is to place more stress on making current members open to the idea of requesting assistance. Olson believes that this task most directly falls on the company officers. He believes that since company officers are in contact with their members every shift, more emphasis needs to be made to bring the mental health conversations to the surface. Making members feel comfortable enough to break the barriers set by the current stigma is key.

**Legal Aspects of the ILFFPS**

The Illinois Firefighter Peer Support group has some unique legal aspects surrounding its existence. Although a not-for-profit organization, funding is still needed to conduct classes and continue to educate the men and woman of Illinois. Since the group only provides a free service, raising money through other avenues became a necessity. Certain legal requirements must be met in order for the group to continue with its mission.

Possibly the cornerstone of the program is the fact that it remains confidential. The peer support group holds member confidentially in the highest regard. Many people are hesitant to contact their EAP in fear that their requests for help will become public. Many fear possible repercussions should their employer become aware. This is what leads many to seek the help of
the peer group. Keeping confidentially can be a difficult challenge, especially with many of the safety issues surrounding mental health treatment.

**Surviving as a Charity**

In order to fund the program, a filing with the Internal Revenue Service was necessary. Most all of the classes, trainings, and services offered by the peer group are provided free of charge for any department requesting a visit from the ILFFPS. The ability to raise funds was made much easier for the group after legally becoming a recognized 501(c)(3) charity. Organizations described in section 501(c)(3) are commonly referred to as *charitable organizations*. Organizations described in section 501(c)(3), other than testing for public safety organizations, are eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions (IRS, 2019). Section 501(c)(3) is the portion of the United States Internal Revenue Code that allows for federal tax exemption of nonprofit organizations, specifically those that are considered public charities, private foundations or private operating foundations.

After legally being recognized as a charity, raising funds for the group became less restrictive and more attractive to potential donors. Corporations, private groups, and individuals are now allowed to donate to the ILFFPS as a charitable tax deduction. This brings increased revenue for the group as there is an added incentive for those making the donations.

**Confidentiality**

As stated earlier, the confidentiality of the participants in the program is critical. Responders trust that their involvement with the program will not be made known. A confidentiality policy is in place to ensure that all seeking assistance remain anonymous.
In order to accomplish this, the program goes as far as to refrain from keeping records of those seeking assistance. Participants are matched with a peer supporter who may not even know the last name of the responder. No records are kept of any connections made as well. This helps protect the anonymity of each person reaching out for help.

There are no laws that legally govern the confidentially of this program. ILFFPS technically does not have any legal necessity to provide confidentiality because the group is not rendering any type of medical service. Therefore, the confidentiality component was incorporated into the mission and protocols (McKiness, 2019). Illinois legislators have approached the organization with good intentions in the hopes of growing the program in certain aspects. Legal intervention would, however, require mandated training and requirements of all peer supporters within the group. Olson would prefer that the group “just remain neighbors and other firefighters available for conversation”.

Per the policy, confidentially can be broken in the case of a high-risk event. This is defined as a situation where any of the following may be present:

- Peer is in danger of self-harm or harming others
- Suicidal
- Abuse (substance)
- Aggressive actions or intimidation to another
- Violent towards others or homicidal

Should any of the above high-risk behaviors be present and the peer is in crisis, the peer supporter is advised to break the confidentially agreement in lieu of immediate emergency medical care and request the current address of the peer. The peer supporter is directed to contact police and EMS if he or she feels that the action is necessary. Documentation of the
high-risk event is to be completed and loaded into a confidential database only accessible by the Executive Director, Lead Peer Coordinator, and Clinical Director. Peer support after a high-risk event is to continue only after professional intervention. Though confidentially is a critical component of the peer support group, it can and will be breached in situations where someone’s safety may be compromised.

Summary

Firefighter and paramedic mental health awareness is becoming a priority in emergency services. With the rising rates of mental health issues and suicides by responders on the rise, it is important to recognize the signs and symptoms. While each responder will react differently to life experiences in this career field, it is critical that those signs and symptoms are addressed early. This will increase the chances of successful treatment and lessen the likelihood that the responder regress into more severe forms of distress in the future. Education will also help to lift the stigma associated with responders who seek assistance.

Illinois now has a resource group formed to assist emergency responders who wish to find an avenue for help. The Illinois Firefighter Peer Support group is available for any responder looking for someone to share a conversation about difficult life events or who seeks a referral for a medical professional trained to deal with emergency workers. Together, the ILFFP peer support staff are dedicated to helping fellow first responders reach the emotional wellness they deserve.
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Appendix

ILFFPS TEAM

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ILFFPS Executive Director

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NE & NW TEAMS
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EC & WC TEAMS
SC & S TEAMS