First Responders: Preventing Behavioral Health Risks

Mary VanHaute
March 2, 2022

Sponsored by the Florida Alcohol and Drug Abuse Association, a subsidiary of the Florida Behavioral Health Association, and the State of Florida, Department of Children and Families
Mary VanHaute, Facilitator

- St. Petersburg College Center for Public Safety Innovation
- Florida’s First Responders Suicide Deterrence Task Force
- QPR Master Trainer
- FL 988 Implementation Plan

6 generations
100+ years
fire & EMS
44 years law enforcement

3/2/22
Life Lessons

- you have life lessons
- take care of yourself
Course Description

• Basic principles of first responder culture that create barriers to seeking and receiving help

• Tips for behavioral health providers on minimizing the barriers
Course Objectives

• Understand **components embedded in first responder culture** that discourage help-seeking behavior.

• Identify **myths and common misperceptions** about fire, EMS, law enforcement (including corrections) personnel as they relate to treatment plans.

• Develop strategies to establish and maintain **cultural competence** in providing services to first responders and their families.
Housekeeping/Logistics

- Two-hour course
- Three modules
  - Intro
    - Understanding and identifying barriers to treatment
    - Bridging the gap between need and services
- One, five-minute break
- Intermittent opportunities for questions
- Interaction/participation is expected
- Resource list at end of presentation
First Responders Defined

(noun) A person, such as a police officer, firefighter, or EMT, trained in urgent medical care and other emergency procedures and prepared to move quickly to the scene of an accident or disaster.

volunteers? 
nurses? 
military? 
corrections officers?
First and Foremost: People

- Neighbors
- Friends
- Family
- Colleagues

How do you define first responder?
What formulates your definition?

Photo credit NLEOMF.org
2021 Officers Fatalities Report
(noun) A person, such as a police officer, firefighter, or EMT, trained in urgent medical care and other emergency procedures and prepared to move quickly to the scene of an accident or disaster.

Question #1: Using above definition, how many do you know personally?
Question #2: What one word would you use to describe first responders?
Question #3: What is the leading cause of line-of-duty death among first responders?
Leading Cause of Death in First Responders

- Historical view
- Last 20 years
- Most recent: 2022
- Data dilemma

Source:


Reducing Death in First Responders

• Wellness/fitness programming and incentives
  • yoga
  • guided sleep meditation
  • cortisol management
  • eliminating carcinogens

• National safety campaigns
  • seat belt usage
  • arrive alive
  • high visibility
  • move over, slow down legislation
Solutions to the Data Dilemma

Bridge the Gap

Services needed

Services provided

Normalize Conversation

Enhance & Diversify Support Systems of First Responders

Separate Fact from Fiction
What Causes the Gap?

- March 2020 statewide survey of first responders
- Florida Department of Law Enforcement &
- Florida Firefighters Health and Safety Collaborative
- White paper based on survey results
  - status of mental health services in FL first responder agencies
  - referral list for culturally competent mental health providers
  - *barriers to accessing mental health care*

Included in Florida First Responders Suicide Deterrence Task Force Report
### Barriers that Prevent First Responders from Accessing Effective Mental Health Care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Percent (#) of Agencies (n=145)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stigma associated with seeking/receiving mental health care</td>
<td>59% (85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of culturally competent resources</td>
<td>23% (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of lack of confidentiality</td>
<td>17% (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge of available resources</td>
<td>14% (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding for mental health resources</td>
<td>13% (19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Barriers that Prevent First Responders from Accessing Effective Mental Health Care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of retaliation of employer</td>
<td>12% (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of mental health resources</td>
<td>12% (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of needing mental health care</td>
<td>12% (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time required to identify and access resources</td>
<td>9% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of access to resources</td>
<td>7% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of first responder use of available resources</td>
<td>6% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership issues</td>
<td>6% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health services are reactive rather than proactive</td>
<td>4% (6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
41% of firefighters reported wanting to solve the problem on their own
37% thought the problem would get better by itself
35% reported feeling embarrassed or ashamed
34% reported not wanting a mental health problem on their medical records
32% reported concerns they might be seen as weak for having a mental health problem or that people they know would find out

Source: Preliminary results of 2nd Alarm Project ongoing study of firefighters in the Panhandle of Florida, [https://www.2ndalarmproject.org](https://www.2ndalarmproject.org)
24% reported not being able to afford financial costs involved
22% were unsure of where to get professional care
20% reported they would rather seek care from peers
14% had previous bad experiences with professional care

Source: Preliminary results of 2nd Alarm Project ongoing study of firefighters in the Panhandle of Florida, [https://www.2ndalarmproject.org](https://www.2ndalarmproject.org)
Bridging the Gap: Building Culture Competence

- Understand **components embedded in first responder culture** that discourage help-seeking behavior.
- Identify **myths and common misperceptions** about fire, EMS, law enforcement (including corrections) personnel as they relate to treatment plans.

**Different stressors & characteristics in each profession.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component embedded in culture</th>
<th>Myth and common misperceptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intrinsic Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component embedded in culture</th>
<th>Myth and common misperception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic</td>
<td>Self-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t like attention</td>
<td>Seek attention through their jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t see themselves as heroes</td>
<td>Like being called a hero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk of Imposter Syndrome</td>
<td>High Self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Help is Threat to Helping Persona</td>
<td>Familiar with Resources = Willingness to Access Help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Build Cultural Competence:
- Recognize behaviors resulting from threat of seeking help
- Avoid focusing on job duties or experiences unless therapeutically necessary
Intrinsic Components

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component embedded in culture</th>
<th>Myth and common misperception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guarded behavior due to:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational trust/distrust</td>
<td>Personality flaw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to protect family</td>
<td>Family support system is immerse in first responder’s experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of loss of control</td>
<td>Portrayed as having complete control (film or media)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of retaliation/impact on career</td>
<td>First responder is familiar with privacy laws; should trust confidentiality</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Intrinsic Components

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over-exposure to trauma</td>
<td>Environment/schedule allows for rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skewed view of the world</td>
<td>Cynical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trivializing trauma/suffering</td>
<td>Impersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhealthy relationship with death</td>
<td>Morbid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark humor</td>
<td>Insensitive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Build Cultural Competence:
- Consider the function of the guarded behavior in assessment and treatment
- Dispel myths perpetuated by inaccurate portrayals in film or media (CSI effect)
- Integrate realistic strategies for balance, mindfulness, resetting
- Acknowledge dark humor as a coping strategy
## Intrinsic Components

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component embedded in culture</th>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Propensity to soul injury/moral injury</td>
<td>Education and experience has prepared first responder for anything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for unresolved guilt &amp; loss</td>
<td>Infrequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic</td>
<td>Inherent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insidious</td>
<td>Inherent part of the profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong sense of belonging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Divorce rate is high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace unit</td>
<td>All first responders work well together</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Build Cultural Competence:
- Place equal value on insidious injury, cumulative career stress
- Understand nuances of differing stressors among different professions
- Acknowledge sense of identity that comes from belonging (family or work)
## Intrinsic Components

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component embedded in culture</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal responsibility</td>
<td>Team training; shared responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of being weakest link</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt or shame related to job</td>
<td>Move on; try different career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underrate or disparage their pain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one else seems troubled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have to fix this myself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Build Cultural Competence:
- Be empathic
- Stay alert for language indicating terminal uniqueness or entrapment
Dr. Rory O’Connor: Volitional Moderators

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=no_4tp0Lh3I
## Extrinsic Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Myth and common misperception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work schedules</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep deprivation</td>
<td>Opportunity for rest on the job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public perception/misinformation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of policy/procedures for mental health or crisis intervention services</td>
<td>Specialized mental health services on site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View of mental health shaped by work experience</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Build Cultural Competence:
Participate in ride-along program; immersive educational opportunities
Advocate for comprehensive behavioral health access programs
Introduction to Best Practices in Bridging the Gap

• First Responders Resiliency Program (Texas)
  • Peer support training
  • Resiliency tools
  • Inclusive plan for behavioral health access
  • Six-week clinician training program

Poll #2
In today’s environment, what factor has the greatest impact on first responders not seeking mental health services?
Introduction to Best Practices in Bridging the Gap

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmqkJKTZnM8
Best Practices in Bridging the Gap with Cultural Competence

• Yellow Rose Campaign (MI Fire Chiefs Association)

Based on Yellow Ribbon Report by IAFC (International Association of Fire Chiefs) Joint Labor and Management Program

Actionable Steps toward Change:

Talk to each other rather than about each other
Improve access to care
Assure that care providers are culturally competent

Source:
https://yellowrose.michiefs.com/index.php
Best Practices in Bridging the Gap with Cultural Competence

• Second Alarm Project (Tallahassee)

Employee Assistance Program
- Leadership development
- Vetted mental health providers
- Trauma-centered care
- Seamless access to care
- Natural support systems supported

BHAP
- Moving from stand-alone to immersed behavioral health care
Best Practices in Bridging the Gap with Cultural Competence

- Florida Firefighters Safety and Health Collaborative (statewide)
- Blueline Rescue and Redline Rescue (statewide)

Clinicians Awareness Course
- Two-day training
- 16 CEUs
- Opportunity for cultural competence certification (requires additional 10 hours of ride-along)

Best Practices in Bridging the Gap with Cultural Competence

• FL Heroes Network sponsored by Crisis Center of Tampa Bay
  • resources for first responders
  • resources for those who support first responders
  • modeled after Veterans Crisis Line
  • peer-based support

First to Respond. Last to Ask for Help.
866-4FL-HERO

Source: https://lasttoask.com
Best Practices in Bridging the Gap with Cultural Competence: It starts with YOU

Poll #3
Based on information and conversation from today, what is one action step you can take to build cultural competence with first responders in your personal and professional life?

verb (action)
no more than four words

Enter answer in the chat.
Best Practices in Bridging the Gap
How One Person Impacted the Lives of Many
Hoan Alone Short Film

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrA495uA6-Y
Resources

• 2nd Alarm Project
  https://www.2ndalarmproject.org

• First Responders Resiliency Program
  https://www.responderresiliency.com

• First Responders Suicide Deterrence Task Force Annual Report
  https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/samh/publications/docs

• Florida Firefighters Safety and Health Collaborative
  https://www.floridafirefighterssafety.org
Resources (continued)

• Last to Ask Campaign (Florida Heroes Helpline 866-4FL-HERO)
  https://lasttoask.com
• Redline and Blueline Project
  https://redlinerescue.org
• UCF Restores
  https://ucfrestores.com
• Yellow Rose Campaign
  https://yellowrose.michiefs.com/index.php
Resources (media)

• Hoan Alone, *Personal Stories from the Bridge* by Aaron Johnson

• *What Leads Someone to Attempt Suicide?* by Dr. Rory O’Connor, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

• First Responder Resiliency Program, Project 360 Story, Lt. Melissa Franks, Desoto (TX) Police Department
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmqkJKTZnM8

• PTSD therapists making history to understand plight of first responders, News 6 Orlando
References


References (continued)


References (continued)

https://www.2ndalarmproject.org
https://www.floridafirefightersafety.org
https://yellowrose.michiefs.com/index.php

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