

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Preventing Suicide in First Responders

There's a growing problem in this country that too few are talking about. That problem is suicide among first responders. The truth is, more law enforcement officers and firefighters have died by suicide as compared to other line-of-duty related deaths. Worse, it's believed that the number of public safety personnel who take their own lives is underreported, making the actual numbers even higher.

In fact, according to First H.E.L.P., a national organization dedicated to collecting suicide data on firefighters, emergency medical personnel, and 911 telecommunications operators, there were 248 suicide-related deaths among first responders in 2019 alone.¹ Though the numbers have decreased somewhat since then, the rates of suicide continue to be 1.4 times higher among firefighters and paramedics than among the general public.²

Risk Factors: Occupational and Personal Stresses

Why are these numbers so high? Those who've studied suicide among the first responder community say the population is at a higher risk due, in large part, to acute and chronic work and personal stress.

More specifically, the suicide risk factors for first responders include:³

- Alcohol and substance misuse
- Availability and familiarity of weapons, such as firearms
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Relationship problems due to difficult or erratic work schedules
- Social scrutiny and other misperceptions
- Stigma, including the fear of being seen as weak or unable to perform duties as expected

By the Numbers

30% of first responders develop depression, PTSD, and other behavioral health conditions

6.6% vs. 0.5% of fire and EMS personnel have attempted suicide compared to civilians

10X the rate of first responders who contemplate suicide vs. the average American adult

Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)⁴

Suicide prevention resources may be better received if they're delivered by a fellow first responder or someone well trained in first responder culture and experience.

Resiliency & Effective Suicide Prevention

So, what can be done about this ever-increasing issue among first responders? First, it's important to acknowledge what the research shows: Resiliency training is key to helping reduce the stress reaction that so often happens among this population.

The Suicide Prevention Plan for Ohio (2020-2022) supports this finding and includes a recommendation for increasing training among public safety and emergency systems, specifically through evidence-based suicide care.

OSPF offers such training to first responder agencies. Known as Question, Persuade, Refer or QPR, this training is made possible thanks to a grant to OSPF from the Ohio Department of Public Safety Emergency Management Agency via the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Once a first responder completes the QPR Instructor Course, they're equipped to train others within their department or agency, thereby creating a help-seeking and help-giving environment.

To learn more about QPR, contact jason.hughes@ohiospf.org.

THREE Reasons to be QPR trained

- 01** Learn the warning signs of someone who might be suicidal.
By knowing the signs you can help intervene and hopefully save a life.
- 02** Know what to say to someone.
Research shows that asking someone "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" can help reduce the risk of suicide.
- 03** Understand what resources to use.
Often times people are at a loss for how to get someone help, QPR equips you with the right resources to help save a life.

More Prevention Strategies

An effective suicide prevention plan for first responders should include a postvention plan and postvention policies that help first responders and agencies connect with local mental health resources, facilities, and clinicians.

Family and friends, too, can equip themselves to help by learning the warning signs and risk factors for suicide, as well as how to have a caring conversation with their first responder loved one.

Reference List

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- SAMHSA. "First Responders: Behavioral Health Concerns, Emergency Response, and Trauma." samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/dtac/

ABOUT

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

OSPF gives hope to those in crisis, strength to those in the struggle, and comfort to those in grief. OSPF is a non-profit organization that works tirelessly to help all of Ohio's communities reduce the risk of suicide. Our work includes supporting those impacted by suicide, raising awareness of mental health issues, and coordinating community resources and evidence-based prevention strategies across the state.



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