

Written Testimony on 2021 S. 42 (2020 = S.243) – Mental Health, Emergency Service Responders, Suicide Prevention

**By: Lt. Robert Lucas, VSP Williston Station Commander
and VSP Member's Assistance Team (MAT) Commander**

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Good Morning, my name is Lt. Bob Lucas and I am currently the VSP Williston Station Commander. I am also the VSP Member's Assistance Team (also known as MAT) team Commander. I came to be the MAT Commander in April 2019, but it wasn't until later that year when I learned the true capability of the team and why it existed.

In February of 2020 and January 28, 2021, I gave testimony to on what was then S. 243 and now S. 42, at which time I depicted one of the first incidents that I as the MAT team commander had been involved in. I won't recant the entire incident but in summary, in October of 2019, VSP Troopers along with local law enforcement officers, fire and EMS responded to a structure fire in North Hero, VT. Upon arrival, Troopers reported the structure was fully engulfed and while two adults had escaped the fire, there were two children still in the structure. Troopers and other First Responders had attempted to make entry numerous times, but Fire Crews determined the children were irretrievable and later confirmed had been killed in the incident.

I use this example as it truly highlights what the capabilities of a MAT team can do when the resources are embedded at the scene from the earliest part possible. It further highlights the power and abilities a proficient team can have on salvaging not only the lives of the First Responder who work the scenes but their careers as well.

Having talked with those specific members who were turned back from making entry due to blistering heat of the fire, those Troopers who heard the screams of the parents who lost their children and then drove home to their own children sleeping in bed and finally those members who believed (in their mind at least), they "should have done more" ... I can attest to this committee that if it wasn't for the intervention of our MAT program, they would not be members of our First Responder Community any longer – or perhaps far worse.

But that night and following days, the VSP MAT team didn't just limit our resources to our own. Also that evening numerous Fire Fighters, Local law enforcement officers, Sheriffs, State's Attorneys, Medical Examiners, Dispatchers and 911 Call Takers and Arson investigators were tasked with managing this gruesome call to the best of their abilities and many were left without a support network of their own. At that point, we did our best to accommodate those that we could, and insured others were put in contact with resources that could handle their volume.

Leaving there that following morning, I felt completely helpless as I know we had exhausted our resources and that there were much more in need of help. To this day, the members of our First Responder Community bare the scars of this call. For me it solidified my commitment to our MAT team and to continue to make our program one to base others off.

Our current VSP MAT program currently has (21) active members representing all disciplines of employees throughout VSP to include sworn and civilian members and highlights (4) of our 911 call-takers and dispatchers. Our team is also unlike many in the state and northeast as we have (2) certified fulltime Clinicians and a Chaplain to utilize. In addition, MAT has recognized the need to have embedded part-time MAT

members on each of our (14) special teams such as Bomb Squad, Tactical Service Unit, SCUBA team and Search and Rescue to name a few.

Statistically, in 2020, while our Statewide response-to- call volume was down (sarcastically - thanks to COVID) our Team documented over 1,900 personal contacts with our members (over 1,300 of those contacts were (One on One) sessions with our members. This totals of 1,900 contacts is more contacts than what was done in 2018 and 2019 combined.

But this doubling down efforts was not by chance. It was a calculated move by our team to insure that Troopers, civilian personnel and their families are getting the needed resources while they face not only the day to day pressures associated with doing our job but the pressures that come with; COVID-19 restrictions and illness, significant budgetary constraints within the department, police reform, societal unrest, potential retirement system reform, and defunding the police discussions both regionally and nationally. Any one of these would be enough to concern our team but combine them all, it creates the perfect storm for a person to experience significant and catastrophic emotional stress.

It is said that (19%) or 1 in 5 law enforcement officers deals with some form of PTSD whereas the general public compares to about 3.5%.

It is known that suicide in law enforcement is on the rise and affects 17/100,000 officers in the US. It is also known that suicide in the fire service world is even higher and affects 18/100,000 FF in the US. While we don't have 2020 data yet, in 2019, close to 250 law enforcement officers alone committed suicide, more than any other "in the line of duty death" reason reported.

My job as a VSP Williston Station Commander is to insure each of my (21) troops have what they need and goes home at night.

My job as the VSP MAT Commander is to not only take care of my 21+ troopers but to also insure the 300+ Troopers, Dispatchers, Civilians members, as well as family members make it to retirement and enjoy a healthy life after their service to our State.

In working with our Clinicians, one of the more depressing statistics was that they use to work with more Retired Members than currently employed ones. In speaking with our clinicians, I am proud to say we are seeing the benefits of our program and can say without a doubt - they have drastically reduced the number retirees seeking job related mental health care. By confronting the traumatic issues we face as we go throughout our careers, we are making profound changes in our members lives.

I went to the police academy because I wanted to help the people of Vermont. I am proud to say that through the MAT program, I now I get to help the people that I work with just as much.

The VSP MAT program is fortunate to have top down support from our Command Staff as well as the resources to do so – Unfortunately many of our sister agencies and other first responders such as fire and EMS within the state do not have the same resources available to them.

I continue to believe that S. 42 is a step in the right direction and collectively we look to ensure that all First Responders in the State of Vermont have the same care as we do.

Thank you for your time and I would be more than happy to answer any questions.