

Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the proposed legislation that the Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission is bringing forward.

While there has been some cultural improvement, unfortunately, the stigma surrounding first responders asking for help with their mental health remains a challenge. Despite the inherently stressful nature of their work, there's a persistent reluctance among many first responders to seek help, as they fear it will be viewed as a sign of weakness or inability to perform their duties. One of the most successful methods of convincing a member to seek help, is to gain their trust and confidence that doing so will remain confidential.

Peer support programs are recognized as having the lowest barrier for seeking help. This is due to their immediate availability, relatability due to shared lived experiences, and a reduced stigma in talking to a peer versus a professional. Successful Peer Support Programs provide early intervention and help first responders reduce their stress levels and remain more resilient.

The backbone of any successful Peer Support Program is trust and confidentiality. If a member of a program were to ever violate this, not only would the member never be successful again as a peer, but the success of the program would be in jeopardy. That is why it is common practice for programs to have policies that mandate communications between a peer support team member and a first responder remain confidential. This legislation would add another layer of protection and trust.

Throughout the country, many other states are taking or have taken steps to protect the confidentiality of these communications. In New England, laws exist in [Connecticut](#), [Maine](#), [Massachusetts](#), and [New Hampshire](#). Outside of New England there are laws in Colorado, Florida, [Maryland](#), [New York](#), and South Dakota. Federally, there is a law protecting peer support communications amongst federal law enforcement.

I would be remiss if I didn't point out that a [law](#) already does exist in Vermont, Sec. X. 28 V.S.A. § 126, Department of Corrections Peer Support Program Confidentiality.

In the Act that created the Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission, we are charged with nine separate tasks. One of those is “to recommend policies, practices, training, legislation, rules, and services that will increase successful interventions and support for emergency service providers to improve health outcomes, job performance, and personal well-being and reduce health risks, violations of employment, and violence associated with the impact of untreated trauma, including whether to amend Vermont's employment medical leave laws to assist volunteer emergency service providers in recovering from the effects of trauma experienced while on duty.”

The Commission strongly recommends this piece of legislation as it will undoubtedly decrease barriers, increase successful interventions, and improve personal well-being.