

# The Critical Need for Mental Health and Peer Support Programs for First Responders

Prepared for the Vermont House Healthcare Committee 2/19/2025

## First Responders are Exposed to High Occupational Stress

First responders — also called Emergency Service Providers — regularly face traumatic situations and are at a higher risk of occupational exposure to incident stress, moral injury, and increased mental health challenges.<sup>1</sup> Despite first responder's crucial role in public safety and providing emergency healthcare, many lack adequate access to mental health resources and peer support programs. Additionally, many avoid seeking help due to social stigma and/or fear of career repercussions. Stigma in help-seeking and gaps in support contribute to higher rates of PTSD, depression, and suicide among first responders compared to the general population<sup>2</sup>.

These occupational stressors in the workforce can result in increased department costs due to workforce turnover, higher rates of absenteeism, reduced quality of emergency services due to understaffed departments, decreased job performance, increased risk of critical errors, and overall decreases in team morale and cohesion.

## Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission

The [Vermont Emergency Service Provider \(ESP\) Wellness Commission](#) (May 2021) was established by Act 37. The 25-person Commission represents Vermont's Law Enforcement Officers, Firefighters, EMS Providers, Emergency Telecommunications Providers, Corrections Officers, and Ski Patrollers. Additionally, the Commission is supported by the Vermont Department of Health.

The Commission is tasked with identifying and making pre-incident behavioral health training and post-incident support/aid available to all of Vermont's emergency service providers. Its focus is to identify the gaps in service and systems of care throughout Vermont's emergency responder community and recommend how peer support services and qualified clinician services can be delivered statewide. The goal is to ensure full access to these programs for all responders, whether from our largest municipal department or a small rural volunteer organization.

[2024 ESP Wellness Commission Report](#) [link to report]

## Recommended Actions

1. **Expand the Worker's Compensation PTSD Presumption Laws to Include all ESP Sectors** The Commission recommends expanding the definition of “rescue workers” to include all ESPs not already included so that they are eligible for the same worker protections under 21 V.S.A. § 601.
2. **Peer Support Communications Confidentiality** Support legislation ensuring that communications between a Peer Support Team Member and an ESP are legally protected as confidential.
3. **Invest in a Statewide ESP Peer Support/Mental Health Service for all ESP Sectors (\$160,000)** The Commission recommends funding SECURE-Vermont Peer Network for \$160,000 during SFY 2026. SECURE is currently funded through a federal grant (CDC grant through VDH), which ends in late 2025. The Commission recommends dedicating funding to sustaining the SECURE program due to the program’s effectiveness as a statewide peer support program available to all ESP providers regardless of affiliation.

This funding would support SECURE's staffing costs for mental health counselors and stipends for peer support team members, training costs associated with regional monthly group meetings and participant training, and outreach to increase the number of trained team members.

4. **Fund Mental Health Training for ESPs Across all Sectors (\$50,000)** The Commission recommends allocating \$50,000 to support mental health-focused training. This would allow all ESP sectors to receive the same opportunity to receive mental health training, reducing the disparity of training opportunities between different ESP sectors.
5. **Fund Emergency Services Provider Mental Health Stakeholder Meetings (\$10,000)** The Commission plans to convene a stakeholder mental health-focused meeting as a forum for emergency services providers, town officials, elected officials, and other key stakeholders to discuss the ongoing needs and lack of resources available to emergency services providers and their departments.

## Expected Outcomes

Implementation of these recommendations will:

- **Improve job performance and emergency response quality**
- **Reduce burden on under-resourced small, rural volunteer communities and departments**
- **Decrease turnover of an already stressed workforce**
- **Enhance department morale and service longevity**
- **Strengthen public safety and emergency healthcare outcomes**

Protecting those who protect us must be a priority. We urge policymakers to implement these recommendations and ensure our first responders have the mental health support they need to continue serving our communities effectively and safely.