

Good Afternoon. My name is Mark McDonough. I am a Battalion Chief with the Burlington Fire Department and the founder and Team Lead of our Department's Peer Support Team. I am also the Vice-Chair of the Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission. The mental wellness of Vermont's ESPs and access to needed resources is extremely important to me. I have witnessed firsthand colleagues whose careers and lives were upended because they couldn't or wouldn't address their mental health. In contrast, I have seen incredibly positive outcomes when stigmas are broken down and colleagues have access to mental health resources.

The [Vermont Emergency Service Provider \(ESP\) Wellness Commission](#) (May 2021) was established on July 1, 2021 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 equitable access to programs for all responders, whether from our largest municipal department or a small rural volunteer organization. We know, however, that we still have not met this goal.

The 2024-2025 recommendations

- 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.

The impact we have seen

Between October 2023 and September 2024, the SECURE network had 79 trained peer support mentors and four clinicians to support providers. Last year, SECURE supported **13 critical incident stress debriefings** for emergency service organizations, reaching **133 first responders**, with an **additional 23 peer referrals** to a mental health counselor. That is around **150 first responders** getting access to peer support and mental health resources who otherwise would not have.

Vermont has a handful of large ESP organizations with the financial means to fund mental wellness programs. However, most of our ESPs are members of small rural and often volunteer agencies with limited financial means and little to no mental health resources. Research shows that without these resources, the ultimate effect will be a reduction in the workforce. This is unacceptable, as many of our ESP agencies are already at critical staffing levels.

Happy to answer any questions and follow up with any detailed information.

Thank you for your consideration.