

Vermont Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission

May 1, 2026

Honorable Chair Lyons,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the proposed legislation, H.270, which the Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission is bringing forward.

While the cultural surrounding mental health amongst first responders has seen improvement, there is still a stigma associated with seeking help. For many first responders, the work they do is a defining characteristic of who they are, and any threat to their ability to continue this work will be avoided at all costs. As such, there is a persistent reluctance among many first responders to seek help as they fear it will be viewed as them being unfit or unable to perform their duties. One of the most successful methods of convincing a member to seek help, is gaining 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, helping first responders reduce their stress levels, remain more resilient, and frequently prevent the need for further professional support.

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 give formal protection to these policies and support Peer Support Program's efforts in gaining the trust of first responders in their time of need.

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 in seeking help, increase the success of interventions, resulting in improved mental health for our first responders.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Mark W. McDonough". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Mark W. McDonough
Vice-Chair
Vermont Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission