
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

**Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission Report
2022 Report to the Legislature**

In Accordance with 18 V.S.A. § 7257b

Submitted to: Vermont General Assembly
Vermont Governor Phil Scott

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INTRODUCTION

The Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission (Commission) within the Agency of Human Services was established in 2021 by [18 V.S.A. § 7257b](#). The purpose of the Commission is to “consider the diversity of emergency service providers on the basis of gender, race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, and the unique needs that emergency service providers who have experienced trauma may have as a result of their identity status.” Emergency Services Providers comprise of six sectors including Emergency Medical Services, Firefighters, Law Enforcement, Corrections staff, Emergency Communications including 911 and dispatch functions, and Ski patrol. Additionally, the Commission is required:

- (1) to identify where increased or alternative supports or strategic investments within the emergency service provider community, designated or specialized service agencies, or other community service systems could improve the physical and mental health outcomes and overall wellness of emergency service providers;
- (2) to identify how Vermont can increase capacity of qualified clinicians in the treatment of emergency service providers to ensure that the services of qualified clinicians are available throughout the State without undue delay;
- (3) to create materials and information, in consultation with the Department of Health, including a list of qualified clinicians, for the purpose of populating an electronic emergency service provider wellness resource center on the Department of Health’s website;
- (4) to educate the public, emergency service providers, State and local governments, employee assistance programs, and policymakers about best practices, tools, personnel, resources, and strategies for the prevention and intervention of the effects of trauma experienced by emergency service providers;
- (5) to identify gaps and strengths in Vermont’s system of care for both emergency service providers who have experienced trauma and their immediate family members to ensure access to support and resources that address the impacts of primary and secondary trauma;
- (6) to recommend how peer support services and qualified clinician services can be delivered regionally or statewide;
- (7) to recommend how to support emergency service providers in communities that are resource challenged, remote, small, or rural;

- (8) 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; and
- (9) to consult with federal, State, and municipal agencies, organizations, entities, and individuals in order to make any other recommendations the Commission deems appropriate.

This report provides an overview of the Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission's activities in 2021-2022, and offers recommendations to improve the mental health and health of emergency service providers.

COMMISSION ACTIVITIES

2021-2022 Activities

The Commission convened its first meeting in September of 2021. Meetings were held monthly thereafter, where discussion focused on identifying effective mechanisms to assess what mental health support systems are in place in Vermont and where gaps in services exist. A survey was distributed to the emergency service provider community in late Fall 2021. In 2022, ski patrol was added as a sixth sector in the emergency service provider (ESP) community and a needs assessment survey was conducted for ski patrol thereafter.

The Commission conducted several surveys regarding the availability of mental health supports for emergency service providers. Based on survey responses, the Commission identified several key findings for improving the mental health and wellness of emergency service providers across all sectors, which are discussed as recommendations below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were developed by the Commission, informed by survey analyses and Commission deliberations. The recommendations are intended to inform policies and practices within related state agencies and emergency service provider organizations:

- **Increase access to formal mental health and wellness programs, & trainings for emergency service organizations and providers.** Survey responses indicated less than half of respondents had formal access to these programs or received this type of training. The Commission determined there is insufficient current funding and resources to develop and conduct these trainings for all emergency service provider sectors.
- **Develop Critical Incident response plans and policies.** A critical incident is any event that has a stressful impact sufficient enough to overwhelm a person's usual coping

strategies. Critical incidents can be sudden, shocking and outside the range of ordinary human experience. Because emergency service providers experience such incidents regularly due to their work environment, there is an imperative to develop and maintain response plans for provider health.

- **Develop pre-crisis (prevention) and post-crisis (support) programs and training.** These programs can promote resiliency, reduce accumulative stress, and better prepare organizations and providers to manage occupational stress and critical stress injuries.
- **Increase access to trauma informed clinicians.** The majority of survey respondents indicated their organizations does not offer such access. Moreover, fewer than ten clinicians were identified to be known to work with emergency service organizations and their members. Relatedly, the Commission identified a need to better define the experience and training needed for mental health professionals to be prepared to work with emergency service providers, given the unique occupational exposure that providers experience.
- **Develop and expand peer support networks for emergency service providers.** Access to formally trained peer support teams varies greatly across the sectors and the State. As a critical piece of the continuum of care, there is a need to expand the number of peers trained to address mental health problems and provide peer support services to emergency service providers in all six sectors.

Future Activities

The Commission has identified the following as priorities for 2023:

- **Develop and deliver trainings for emergency service organizations and providers.** The Commission will develop trainings focused on pre-incident preparation and post critical incident response for emergency service organizations and providers.
- **Host an annual conference focused on emergency services mental health and wellness.** The Commission is seeking to convene a mental health focused conference/ annual meeting which can be a forum to train emergency services providers and key stakeholders.
- **Develop recommendations for defining ‘qualified clinicians’ who are prepared to treat emergency service providers.** The Commission plans to develop a list of suggested experience and training that can help to identify a qualified clinician. This can help increase the number of mental health clinicians who are prepared to treat emergency service providers. The Commission plans to compile a list of clinicians who meet these the suggested experience and populate the emergency service provider wellness resource center on the Department’s website.
- **Review Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) workers compensation legislation.** Review the PTSD workers compensation legislation, and Vermont’s employment medical leave laws, and to assess which emergency service sectors are currently included in the legislation and make recommendations in future reports.