



Wildfire Mental Health Resiliency

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Just as fighting a wildfire event is complex, so are supporting the effects of ongoing and often intense emotional exposures in the line of duty. These exposures often linger beneath the surface for Fire Department and First Responder members, creating mental health vulnerabilities which often go unaddressed.

Volunteer Firefighters in small communities face distinct challenges. In BC 70% of firefighters are volunteers, most of whom live in the same small communities that they serve. The primary distinction between urban and rural is that in rural communities, firefighters will likely personally know those that they are going to help. This presents a unique risk to the firefighter's mental health burden. PIVFD is a prime example of this same dynamic which creates an added emotional burden while attempting to both provide support and receive it.

In recognizing this predictable cascade of psychological overload, PIVFD has developed a Mental Health Resiliency plan utilizing existing models adapted for our department. The goal is to provide education, training, intervention and resources supporting our team and integrating it throughout the year rather than focusing on a critical incident alone. If the access and knowledge is shared before a critical event, department members will have the framework in place for access and support which creates a culture of empowerment and empathy.

Fire Departments big and small need to have in place an integrated model which establishes mental health protocols and procedures and enables members to access the proper materials whenever they are needed as part of their SOG. There is a tremendous amount of research in the area, with immediate access available online.

The critical elements of the PIVFD Mental Health Resiliency Plan outlined below, highlight some of the tools and websites that we have found invaluable.

1. Leadership

- Leadership sets the tone in adopting the Mental Health Resiliency Plan. The plan needs to be on-going and made available to all department members. Creating a culture of acceptance and having an SOG ready for rapid deployment is a great starting point. The BC First Responders Mental Health Website is an excellent resource to consult.

<https://bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/looking-to-help/as-leaders/>

<https://bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Recommended-Practices-for-Supporting-Mental-Health-in-First-Responders-191029.pdf>

2. Education and Training

- Member resiliency will only improve with regular education and training to promote awareness, understanding and knowledge. This information allows for firefighters to be equipped with tools to support interventions in the field and within their own lives.
- **Psychological First Aid** for First Responders. This has been adapted to support the unique distinction of being both the responder and community member. Although this is often taught online, we provide this training in person to accommodate for our unique location and setting.

https://relief.unboundmedicine.com/relief/view/PTSD-National-Center-for-PTSD/1230010/all/Introduction_and_Overview

<https://www.frontlinefirstaid.ca/psychological-first-aid-self-care.html>

- **Peer Support Training:** Training addresses the needs of appropriate peers who can provide individual and often informal supports.

<https://bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/looking-to-help/as-colleagues/>

<https://bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/resource/developing-peer-support-policy/>

3. **Intervention:** Ensures Leadership and Membership have access to a range of professional support options both immediate and ongoing. Interventions can range from informal peer support to the protocol of the CISM defusing and debriefing. Each incident which occurs should be assessed to implement the appropriate protocols. This will help teams with ongoing expectation and understanding of what happens if an event occurs.

- **Peer Support.** This allows for confidentiality, access and intimacy when a member is need of support. The individuals designated as Peer Supporters will have been equipped with tools and resources in order to support this intervention.
- **Critical Incident Stress Management CISM.** This can be facilitated by a member of Workplace BC or a member designate who has received the training. This model allows for therapeutic intention and interventions.

<https://bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/resource/critical-incident-stress->

[management/](#)

<https://bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/CISM-content-Apr-10-2017.pdf>

4. **Resources:** Ensure team members are aware of resources available to them to support their resilience and mental health well-being. In the event of a crisis within the team, make certain that hotlines and 24-hour supports are known.

<https://bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/reach-out/>

<http://www.firebc.org/>

<https://firstresponderhealth.org/directory-search#!directory/map/ord=rnd>