



PEER SUPPORT SUICIDE PREVENTION BEST PRACTICES

Findings suggest that implementing a combination of suicide prevention strategies that address risk and protective factors at multiple levels of influence are the most effective in addressing first responder suicide.

STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

1 Leadership and Culture Engagement

Leadership in suicide prevention includes developing policies and systems related to mental health, wellness, and suicide prevention, and considering ways to reduce work-related sources of stress among first responders. Leaders need to build a work environment where holistic health is supported - mental and physical.

Implementation:

- Incorporate mental health presentations into annual training
- Adopt policies that build peer support
- Establish support guidelines in response to a traumatic incident
- Adopt an early intervention system to identify first responders at risk

2 Access to Mental Health Services

Increase access to mental health and wellness services by building relationships with culturally competent clinicians and introduce them to the department. It is important to ensure confidentiality and that there are no repercussions for seeking mental health services. To address privacy concerns, departments may consider utilizing two mental health providers, one who may serve to determine fitness for duty, while another provides anonymous confidential counseling and services.

Implementation:

- Offer an EAP with 5 or more visits
- Allow additional visits to the EAP after a traumatic incident
- Invite clinicians to do ride-alongs and mental health training
- Build a Chaplain Program
- Offer yearly mental health check-ins with a mental health provider

3 Peer Support Peer Programs

Train peers to recognize and respond to signs of suicide risk by connecting first responders to appropriate sources of help. These include crisis lines, in-patient treatment centers and mental health professionals.

Peer Support may be the first line of contact for a department member that is depressed or suicidal. It is part of an overall recognition that mental health and wellness is important for the safety and performance of first responders.

Talking with peers helps to reduce stigma and increase connection to qualified help.

Implementation:

- Encourage peer support team participation
- Support confidentiality within these programs
- Remove punitive measures if someone seeks out mental health help or resources
- Have a policy allowing peers to follow-up after a traumatic incident
- Ensure peer supporters have access to a clinician familiar with peer support processes and policies

4 Training

Minimally, once a year, train all employees about mental health, wellness, and suicide prevention. Include warning signs and sources of help. All levels of staff should be required to attend including the Chief, Supervisors and Command Staff.

Implementation training topics can include:

- Peer Support in your department and region
- Policies for wellness and after a traumatic incident
- Local vetted resources
- QPR Training
- Resiliency
- Signs a coworker might be struggling and how you can start the conversation

Learn more about the Tri-State Peer Support Team: www.tsfirstresponderpst.org



TRI-STATE
PEER SUPPORT TEAM

5

Enhance Life Skills and Build Resilience

By helping people build life skills, such as critical thinking, stress management and coping skills, you can prepare them to safely address personal challenges such as financial, divorce, physical illness, and retirement. Adapting to change is a protective factor against suicide risk.

Resilience is the ability to cope with adversity. While it has some overlap with life skills, resilience also encompasses other attributes such as optimism, positive self-worth, and being hopeful.

Implementation:

- Offer skills training about retirement, financial services, physical health, and employee job skills development
- Offer mobile wellness apps and provide self-help material

6

Event Response Development

Develop support systems for life changing events like OIS, MVA, child death or trauma and LODD before they happen. Share your department's policy about response protocols about potential traumatic events BEFORE a crisis. This is a trauma-informed way to enable learning and understanding of the process before a crisis happens.

Implementation:

- Share the policy with staff before an event happens
- Event response protocols should be developed for potentially traumatic event response and for response in the aftermath of an event (postvention)
- Ensure all contact forms are updated yearly and after a life changing event like a divorce or death of a spouse

7

Strengthen Support and Connection

A sense of belonging and being connected to family and peers are some of the strongest protectors against suicidal thoughts. Departments should encourage connectedness through programs and activities that promote a sense of belonging and reduce isolation.

Implementation:

- Create a culture of support and camaraderie, where first responders feel valued and understood
- Offer flexible scheduling, where possible, to allow for sufficient rest and personal time.
- Encouraging vacation time and finding hobbies to maintain their mental and emotional well-being

8

Family Support

Strengthen family support by holding family events to increase social connectedness. It is critical to have connection prior to a traumatic event. Educate about the depression, anxiety, substance misuse, post traumatic injury and suicide so they can reach out for help.

Implementation:

- Host family nights and new recruit family events
- Incorporate family training about available support services, improving communications, building first responder relationships, and local family therapists familiar with the first responder culture
- Provide support to them on an ongoing basis

9

Limiting Access to Lethal Means

Identify appropriate ways to limit access to lethal means among first responders who may be experiencing a suicidal crisis. Respectfully removing a weapon, or adding a safety lock, may save a life.

Implementation:

- Create a relationship with a trusted clinician who understands the first responder culture and the impact removing a gun will have on them
- Provide safety locks for at risk individuals
- Consider hosting a CALM (Counseling on Access to Lethal Means) Program Training

10

Messaging

Ensure that all communication related to suicide is conveyed in ways that prevent contagion and support safety, help-seeking, and healing.

Communication efforts should also raise awareness of department mental health and wellness programs and local treatment and clinical support.

Implementation:

- Incorporating hopeful, appropriate language in all mental health and suicide related communications.
- Post information about EAP access, insurance benefits and peer support in and outside of the department.



Take Care of Each Other.