



Supporting the Voices Behind the Headsets: Why Peer Support & Critical Incident Stress Management Matters for 9-1-1 Telecommunicators

Every day, across emergency communications centers, 9-1-1 telecommunicators are the first to hear the cries for help. They are the calm during chaos, guiding callers through the worst moments of their lives while coordinating life-saving responses. Although they may never physically step foot on an incident scene, they are exposed to critical stress as deeply as the responders they dispatch.

Yet, historically, their wellness needs have remained overlooked — silent professionals carrying invisible burdens.

It's time to change that.

The Human Cost of the Headset

Telecommunicators encounter trauma in a unique way:

They **hear everything** — the screaming parent, the final breaths, the silence that follows — but they cannot physically intervene. This creates a distinct form of stress called **vicarious trauma**.

Research continues to show elevated risks of:

- Anxiety and depression
- Cumulative stress overload
- PTSD and acute stress reactions
- Sleep disruption and burnout
- Compassion fatigue
- Increased medical and sick-leave use

When a telecommunicator is struggling, it doesn't just affect one person. It impacts the entire system — service quality, retention, morale, and organizational culture.

Peer Support: The Power of “Someone Who Gets It”

Peer Support is built on a simple truth:

People heal best through connection — especially with those who understand their world.

Peer Support within 9-1-1 centers:

- ☒ Reduces stigma around seeking help
- ☒ Promotes early intervention before stress becomes crisis
- ☒ Provides peer-to-peer connection after difficult calls
- ☒ Creates a supportive and trusting team culture
- ☒ Encourages resilience, hope, and mental wellness

Peers are trained to:

- Listen without judgment
- Recognize stress injury signs
- Offer healthy coping resources
- Support with confidentiality and compassion
- Bridge individuals to professional help when needed

A strong Peer Support team becomes part of the center’s DNA — supporting wellness every shift, every call.

Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM): Framework for Healing

CISM is an evidence-informed crisis intervention model designed to help public-safety personnel process traumatic exposure. For 9-1-1, this may include:

- Line-of-duty deaths
- Infant and child fatalities
- Suicide calls
- Mass casualty events
- Personal-connection incidents (dispatchers who know those involved)

CISM offers structured interventions such as:

- **Defusing Sessions** – quick, informal decompression after a difficult call
- **Critical Incident Stress Debriefings (CISD)** – guided group support with trained peer support and clinicians
- **One-on-One Peer Interventions** – private, confidential conversations
- **Follow-up Care** – ongoing check-ins and resources

These services **validate emotional reactions** and help prevent long-term mental-health impacts.

Building a Culture of Care in the Communications Center

Leadership investment in Peer Support & CISM is not just “nice to have” — it is essential workforce protection.

Strong programs:

- Encourage supervisors to recognize stress indicators early
- Provide accessible wellness resources 24/7
- Train peers across all shifts and roles
- Promote work-life balance and self-care
- Celebrate and support the unseen heroes of emergency services

When telecommunicators feel heard and supported, retention improves, performance strengthens, and morale grows.

You Are Not Alone — And You Don’t Have to Carry It Alone

Every voice behind a radio or headset plays a vital role in saving lives. It’s time to take care of those who take care of everyone else.

Peer Support and CISM ensure that:

- ✦ Emotional wounds are treated like physical ones — promptly and professionally
- ✦ Asking for help is a strength, not a weakness
- ✦ No one suffers in silence

To every telecommunicator:

Your wellbeing matters. Your story matters. You matter.

We see you. And we’ve got your back — one call, one shift, one conversation at a time.

Please reach out to us if you wish to be part of the FL-911 Peer Support Network to provide peer support to others. Brittany McGary, (Brittany.mcgary@floridaapco.org)) membership coordinator, can provide information to joining us.

Your sister in public safety,

Natalia Duran