

Front Line & Forgotten:  
Examining Stress,  
Burnout, & Social  
Support for 911  
Dispatch/Employees

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# Outline

- Importance
- Past Research
- Current Research
- Results
- Implications
- Questions



## Definition: Mental Health

A state of well-being in which an individual realizes their potential, can cope with the every-day stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to the community<sup>15</sup>

# Why is this Important?

**Absenteeism**

**Work Performance**

**Staff Attitudes and  
Behaviour**

**Relationships at  
Work**

# Absenteeism

Increase sickness related absences



Poor general health (depression, stress, burnout)



Physical Conditions (heart disease, ulcers, sleeping disorders, low resistance to infections)



Work  
Performance

Reduced  
productivity

Increase in  
errors

Poor  
decision  
making

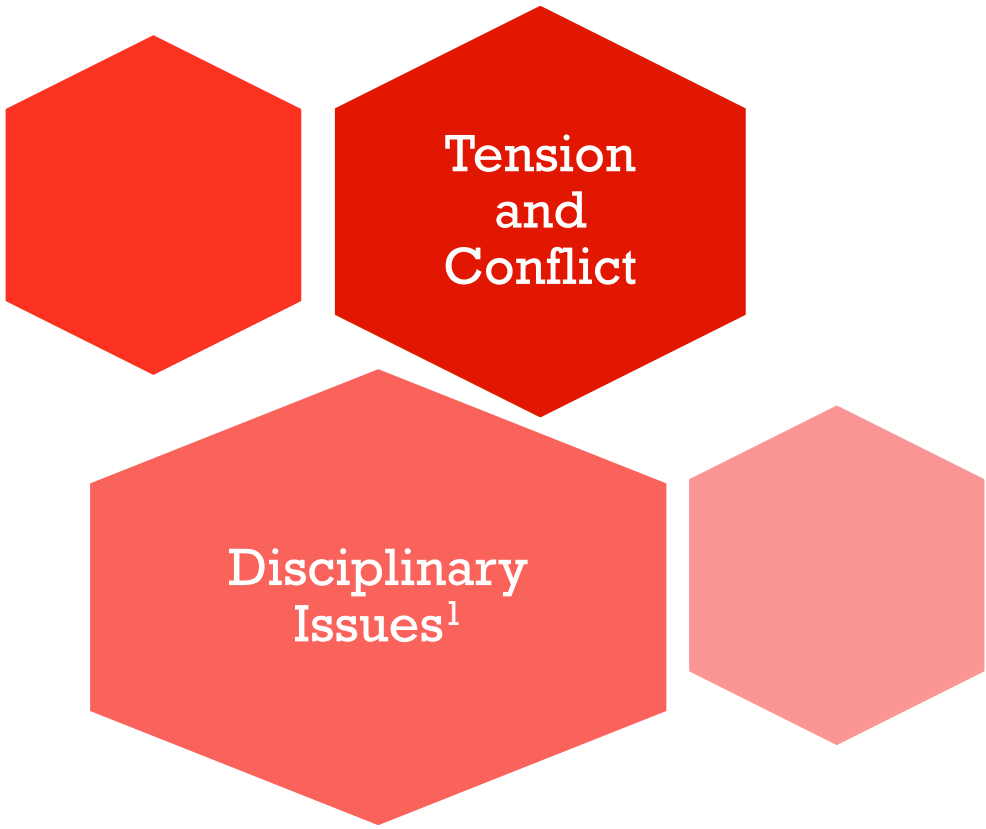


# Staff Attitudes and Behaviour

**Loss of  
motivation and  
commitment**

**Burnout**

# Relationships at Work







# Question

**How does your communication center attend to the mental health of its staff?**

## Past Research on 911 Dispatchers/Call-Takers

Limited

Focuses on one role

Small sample size

Imperative for assisting navigation of trauma effectively to protect mental health.



# External Resources for 911 Dispatchers

**External resources  
available**

**Less programs  
available compared  
to other first  
responder agencies  
in Canada.<sup>9</sup>**

## Past Research Related to Dispatcher Stress

- **Work environment**
- **Organization and its hierarchy**
  - **Chain of command**
  - **Varying levels of authority**
  - **Limited autonomy**
  - **Lack of formal training**
- **Failure to control situations**
- **Inability to save lives<sup>12</sup>**





## Definition: PTSD & Burnout

### Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- Intense, disturbing thoughts and feelings related to an experience
- Relive the event
- Feel sadness, fear or anger
- Feel detached from other people.<sup>3</sup>

### Burnout

- Emotional pressures associated with an environment
- Involvement with people over time.<sup>2</sup>



## Past Research on PTSD & 911 Dispatchers

- Indirect trauma from distressed callers
- Lack of control
- Stress from listening to callers<sup>13</sup>
- PTSD levels higher than in the general population.<sup>4</sup>
- 31% of participants reported symptoms of trauma at a level consistent with PTSD.
- Rate of PTSD symptoms 4X higher than police officers.<sup>5</sup>

## Past Research on PTSD for Police, Firefighters, & EMTs/Paramedics

- 2017 survey
- University of Phoenix
- 2 000 US First Responders
- 10% diagnosed with PTSD<sup>14</sup>

# Past Research on Ameliorating Stress in the Workplace



- Quiet rooms
- Ergonomic equipment
- Rotating shifts
- Guidelines for managing difficult calls
- Feedback after difficult calls
- Positive feedback from supervisors
- Cross-training
- Mandatory educational programs
- Paid stress leave<sup>8</sup>





# Current Study

- 911 communication centers in Alberta
- 200 participants
  - 83% female
  - 16% male
  - Age of Participants
    - Average 38
    - Range 22-65
  - Number of years served
    - Average 10
    - Range 0-33



63% of participants served in a community of  
over 500 000

13% served in a community of under 60 000



**Police 37.5%**



**Fire 7.5%**



**EMS 15%**



**Police and  
Fire 4%**



**Fire and EMS  
15.5%**



**All Three  
20%**

**Role Participants Provided Support For**

# External Resources

Legacy Place

Respect Canada

Canadian Institute  
for Public Safety  
Research and  
Treatment (CIPSRT)

Alberta Critical  
Incident Stress  
Management  
(ACIAC)

Mental Health  
Commission of  
Canada



**Familiarity**

**Scale  
from 1-5**

**Use**

**Yes or  
No**

**Helpfulness**

**Scale  
from 1-5**

**Familiarity, Use, and Helpfulness of External  
Resources**

## Legacy Place

**Canada Wide: Alberta Focused  
Mental Health Programming  
Advocacy  
First Responders, 911  
Dispatchers, Military Families**

<b>Familiarity</b>	<b>Use</b>	<b>Helpfulness</b>
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<b>38.5%</b>	<b>1.5%</b>	<b>1.5%</b>
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# Respect Canada

Canada Wide

Collaboration

Networking

Knowledge Sharing

Improve Mental Health Services

Familiarity	Use	Helpfulness
2%	None	None

# Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment (CIPSRT)

**Canada Wide  
Wellness of Public Safety  
Personnel  
Research  
Exchange of Knowledge  
Strategic Partnerships**

<b>Familiarity</b>	<b>Use</b>	<b>Helpfulness</b>
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<b>4.5%</b>	<b>.5%</b>	<b>.5%</b>
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# Alberta Critical Incident Stress Management (ACIAC)

Familiarity	Use	Helpfulness
23%	2%	1.5%

Alberta

Development

Training

Maintenance

Sustainability

Peer-support model

# Mental Health Commission of Canada

**Canada Wide  
Mental Health Courses  
Working Mind/R2MR**

<b>Familiarity</b>	<b>Use</b>	<b>Helpfulness</b>
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<b>24.5%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>
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# Question

**What external resources are available for your agency?**



# Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale - Revised

- Adapted from experiencing trauma due to client's narratives in a therapy setting.
- Participants responded on scale from 1 to 5.

## STSS Subscale

### Intrusion:

- Reminders of one's work,
- Having uncontrollable intrusive thoughts about the trauma experienced

### Avoidance:

- Feeling emotionally numb
- Avoiding people and situations that serve as reminders of work

### Arousal:

- Concentration problems
- Increased irritability associated with a professional's indirect exposure to traumatic calls.<sup>6</sup>

## Results

- **37% met diagnostic criteria for PTSD**
- **37.5% reported crying at work**
- **49.5% reported feeling stressed when there is a shortage of police, fire, and ambulance resources.**



## Existing Agency Specific Resources

- 77% Employee Assistance Program
- 73.5% Quiet Room
- 71% Peer Support Program
- 50% On-Call Department Psychologist
- 30% Paid Fitness/Gym time
- 29% Team building activities
- 25% Soft Lighting
- 21% Planned Social Events
- 10.5% Therapy Pet
- 6.8% Outdoor Space or Garden

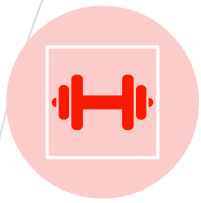




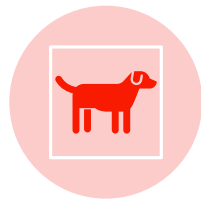
# Top Three



**58.5%**  
**QUIET**  
**ROOM**



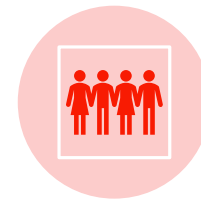
**38.5%**  
**PAID**  
**GYM/FITNESS**  
**TIME**



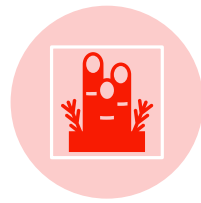
**37%**  
**THERAPY**  
**PET**



**32.5%**  
**ON-CALL**  
**PSYCHOLOGIST**



**29.5%**  
**PEER**  
**SUPPORT**  
**PROGRAM**



**17%**  
**OUTDOOR**  
**SPACE**

# Other Responses

- Debriefing offered after large incident calls
- More avenues for staff to express their ideas and concerns
- Better communication from management
- Better support from management
- Caring Management
- Better support from HR
- Consistent feed back
- Increased staff
- Suicide awareness workshops
- Better mental health leave
- Breaks
- Massages on shift from students
- More mental health benefits (therapy)
- Meditation space
- More mental Health Training

- 10.5% have therapy pet
- 37% would like a therapy pet
- The Psychological Awareness and Wellness Support (PAWS) in Alberta
- Do you think a therapy pet would be beneficial in your communication center?

Question



## Barriers to Accessing Services

**60.5% Lack of Time**

**52.5% Stigma (others will judge)**

**37% Lack of Employer Support**

**25.5% Lack of Finances**

**Other Responses:**

- **Unsure of supports available**
- **Lack of local resources**
- **Lack of staffing**
- **Nothing offered**
- **Lack of knowledge**



## Implications

- Educate employees AND management on Mental Health
- Discuss with employees AND management the external resources available
- Apply stress reduction
- Help eliminate stigma
- Discuss with employees concerns they have

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# QUESTIONS

