

Growing Wellington Fire Department's Peer Support Program

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Annie Lindgren | North Forty News

The Wellington Fire Protection District (WFPD) was the first fire department in northern Colorado to implement the Peer Support Program, a systematic approach to helping WFPD members and their families in times of crisis.

In 2014, First Responder Trauma Counselor Joanne Rupert, along with the Clinical Supervisor Regional Peer Support Team, met with the Wellington Fire Chief and agreed to work 6 months at no charge to show a proof of concept.

Shortly thereafter, Joanne became clinical supervisor for both the Wellington Fire Protection District and the Poudre Fire Authority. The peer support program has grown significantly since that time. The First Responder Trauma Counselor team is structured and organized to professional standards for confidentiality and training in specific areas to help their fellow team members with their behavioral health needs. Clinical supervision enhances the program for efficacy and confidentiality.

The Wellington Fire Department Peer Support Team supports employees in times of stress, distress, or problems in everyday life through counseling services. Peer support team members are available to all Wellington Fire Department staff and volunteers and their families. The service is free and is available 24/7.

Ashley Macdonald, Deputy District Manager, Wellington Fire Department, shared: "Mental health is an important conversation for our first responders and something I'm personally passionate about. I worked with US Senator John Hickenlooper and his office a year ago to advocate for federal funding to support the Peer Support mental health program for our firefighters. As a result, we were selected and provided direct funding to support the mental health program for our first responders.

The Wellington Fire Protection District Peer Support First Responder mental health care project is funded by the Labor, Health and Human Services Subcommittee Appropriations Bill at \$18,000. Funds received will support 100% of the training and additional resources needed to provide the Peer Support Program through the First Responder Trauma Program.

The Fiscal Year 2022 federal appropriation omnibus bill included 64 projects for \$100.4 million in funding across Colorado. “Local communities in Colorado drive these federal investments. These funds will accelerate much-needed projects across the state,” shared Senator Hickenlooper.

The 64 projects for which Hickenlooper has secured funding will address priorities across the state, including investments in affordable housing, clean energy and health care. To qualify for this funding, requests must be submitted by local governments or nonprofits. Senators can then request the inclusion of these projects in one of twelve annual funding bills. The Senate sends the next final 2022 federal appropriations bill to President Biden. Other northern Colorado recipients include Colorado State University in Fort Collins for a soil carbon sequestration project.

First responders whose job it is to reach the spot in times of crisis never know what a day will bring. Some days are filled with heroic and heartwarming success stories, while others have scenes and images that are hard to shake and sometimes strike confidence. To be successful in these areas you need to have a good support network. That’s why it’s great to see mental health support becoming more readily available to first responders.

To know more about the program visit 911overwatch.org