



Special Districts Share Mental Health Support

TAGS: **FIRE DISTRICTS, FIREFIGHTER, MENTAL HEALTH**

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We asked fire districts about the resources they use to help staff.

While it's no secret firefighters undergo a high amount of physical stress on the job, recognizing the mental health care needs sustained by these first responders is also critical. [Mental health issues](#) experienced by firefighters are many, and include depression, PTSD, anxiety, burnout and addiction.

In fact, the mental health needs of firefighters have only started to come to prominence in the recent past, according to Jeff Dill, a licensed mental health counselor and retired fire captain, who further stated, “I am a firm believer the state of the fire culture is still in its infancy stage as related to behavioral health.”

In an article shared on [firehouse.com](https://www.firehouse.com), Dill discussed the ways in which fire service culture has adjusted with regards to the mental health of its participants in the last five years. At least 3 major transformations have come about, including the growth of peer support teams; the increased discernment and support of counselors in discussing the unique needs and issues of fire service culture, which encourages firefighters to get the aid they need; and finally, how the firefighters themselves shared what they were going through with their comrades, encouraging an atmosphere of openness in discussing these topics.

Programs in Use by Colorado Special Districts

We asked a few of our districts about their resources for mental health recently, and below are some of the programs currently in place.

South Metro Fire Rescue

Currently South Metro offers quite a toolkit of resources to support the mental health of their firefighters.

In 2019, South Metro Fire Rescue encouraged stress injured employees to come forward and tell their stories, working to place a priority on normalizing the effects of stress, and clearing the path for employees to get help with the effects of trauma.

Included among these resources is their robust Employees Assistance Program, which combines the means of six different practices and 35-40 clinicians. All provider groups are carefully vetted to ensure each clinician is adequately trained to deal with trauma.

Because talk therapy alone does not mitigate the physiological changes that happen in the brain in response to trauma, therapy types utilized by these clinicians also include EMDR, and neural feedback therapy, in addition to talk therapy. A cognitive performance specialist is also available to help employees work on changing their modality, with the end goal in mind being to encourage

resiliency. In addition, a clinician is also on site Monday through Friday for immediate needs.

Also in play is a virtual reality program which helps to provide exposure therapy. Participants in this program can be placed in simulated situations that help provide the same sensation of fear without the participant actually being put at risk. Specific fears addressed include fear of heights and social anxiety, and South Metro is also searching for a good program to help with claustrophobia as well.

South Metro has also utilized a Peer Support Team which was officially established in 2012, includes 32 members, with availability across all shifts, and also offers support for administrative staff.

And finally, South Metro also makes use of emergency service dogs, currently maintaining three service animals, which help to provide comfort to those under stress. One service dog is available each shift for those in need.

Los Pinos Fire Protection District

Los Pinos Fire Protection District has been putting together a peer support program, combining forces with neighboring department programs, and their regional hospital, to create a regional team. This, along with local Employee Assistance Programs, has allowed for the area fire departments, EMS and hospital agencies to pool assets, giving employees more options for peer support and reach out resources should they need them.

Berthoud Fire Protection District

Berthoud Fire Protection District has offered Staff Peer Support Counseling since 2017. Peer Counselors must attend a Peer Support Team Member certification program, which includes 40 hours of training and is supplemented by monthly mandatory trainings.

Peer Counselors are under clinical supervision with Emergency Responder Trauma Counselors. Counselors are there to assist both career and volunteer staff, and have even provided support to neighboring agencies on request.

Mountain View Fire Rescue

Mountain View has a strong mental health program that is grounded by robust peer support. Aware of the fact that first responders nationwide are at an elevated risk for mental health disorders, PTSD, and suicide, the district has

worked to secure a strong network of support, people who are trained and mentored by mental health professionals that provide access and support for the district.

Mountain View works with a program called Building Warriors to educate and train staff members at the district and other organizations to become peer support professionals. The program puts them through special training to be able to meet standards and provide support to frontline workers. It is a great support system that extends beyond the walls of Mountain View.

If a staff member is struggling with mental health, they can go to their designated peer support professional within the district, or if privacy is a concern, they can reach out to other organizations locally that have similarly trained professionals; these other organizations are all connected with Mountain View, making the support reciprocal.

“We provide funding and provide the support; but it’s driven from the ground up,” Fire Chief Dave Beebe said. “It’s been very successful. We provide it to everyone.”

North Metro Fire Rescue District

The North Metro Fire Rescue District (NMF RD) Peer Support Team is a hand-picked and vetted volunteer group of employees that offers support to district employees.

The Peer Support Team offers support for any district employee requesting counseling as well as post-incident crisis intervention; the members of the Peer Support Team rely on oversight from licensed clinicians and counselors.

The NMF RD Peer Support Team is part of the North Area Peer Support Team as well, which includes many of the neighboring departments. Aid is provided by members of this group to other districts in the area as needed.

The Importance of Mental Health Awareness

[While adequate mental health support](#) may be just getting started when it comes to comprehensive care for firefighters, creating an open and supportive environment for firefighters to discuss mental health concerns is an important step in improving fire service culture.

For additional resources, see below.

Cordico Wellness Apps

Offering apps tailored for Fire & Rescue, Law Enforcement, 911 Dispatch, and Corrections and Probation, Cordico has created a wellness support platform which includes contact information for recommended therapists, peer support, tools for anything from depression to anger management, and so much more.
www.cordico.com

First Responder Trauma Counselors

This group provides a Peer Support network in Colorado.
<https://911overwatch.org/>

ResponderStrong Webinar and Resources

The CSD Pool recently hosted a webinar on mental health risks and resources presented by Rhonda Kelly, the National Director of Health, Wellness and Resiliency for Global Medical Response and founding Director of ResponderStrong.

ResponderStrong's mission to build better mental health supports for first responders and their families, and offers tools for first responders to seek help.
[View the ResponderStrong Webinar here.](#)

You can also learn more about ResponderStrong by visiting responderstrong.org or [viewing our previous article on the organization.](#)