

# SUPPORT THAT SAVES

## BUILDING AND SUSTAINING PEER SUPPORT

### Wellness and Resiliency for First Responders Program

The Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX) has established a Wellness and Resiliency Program for first responders. The program's primary goal is to train first responders in culturally competent, trauma-informed, peer-supportive care, so they are prepared to support mental health needs in their communities via face-to-face peer support networks. The program's secondary goal is to offer ongoing support to the broader first responder community via policy and peer-support program development initiatives. TEEX customizes the assistance to each department's current and forecasted mental health program needs, and solutions may include a comprehensive program or refining an existing program.

### Building a Foundation

Education is the first step in building an effective peer support program. TEEX has developed **Support That Saves**, a three-day training opportunity that covers all elements of building and maintaining an effective peer support program. Department employees are invited to complete a Needs Survey consisting of 16 yes or no questions and five short answer questions. The responses are compiled into a report that provides stakeholders with information about the unique challenges faced.

### Ongoing Support

TEEX program leaders receive ongoing support in areas such as, policy creation, assistance and program development, including building the peer team, constructing peer applications and identifying team members.

### Research Related to the Effectiveness of Peer Support

Suicide and self-harm are vital to address when working with first responders, as police, firefighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and telecommunicators are at a greater risk of suicide than members of the general public. This increase is often associated with repeated exposure to traumatic events, unresolved stress and depression, and the stigma surrounding treatment for mental health concerns. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>1</sup>, law enforcement officers and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty. Additionally, between 17% and 24% of public safety telecommunicators have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and 24% have symptoms of depression.

Peer support programs provide many benefits to first responders, including acknowledging the difficulties of response work, strengthening teams and equipping them to cope effectively. Peer support programs:

- Provide training to identify risk factors for behavioral and mental health problems.
- Reduce stigma by encouraging conversations surrounding mental health and normalizing difficult experiences.
- Create an environment where people feel comfortable approaching one another.
- Link peers to outside professional resources for additional care when necessary.

<sup>1</sup>*Suicides Among First Responders: A Call to Action*, April 6, 2021, <https://blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/2021/04/06/suicides-first-responders/>





## PROGRAM INFORMATION

### **SUPPORT THAT SAVES:**

#### **A Guide to Building and Sustaining Peer Support**

##### ***Module 1: Defining Peer Support***

This module covers responsibilities of a peer supporter, peer support team structure and overall guidelines for peer support teams.

##### ***Module 2: Skills and Qualities of an Effective Peer Supporter***

In this module, participants learn to identify potential peer supporters, the personal qualities of effective peer supporters, peer support skills and limits to the peer support roles.

##### ***Module 3: Recognizing Peers in Need***

This module delves into trauma and trauma-informed care, personal life struggles, addiction and occupational stress.

##### ***Module 4: Implementing Peer Support***

Module 4 covers discussing confidentiality with peers, effective peer-to-supporter pairing, overcoming stigma and responding to peers' needs.

##### ***Module 5: Sustainable Peer Support***

The final course module reviews challenges and mental health strategies for peer supporters.



#### **Contact Information**

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