

Working to reduce stigma and to provide timely, accessible, and affordable mental health interventions to first responders.

Background and Concerns

Psychologistsⁱ play an active role with first responders (Police, Firefighters, Paramedics, 911 Dispatchers and Correctional Officers) to address mental health and addictions issues. There is, however, no standardized, province-wide system and this results in some first responders, departmental staff, and family members receiving timely intervention, while others have access issues.

Despite the development of some good programming in particular regions, stigma remains a significant issue. In addition to daily exposures to traumatizing events, the media has played a part in adding to the distress of first responders. As an example, recent highly publicized incidents involving police use of force with the mentally ill has resulted in public outrage, and this has negatively impacted those who serve. Many first responders seek treatment outside of their places of work, out of fear of being ostracized. Still others keep their mental health difficulties to themselves. The dire results of this can be seen in significant rates of addictions, marital breakdowns, time lost from work, higher numbers of EAP referrals and WSIB claims and a suicide rate that is higher than the number of first responders killed in the line of duty. In addition, WSIB claims move too slowly for officers to receive timely intervention and timely access to care in the health system is problematic. First responders have been seeking the assistance of psychologists to overcome these barriers to care.

Psychology and the Police, Firefighters, Paramedics, 911 Dispatchers and Correctional Officers

Psychologists could provide the following services to first responders:

- Hiring screening
- De-escalation training
- Education in PTSD, depression, anxiety and addictions for every member from the Chief to front line staff (HEART program) • Early comprehensive psychological Assessment, diagnosis and treatment for First Responders, staff, and family members
- Return to work support/fitness for duty assessment

OPA Recommendations to Ontario's Government

- First responder organizations should work collaboratively with the OPA to develop standardized assessment, treatment, and educational programming - as well as to hire staff Psychologists or consultants to provide necessary services to ensure timely intervention.

- Brief psychological treatment should be mandatory for first responders involved in traumatic incidents.
- Ongoing efforts are required to reduce stigma.
- All first responders should have access to Psychologists to assist in defusing situations involving the mentally ill.
- Significant changes to WSIB protocol are required to ensure timely handling of claims, reduce the wait time to tribunal, and ensure funding for assessment even while consideration of claims is ongoing. A review and expansion of WSIB's traumatic mental health policy is required.

ⁱ The term “Psychologist” in this document refers both to doctoral-level Psychologists and masters-level “Psychological Associates”. For information on the extensive training required to become a registered Psychologist or Psychological Associate, please see: www.cpo.on.ca