

Health Awareness

Majority Of First Responders Have Experienced Symptoms Related To Mental Health, Need Support To Receive Care, According To New Survey

(NAPS)—First responders put their lives on the line for public safety every day and a recent University of Phoenix[®] College of Humanities & Sciences survey found that 84 percent¹ of firefighters, police officers, EMT/paramedics, lifeguards and nurses surveyed have experienced a traumatic event on the job. The results found that 85 percent² of these first responders have experienced symptoms related to mental health issues, but many feel stigmas may deter some first responders from receiving the help they need.

“With so many first responders reporting that they have experienced traumatic events in their jobs, it is critical to provide access to mental health services and for their employers to encourage them to seek help if needed,” said Samantha Dutton, Ph.D., MSW, program director for University of Phoenix’s Bachelor in Social Work. “It is also essential that providers help first responders learn how to address stress that comes from experiences they encounter.”

Warning Signs

The same survey found that one in three (33 percent)³ first responders have received a formal diagnosis of a mental health disorder, such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Dr. Dutton says early warning signs can manifest in different ways and it is important to get care as soon as possible.

“Signs a person should consider talking to a mental health professional include not wanting to spend time with friends and family, getting angry easily, and abusing drugs or alcohol,” she said. “The key to prevention is to identify work-related pressures and not let them build up, which could lead to more serious mental health needs.”

Removing Stigmas

First responders reported⁴ that they felt that there could be negative repercussions (such as their supervisor treating them differently, being viewed as weak by colleagues or being looked over for promotions) for formalizing their need for mental health help. However, Dr. Dutton says that in her professional experience, seeking mental health care has rarely affected one’s position at the workplace, but it is when they do not seek care that things get progressively worse, and then their jobs could be affected.

“There’s no difference between seeking mental health care and going to the



First responders know how to save others but sometimes need help saving themselves.

doctor to treat a cold,” Dutton concluded. “Just like you wouldn’t expect a broken leg to heal by itself, you can’t expect your mental health concerns to heal on their own.”

How Public Safety Agencies Can Help

Although the survey found approximately half⁵ of first responders have participated in pre-exposure mental health training (51 percent)⁶ and “psychological first-aid” after an incident (49 percent)⁷, there are still roughly half of first responders without any pre- or post-training or mental health support before or after an incident. Additionally, 69 percent⁸ of first responders say mental health services are seldom or never utilized at their organization.

To help first responders seek and feel comfortable receiving care:

- Employers can be proactive educating first responders about the resources available to them to address mental health and to help eliminate the stigma around receiving mental health care.
- Organizations employing first responders can encourage mental well-being—not just after a traumatic event but even from the effects of routine stress on the job.
- Managers can speak openly about mental health to let people know there is nothing wrong with seeking help.

University of Phoenix operates eight counseling centers in six states (California, Michigan, Arizona, Nevada, Utah and Colorado) that offer free services to members of the community. For more information or to set up an appointment, visit www.phoenix.edu/colleges_divisions/social-sciences/counseling-skills-centers.html.

Visit www.phoenix.edu/firstresponders to find full results from the first responders’ mental health survey.

¹This survey was conducted online within the U.S. by Harris Poll on behalf of University of Phoenix between Feb. 2 and 21, 2017, among 2,004 U.S. adults aged 18 and older, who are employed as either a firefighter, police officer, EMT/paramedic, lifeguard or nurse. Figures were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the first responder population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents’ propensity to be online.

²Ibid

³Ibid

⁴Ibid

⁵Ibid

⁶Ibid

⁷Ibid

⁸Ibid