
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

**Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission Report
2024 Report to the Legislature**

In Accordance with 18 V.S.A. § 7257b Emergency Services Provider Wellness Commission

**Submitted to: Vermont General Assembly
Vermont Governor Phil Scott**

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EMERGENCY SERVICE PROVIDER WELLNESS COMMISSION
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Introduction

The Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission (Commission) within the Agency of Human Services was established in 2021 by 18 V.S.A. § 7257b. The purpose of the Commission is to “consider the diversity of emergency service providers on the basis of gender, race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, and the unique needs that emergency service providers who have experienced trauma may have as a result of their identity status.” Additionally, the Commission is required:

- (1) to identify where increased or alternative supports or strategic investments within the emergency service provider community, designated or specialized service agencies, or other community service systems could improve the physical and mental health outcomes and overall wellness of emergency service providers;
- (2) to identify how Vermont can increase capacity of qualified clinicians in the treatment of emergency service providers to ensure that the services of qualified clinicians are available throughout the State without undue delay;
- (3) to create materials and information, in consultation with the Department of Health, including a list of qualified clinicians, for the purpose of populating an electronic emergency service provider wellness resource center on the Department of Health’s website;
- (4) to educate the public, emergency service providers, State and local governments, employee assistance programs, and policymakers about best practices, tools, personnel, resources, and strategies for the prevention and intervention of the effects of trauma experienced by emergency service providers;
- (5) to identify gaps and strengths in Vermont’s system of care for both emergency service providers who have experienced trauma and their immediate family members to ensure access to support and resources that address the impacts of primary and secondary trauma;
- (6) to recommend how peer support services and qualified clinician services can be delivered regionally or statewide;
- (7) to recommend how to support emergency service providers in communities that are resource challenged, remote, small, or rural;
- (8) to recommend policies, practices, training, legislation, rules, and services that will increase successful interventions and support for emergency service providers to

improve health outcomes, job performance, and personal well-being and reduce health risks, violations of employment, and violence associated with the impact of untreated trauma, including whether to amend Vermont's employment medical leave laws to assist volunteer emergency service providers in recovering from the effects of trauma experienced while on duty; and

- (9) to consult with federal, State, and municipal agencies, organizations, entities, and individuals in order to make any other recommendations the Commission deems appropriate.

This report provides an overview of the Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission's activities from December 2023 to December 2024 and offers recommendations to improve the mental health and physical health of emergency service providers.

COMMISSION ACTIVITIES 2023-2024

Membership and Meetings

During the report period, the Commission has convened eight meetings and welcomed four new representatives. The Commission prioritized hosting an Emergency Service Provider (ESP) Mental Health Conference; developing a Stress Injury Awareness and Management curriculum and establishing core competency standards; promoting peer support networks; reviewing the Vermont Workers Compensation Act; further investigating new and innovative solutions to support the mental health of ESPs; and utilizing existing networks to promote training and available resources.

Priorities

Emergency Services Provider (ESP) Mental Health Conference

The Commission again partnered with The Castleton Center for Social Justice and Trauma Informed Care to host a two-day conference at the Vermont State University - Castleton Campus. On July 15th & 16th, 2024, ESPs from across the state representing all sectors of First Responders attended lectures focused on overall wellness for responders. Attendees participated in workshops focused on a variety of wellness topics (financial, legal and spiritual, etc.), mindfulness practices, and self-compassion. Keynote speakers included Dr. Nicole Sawyer, PsyD from NH State Police Peer Support Unit, and Frontline Foundation Director Mike Cancellieri. These presenters and others focused on the psychological challenges first responders experience and building mindfulness-based skills throughout responder's careers to improve health outcomes and reduce workforce turnover.

Developed a Mental Health and Wellbeing Training Plan for Providers, Organizations and Clinicians

The Commission continues to devote a substantial amount of time and effort developing training resources to improve awareness of occupational stress-related injuries among the emergency

services communities. When the signs and symptoms of occupational stress-related injuries go unnoticed, or are left untreated, emergency services provider's (ESP's) are at increased risk for anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicide, substance misuse, and other physical health issues. These conditions can result in absenteeism or leave ESPs unable to work, which contributes to greater turnover in the workforce.¹

The Commission has agreed upon a list of learning objectives to address operational stress injuries in first responder communities. The curriculum, which is currently under development, is applicable to all ESP sectors. Attendees will learn about the pathophysiology of stress injuries, recognizing signs and symptoms, and self-care practices. Additionally, attendees will learn about risks associated with persistent traumatic exposure, secondary trauma, and how this form of trauma can affect ESPs and their loved ones.

It is widely understood ESPs require flexible training opportunities. The Commission has settled on a hybrid training model, allowing first responders from different sectors to receive this vitally important education and training either online or in person. The Commission is currently compiling a roster of experienced emergency services educators to deliver this training. The Commission is planning for a train-the-trainer program, permitting sector-specific educators to adapt the program to better deliver content based on the ESP model for their respective first-responder communities. As an example, the Commission is currently collaborating with the Vermont Fire Academy to adapt the curriculum to fire service specific courses.

Improving awareness and promoting skills to reduce the negative impact of occupational stress and physiological trauma will keep Vermont's ESPs healthier and better able to respond to emergencies. This training program is urgently needed to improve workforce retention.

Increase Awareness and Participation in Emergency Services Provider (ESP) Peer Support Networks

The Commission continues to work on increasing awareness and participation in ESP peer support networks and improving access to mental health services regardless of agency or sector affiliation.

ESP peer support networks are teams of ESPs trained to provide peer support and often work with the assistance of an embedded mental health counselor(s). These peer support networks assist ESPs, providing guidance and support to those experiencing mental health challenges typically caused by responding to a traumatic event. A peer support team can provide one or more debriefing sessions for a department after a critical incident; they can also refer colleagues to mental health counselors embedded within regional groups when a higher level of support is indicated.

The Commission is aware of several agency-specific peer support teams, including the Vermont State Police Member Assistance Team, the Department of Corrections Peer Support Team, the Burlington Fire Department Peer Support Team, Green Mountain Critical Incident Stress Management Team, and the Professional Firefighters of Vermont Peer Support Team. Only a limited number of organizations can afford to contract for critical incident debrief and mental health services for the members of their team. Despite these existing agency-specific resources,

¹ CDC. (2024, April 21). Traumatic Incident Stress. Stress at Work. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/stress/traumaticincidentstress/index.html>

a majority of Vermont ESPs and their agencies do not have equitable access, which can lead to chronic poor mental health outcomes.²³⁴

Vermont has only one statewide peer support team, administered by the Invest Employee Assistance Program, referred to as SECURE (Skills and Experience for Calling Up Resiliency). SECURE is a grant-supported program funded through the Vermont Department of Aging and Independent Living. This program offers various services and support to any ESP regardless of agency affiliation. SECURE clinicians work with peer support teams to serve any individual ESPs and entire departments in need of urgent counseling and other types of mental health supports after a critical incident. SECURE provides peer support team access to all ESP sectors, including corrections, law enforcement, career and volunteer firefighters, career and volunteer emergency medical services (EMS), emergency telecommunications (E911 and dispatchers), and ski patrol.

Between October 2023 and September 2024, the SECURE network recruited 13 new members for a current roster of 79 peer support mentors from all sectors, this includes municipal police officers, county sheriffs, firefighters, EMTs, corrections officers, and ski patrollers. This cohort of peer support mentors worked with SECURE counselors to complete 13 critical incident stress debriefings for emergency service organizations, a total of 133 first responders, with an additional 23 peer referrals to a mental health counselor. The SECURE program is in high demand as it serves all emergency service organizations regardless of type, ensuring timely and reliable mental health services for all of Vermont's ESPs.

Several of Vermont's ESP sectors, including EMS, volunteer firefighters, local law enforcement, emergency telecommunications staff and ski patrollers, rely on SECURE for peer support services. Without the SECURE program, many smaller, rural volunteer services that do not have the financial means to afford such services would go without.

Explore Technology-Based Resources for ESP to access mental health resources

The Commission agrees technology-based resources will serve as an important source of information to augment existing mental health supports including access to peer support teams, education and training programs. Following an initial investigation, the Commission determined that more time is needed to assess a range of technology-based resources and their associated costs. In 2024-2025, the Commission will work to develop a Request for Information so to better understand what resources available and develop a cost estimate for a statewide resource.

Expand the Worker's Compensation PTSD Presumption Laws to include all ESP Sectors

In 2017, Act 80 established that certain Emergency Service Providers ("ESP"), specifically, "police officers, rescue or ambulance workers, or firefighters," diagnosed with post-traumatic

² Harley, Burchfiel, Fekedulegn, Andrew, and Violanti, "Health Disparities in Police Officers: Comparison to the US General Population." *International Journal of Mental Health*, 2011.

³ *Id.*

⁴ McCaslin, Rogers, Metzler, Best, Weiss, Fagan, Liberman, and Marmar. "The Impact of Personal Threat on Police Officers' Responses to Critical Incident Stressors. *Journal of Nervous Mental Disorders*, 2006.

stress disorder by a mental health professional would be presumed to have incurred such injury in the line of duty and would be eligible for compensation under 21 V.S.A. § 601.⁵

In 2024, Act 184 added another category of eligible employees, that being state employees, as defined within 21 V.S.A. § 601(11)(I)(iii)(VI).⁶ However, this legislation did not expand the definition of ESP, contrary to the Commission’s recommendation that ESP should include all ESPs. Those ESPs not covered under the law include emergency telecommunicators who are not ‘classified employees of public safety answering points’, local dispatchers providing service for an emergency service provider organization, and ski patrollers. These ESPs remain on the front lines and are responding to requests for emergency services daily. However, they are not afforded the same protections as other ESPs doing the same work, and often at the same emergency incident.

PLANNED COMMISSION ACTIVITIES 2024-2025

In addition to the ongoing work in the areas discussed above, the Commission expects to prioritize the following over the next reporting period.

Reassess the Level of Awareness and Knowledge of ESP Mental Health Services and Promote Existing and New Resources

The Commission will survey all emergency service agencies and providers across the state to assess the level of awareness and local/regional access to mental health resources. The results of the survey will serve as an indicator that the Commission will rely upon to understand the degree to which progress has been made regarding the ESP communities’ level of awareness and knowledge of mental health and stress injury prevention resources. Survey results may also identify pervasive gaps in the system and will inform future recommendations and activities for the Commission.

Finalize and Distribute Mental Health and Well-Being Training Plans for Providers, Organizations, and Clinicians

Once this training model is complete, the Commission will collaborate with ESP agencies to integrate the curriculum into their annual training plans. The goal being to ensure that all ESPs and their department’s leadership have the foundational knowledge needed to reduce physiological stress injuries and other mental health conditions.

Additionally, the Commission will make available a list of training courses that when taken together, will encompass all the core competencies for maintain mental wellness. Examples include Stress Injury Awareness 101, De-escalation skills, Stress First Aid, Critical Incident, and Stress Management.

Convene an Emergency Services Provider Mental Health Stakeholders Meeting

The Commission will plan and convene a meeting with stakeholder to discuss all aspects of ESP mental health. ESPs, sector leaders, town officials, and other stakeholders will have a forum to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the current system and set future priorities. This meeting

⁵ Act 80 (2017)

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2018/Docs/ACTS/ACT080/ACT080%20As%20Enacted.pdf>

⁶ Act 184 (2024)

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2024/Docs/ACTS/ACT184/ACT184%20As%20Enacted.pdf>

will also provide an opportunity to learn and share best practices on mental health and wellness in emergency services. This will also allow partners to increase collaboration across emergency services sectors and departments and educate appointed and elected officials on the impact of occupational exposure to trauma experienced by all sectors of ESPs.

Advocate for the Further Expansion of Workers' Compensation Laws to be inclusive of all ESP Sectors

The Commission will continue to advocate for the health and wellness of all ESP workers, by advocating for technical changes within the legal definition of a rescue and ambulance worker as defined under 21 V.S.A. § 601, so to ensure equal protections under the law.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2024

The following recommendations were developed by the Commission and informed by presentations by subject matter experts, lived experiences of ESPs, national best practices, and Commission deliberations.

Expand the Worker's Compensation PTSD Presumption Laws to include all ESP Sectors

The Commission recommends that the definition of “rescue and ambulance workers” be expanded to include all ESPs, except those already represented (i.e. law enforcement, firefighters, etc.), so that all sectors represented by the Emergency Service Provider Wellness Commission will be eligible for the same worker protections under 21 V.S.A. § 601.

Invest in a Statewide ESP Peer Support/Mental Health Service for all ESP Sectors

ESP Peer Support teams are essential for improving mental health and well-being of ESPs by lowering the stigma associated with seeking mental health treatment and developing a culture of support within an agency and sector.⁷ Due to the effectiveness of a statewide peer support program available to all ESP sectors, the Commission recommends the State dedicate funding to sustain the SECURE program. The loss of this program will deny smaller and rural emergency service organizations access to urgently needed mental health resources and supports needed to sustain ESPs.

SECURE is currently funded through a federal grant which ends in late 2025. The Commission recommends funding SECURE for \$160,000 during SFY 2026. This funding would provide vital support for SECURE's staffing costs of mental health counselors and stipends for peer support team members, training, costs associated with regional monthly group meetings and participant training, and outreach to increase the number of trained team members.

Increase the Capacity for Mental Health Training for ESPs Across all Sectors

Funding is needed to allow all sectors the same opportunity to offer mental health training for ESPs. Currently, many training budget allocations are restricted to specific sectors, creating barriers to offering cross-sector training and resource sharing. Doing so would reduce the disparity of training opportunities between different ESP sectors. The Commission recommends allocating \$50,000 to support mental health-focused trainings.

⁷ Horan KA, Marks M, Ruiz J, Bowers C, Cunningham A. Here for My Peer: The Future of First Responder Mental Health. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2021; 18(21):11097. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182111097>

Convene Emergency Services Provider Mental Health Stakeholder Meetings

The Commission plans to convene stakeholder mental health-focused meetings as a forum for emergency services providers, town officials, and other key stakeholders to discuss the ongoing needs and lack of resources available to emergency services providers and their departments. The meetings will identify stakeholders' priorities, perceived strengths, and weaknesses of the current system and provide an opportunity to learn and share best practices on mental health and wellness in emergency services. This will also allow partners to increase collaboration across emergency services departments and educate town leadership and elected officials on the impact of occupational exposure to trauma experienced by emergency services. The Commission recommends allocating \$10,000 of funding to support meeting facility/conference center costs, expert speakers, meeting facilitators, etc.