

MINUTES

Mental Health of First Responders



Representative Rhonda Milstead, Chair
Representative Ryan Cwach, Vice Chair

**Second Meeting, 2020 Interim
Thursday, September 17, 2020**

**Room 414 – State Capitol
Pierre, South Dakota**

The second meeting of the Mental Health of First Responders Task Force was called to order by Representative Ryan Cwach, Vice Chair, at 1:00 PM on September 17, 2020, in Room 414 of the State Capitol, Pierre, South Dakota. A quorum was determined with the following members answering roll call: Representatives Doug Barthel (remote), Ryan Cwach (Vice Chair), Rhonda Milstead (Chair), Tina Mulally (remote), Tamara St. John, and Larry Zikmund (remote); Senators Troy Heinert (remote), V.J. Smith (remote); and public members Roger Belisle, Nick Carlson, Connie Johnson (remote), Anne Kelly, Maynard Konechne, Tom Ward, and Brad Wilson.

Staff members present included Alex Timperley, Legislative Attorney; and Cindy Tryon, Senior Legislative Secretary.

NOTE: For purpose of continuity, the following minutes are not necessarily in chronological order. Also, all referenced documents distributed at the meeting are attached to the original minutes on file in the Legislative Research Council office. This meeting was webcast live. The archived webcast is available at the LRC website at sdlegislature.gov.

Approval of Minutes

Representative Milstead moved, seconded by Mr. Konechne, to approve the minutes of the August 20, 2020, Mental Health of First Responders meeting. Motion prevailed on a roll call vote with 15 voting AYE. Voting AYE: Barthel, Mulally, St. John, Zikmund, Heinert, Smith, Belisle, Carlson, Johnson, Kelly, Konechne, Ward, Wilson, Cwach, and Milstead.

Opening Remarks

Representative Cwach said the testimony and data from the first meeting of the task force was moving and shocking. Representative Cwach thanked the first responders who came forward and told their stories. Representative Cwach said the first meeting looked at first responders on a personal level. The meeting today is intended to look at first responder as a profession and look at existing mental health services available in South Dakota. Representative Cwach added as a task force we know South Dakota can do more and do better.

How Does the Mental Health of First Responders Affect the Public?

What is Currently being Done to Respond to Trauma?

How Does It Affect Retention and Recruitment?

Several first responders and caregivers were invited to give testimony regarding the above mentioned mental health issues affecting first responders. Participants were given the option to testify remotely or in person.

Mr. Doug Kirkus, South Dakota Municipal League (SDML) Workers' Compensation Fund (WCF), thanked the task force members for the work they are doing. Mr. Kirkus said he worked in law enforcement for over 20 years and also served as a firefighter and EMT, so he has experienced firsthand the stress of being a first responder. Mr. Kirkus said the SDML WCF makes recommendations to members on how to find ways to minimize employee risks. The fund works with 10,000 first responders. Stress can have a serious adverse effect on the first responders and their families. While listening to what is being done in other states, Mr. Kirkus said he has thought about what can be

done here in South Dakota. He said he hopes the culture can change making it more acceptable for first responders to talk about their feelings. The SDML WCF worked with first responders in developing a pilot program for the Mitchell area.

Mr. Kirkus talked about the Connections program that has been providing assistance for over 30 years. The program does more than just address mental health issues. Using this program may help first responder agencies with retention and recruitment. Connections utilizes counselors they have vetted, and telehealth services are also available. The only South Dakota team listed on the website is from Sioux Falls. It would be nice to have some type of registry for available services in the state. More information on the Connections program can be found on their website at connectionseap.com.

Mr. Tom Kurtenbach, Chief, Yankton Fire Department, (remote participation) testified about the stress of public safety. Mr. Kurtenbach has been involved in fire management since 1981 and in all those years this is the first time the State Legislature has discussed the mental health of first responders. These issues affect recruitment and retention for first responder agencies. The Yankton Fire Department has had a strong chaplain program for several years. There is a critical debriefing team that gets the process of dealing with mental health issues started by talking about what the responders have seen, smelled, and done.

Mr. Kurtenbach said according to the National Fire and Protection Association, there were 814,850 volunteer firefighters in our country in 2015, that decreased to 729,000 in 2016, and was down to 682,600 in 2017. The number of people wishing to join the first responder agencies decreases every year. The work the first responders do on a day-to-day basis is one of the reasons it is more difficult to recruit members. The best resource for recruiting is to be able to retain the people we already have. Unhappy people do not recruit new people. Not dealing with the mental health of our people becomes a roadblock in finding new recruits. The work the task force is doing to help address these issues could help us keep our rosters full.

Captain Josh Phillips, Minnehaha County Sheriff's Department, Sioux Falls, talked about a deputy he supervised who developed a friendship with a troubled youth who committed suicide. The deputy was so affected by this event he left law enforcement soon after. When a deputy first starts out with the sheriff's office he or she undergoes a psychological exam, and their mental health is never checked on again. When first responders first start out they have no idea how they will react to any certain event. Each event keeps adding to the emotional cup and that cup is soon full.

Captain Phillips continued saying he attends various conferences and one of the main topics is officer wellness and mental health. A colleague with the NYPD told Captain Phillips the suicide rate among NYPD officers continues to increase and not just with new officers but also with officers who were close to retirement and all years of service in between.

Captain Phillips said the Minnehaha County Sheriff's Department has started a new program requiring each member of the department to attend one 50-minute session on mental health sometime during the months of September and October and they have to turn in paperwork proving their attendance. If the officer has a mental health issue for which they would like help, this session will teach them how to reach out for more assistance. About 80% of the officers have already signed up. The program will cost the department about \$5,000. Once everyone has attended a session the officers will be surveyed to get their responses on changes they would like to see to the program. The plan is to make some tweaks to the program and at a later time offer it to the over 200 employees working at the jail. This program is a start and the more programs offered to law enforcement the better.

Mr. Rod Veldhuizen, Chaplain, Custer Volunteer Fire Department, (remote participation) was with the Yankton Fire Department for 12 years just prior to moving to Custer, where he is the Chaplain for the Custer Volunteer Fire Department and a licensed marriage therapist. Mr. Veldhuizen said there has been a lot of testimony regarding

stress. Stress can impede judgment. Some first responders have flashbacks and people may freeze up because of intrusive memories. Others may react by exploding at social scenes. Along with losing the people, agencies lose valuable training and resources when first responders drop out of service.

Mr. Veldhuizen said there is an EAP program in Yankton, but first responders do not always trust therapists. The hope is to find a chaplain for every fire department in the state, but he is not sure that will be possible as these are volunteer positions. The National Fallen Firefighters Association is putting together a list of mental health providers for firefighters. Right now the list has two providers from South Dakota including Mr. Veldhuizen. The need for help is out there and it is real. If South Dakota can step up to address these issues it will benefit not just the first responders but also the public whose safety we have been entrusted.

Mr. Jeremy Walla, Whispering Pines Volunteer Fire Department and SD Fire Chiefs Association Board Member, Rapid City, said the task force needs to discuss what it means to be a first responder. There is a broader scope of first responders than those who work for municipal departments, volunteer first responders are not included in a lot of things. The laws regarding first responders do not always include volunteers. What it means to be a first responder needs to be reviewed especially when it comes to workers' compensation coverage and who is eligible for assistance. Any legislation drafted needs to cover the gambit of what the term first responder means.

Mr. Walla also talked about the importance of remembering the stress goes beyond just the first responder. When the bell rings calling the responder to another event, the people waiting at home have no idea if their loved one will ever return. The stress compiles for those at home as well.

Ms. Staci Ackerman, Executive Director, SD Sheriffs Association, Eureka, said her father was in law enforcement and emergency service is strong in her family background. It is important to remember the first responders must be protected so they can be there to protect us. Law enforcement officers are more willing today to discuss officer mental health in general, but few are willing to discuss their own personal needs. There is always a fear of the backlash if an officer speaks out about his or her own mental health.

Ms. Ackerman said a central repository for available services would be of great help. After a shooting in 2009, a list of names was given to the officers for assistance in dealing with the event and the contact information was all out of date. Making this assistance also available to the officers' families could allow for saving marriages as well.

Sergeant Tom Ward, Sioux Falls Police Department (SFPD), has been with the SFPD for 26 years and has served on the peer support group for 10 years. Sergeant Ward read two messages from other Sioux Falls Police Officers. The first message addresses the riot at the Empire Mall this summer. The officer said that incident in combination of being short staffed with increased workloads continues to wear on the officers. The officer knows the members of the SFPD are dealing with even more stress because of the political climate and the COVID pandemic and that additional stress is taking its toll on the officers and their families. The writer of the message says he knows of several officers who have exit plans in place to happen in the next few years.

The second message Sergeant Ward shared talked about the increasing number of calls each patrol receives and the increasing number of major calls for service. With officers having to run from one call to the next without a break there is no time to process the events or to conduct any type of debriefing. The writer states, "Officers are too 'tough' to reach out for help, and this is magnified when they are too busy." The message refers to the national negative portrayal of police officers which is an additional stressor for officers. The officers have to deal with threats, people pretending to shoot at them, and verbal dehumanization. The writer of the message said the peer support system is great when used but not enough is done to check in with officers regarding their mental health. "More resources need to be used to assist in the maintenance and restoration of officers' mental health."

Sergeant Ward explained how the SFPD Peer Support Program works and the training of those who choose to participate. Sergeant Ward said he is proud of the Peer Support Program but there is more work that needs to be done as we move into even more difficult times.

Mr. Jerome Harvey, Pennington County Fire Administrator, Rapid City, has been involved with firefighting in some capacity since 1979. Currently he is the Pennington County Fire Administrator working with 550 volunteer firefighters covering 5,000 square miles. Mr. Harvey said regarding recruitment and retention he knows people who have left the service after one traumatic event and others from the buildup of fatigue. Recruitment and retention is always the first or second topic of discussion at department meetings. Mr. Harvey said they do have a critical management response team and keeping people on that team is a challenge. This is an issue in all the rural communities and will not go away unless there is some type of permanent solution. Mr. Harvey introduced Ms. Julie Webster who is one of the fire chaplains for Pennington County.

Ms. Julie Webster, Black Hills Fire Chaplain Association, Rapid City, talked about her experiences working with the firefighters. Ms. Webster said the firefighters will just come and sit with her, some talk about what is happening, and others just need a safe place for a bit. After one extremely traumatic event several firefighters quit the department and now they need help dealing with the event and do not know where to turn. Ms. Webster said they can always talk to her. Mental health assistance is greatly needed for first responders, and not just the first responders but their families, too. Ms. Webster asked the task force members to help these people, adding God gave these people something most of us do not have; the ability to go into a fire and help people.

Committee Discussion and Questions

Representative Cwach opened the meeting to questions from the task force members.

In response to Representative Milstead's question, Mr. Kirkus said when looking on the Connections website, there was just one critical incident team listed for South Dakota, but he knows there are more teams in the state. It would be beneficial if a state agency could be tasked with putting together a list of critical incident teams and keeping the list updated.

In response to other questions, Mr. Kirkus said the pilot program just kicked off after the first of the year and then COVID slowed the process down. If the SDML Board approves the program it will be made available statewide in January of 2021. The SDML WCF hopes to be able to do more this fall to better build on the program. There have been individuals reach out for clinical assistance. At this time there are three free sessions for those in the program and there is a 6 session proposal being considered. Mr. Kirkus added they are trying to change a culture and this is the starting point. This issue of addressing mental health in first responders has not been addressed for a very long time. The hope is to get people to reach out for help before burning out.

Dr. Kelly asked if there are groups who work with first responders who could better increase the ability to recognize stress and destigmatize mental health issues within that profession. Ms. Webster said the chaplains are a good resource and are there to help whoever needs help. Mr. Kurtenbach said other possible resources could be churches and first responders' families. Mr. Veldhuizen added this needs to be peer support, inter-department people. Many of the events causing the high levels of stress cannot be talked about outside the first responder group.

Mr. Konechne said the rural volunteer first responders in his area go on about 85 calls a year and have other jobs. There are no counselors in most rural areas. The hope is that through workers' compensation there would be more options for first responders not located in Pennington or Minnehaha Counties. The rural areas lose people in the service because there is nowhere for them to go for help.

Ms. Connie Johnson said as an army veteran who served in combat and now suffers with PTSD, she understands and applauds many who have testified. Ms. Johnson asked Sergeant Ward about the gaps in the peer support program. Ms. Johnson said she strongly supports the peer program and has no interest in calling a service provider who does not know her or understand what she has been through. Sergeant Ward said the peer support program in Sioux Falls has received well over 100,000 calls for services. The program is completely overwhelmed, and he wonders how other departments operate without this type of program. Sergeant Ward added that what is being done in Sioux Falls is good, but it is not enough.

Ms. Johnson asked Mr. Harvey about the gaps in the programs in his area. Mr. Harvey said one of the gaps is not addressing these as long-term issues. Mr. Harvey said he does appreciate the fact the insurance companies are starting to come around, but unless a person is a veteran there are no services to fall back on. In rural America responders do not have the resources available on a continuous basis. Mr. Harvey added he is concerned all of this information gathered by the task force will get stuffed into a file folder, someone in the insurance industry will say they cannot afford it and it will all just fade away. That would be an extreme disservice to the first responders.

Ms. Johnson asked Mr. Harvey if someone is given a phone number to call for help, does he think that person will follow up with the phone call. Mr. Harvey said getting people in need of help to call a phone number is one of the big issues.

In response to questions from Representative Milstead regarding Yankton's EAP program, Mr. Kurtenbach said the Yankton Fire Department used to be with Connections but now has Avera Health Insurance. Avera sends the responder to a counselor participating in the Avera program. Use of these services is highly confidential so there is no way of knowing when someone is speaking to a counselor. Mr. Kurtenbach said there are several 800 telephone numbers a first responder can call when seeking services but there is no way of knowing if the responders take advantage of any of those programs.

Dr. Belisle said when discussing a variety of services, it is good to think about the four different tiers of service. Those tiers are 1) debriefing, 2) peer support, which is a little more intense, 3) referrals to EAP, which includes more professional help, and 4) long term help at a treatment center. There is no one intervention better than another it just depends on the need of the individual. There is no one size fits all program.

Representative Milstead said the peer support program is an excellent program and is working well. The fact the support team is a brotherhood is what makes it work so well. These are people helping one another and all are volunteers so there is no cost.

Dr. Belisle said there is an informal peer support and it may be good to discuss how to best foster that culture. There are some costs to the more professional peer groups for training and certification. Confidentiality is a big piece of the peer support program with a formalized contract outlining real consequences for breaking confidentiality. The peer groups are made up of individuals who people just naturally look up to.

Mr. Konechne commented that peer groups are very important but there are times when a higher level of treatment is needed.

Representative Cwach asked about compassion fatigue, how it develops and what is the prevalence of this issue.

Sergeant Ward said compassion fatigue can set in when the responder keeps going to event after event and the stress just keeps accumulating. The responder can actually take on the stress of the individual he or she is trying to help. There is a test that examines the level of stress. The responder knows to take the test when his or her significant other says something, or there is a peer reference, or there are physical maladies such as headaches or stomach issues.

Mr. Carlson said when starting out as a first responder the person thinks they are going out to help good people and soon learn there are a lot of bad people. Every call is someone's worst day. Eventually the responder no longer wants to do the job and now what is he or she to do. So the responder stays on the job and the stress just continues to wear on him or her and eventually there is a point where the responder is just tired. That is compassion fatigue.

Dr. Belisle said the work the responders do is a tremendous burden to bear. First responders bring a sense of service and compassion to the job but after time can become emotionally numb and begin not to care. They have a sense of a lack of control and feel they are not making a difference. This is also compassion fatigue.

Mr. Kurtenbach commented compassion fatigue adds to the problems with recruitment and retention as sometimes the only recourse when someone is suffering with compassion fatigue is to remove them from the organization.

Representative Cwach said we are all now aware there is a problem that affects the first responder and affects the service, especially with retention, recruitment, and removal.

Mr. Carlson suggested the development of a statewide first responder group which would allow for a larger pool of members to pull from when needed so the same people are not having to go to the bigger events. There is a need to build the pools to help alleviate the pressure on responders.

Representative Cwach asked about the most effective ways to conduct peer support groups and would it be possible to have peer support groups where the responders are more remote.

Ms. Johnson said in the veteran community there is the Wounded Warrior Project which includes a peer on peer program working with different branches in different areas. The closest office to South Dakota is in Minneapolis. There is a program in Rapid City called Sacred Mountain which is a retreat center for military, first responders, and gold star families. Dr. Belisle said a retreat center is different from a treatment center and a brief retreat will not have the same impact as a more structured program.

Mr. Wilson said the SDML WCF is working on a list of people who could offer peer support. A central registry on a statewide level could be of assistance. Representative Cwach said a central registry is a good idea and perhaps information from groups already collecting that information could be shared.

The next meeting of the Mental Health of First Responders Task Force will be October 15, 2020, and the fourth meeting will be November 12. The task force members agreed to adding a fifth meeting to the schedule. The final meeting will be December 10 which will include action on proposed legislation.

Adjourn

Dr. Kelly moved, seconded by Mr. Konechne, that the Mental Health of First Responders Task Force be adjourned. Motion prevailed on a roll call vote with 15 voting AYE. Voting AYE: Barthel, Mulally, St. John, Zikmund, Heinert, Smith, Belisle, Carlson, Johnson, Kelly, Konechne, Ward, Wilson, Cwach, and Milstead.

The task force meeting adjourned at 3:50 p.m.