

Guide to Building an Effective EMS Wellness & Resilience Program

INTRODUCTION

The greatest asset of any EMS agency is its people – the EMS practitioners and other personnel who are there for members of the community during their worst moments, and who ensure their patients receive high-quality, compassionate and life-saving care. However, “being there” for patients and their family members and friends during medical emergencies is inherently stressful. EMS practitioners often work under difficult, unpredictable and rapidly changing circumstances. They may work in harsh environments, with limited information, assistance and resources. In the course of their work, they may be exposed to risks such as infectious disease, physical violence, occupational injury, vehicle crashes and death. They may be called on to help the victims of traumatic events, such as those who have experienced a natural disaster, serious motor vehicle collision, abuse or violence. EMS practitioners also run the risk of becoming victims of violence at the hands of patients who are inebriated or having a mental health crisis. To be able to effectively handle the stress associated with working in EMS, EMS personnel benefit from having good physical, mental and emotional health.

Building a Culture of Wellness & Resiliency

A culture of wellness and resilience begins with an awareness of healthy lifestyles in the workplace. EMS agencies achieve this by providing educational opportunities, programs and hands-on experiences to address a large array of health and wellness related topics for employees.

1. **Offers opportunities for connection among employees.** Social skills are associated with resilience, and the workplace is often a source of social support. Co-workers may also serve as an extended family. This may be particularly true in EMS, where teamwork is essential and EMS practitioners form strong bonds as a result of shared experiences – such as saving a life or dealing with death. The opportunity to build friendships at work can contribute to a sense of belonging and a shared mission, and may offer support in helping to face life’s challenges.
What can employers do? Employers can offer opportunities for employees to socialize with one another, in a variety of settings, to strengthen friendships and create bonds.
2. **Supports good physical health.** Physical health is associated with mental health and resilience. Getting sufficient sleep, nutrition and exercise can ward off chronic illness, boost the mood and provide protection from depression. People who are healthy physically are better able to face the emotional and psychological challenges of working in EMS.
What can employers do to help? Employers should establish policies and initiatives that promote a healthy lifestyle. Smoking cessation, weight loss programs, opportunities to exercise and fatigue mitigation are a few examples.
3. **Fosters positivity.** Positivity and optimism have been shown to bolster resilience. The work environment should be one in which employees receive recognition and appreciation for their work.
What can employers do to help? Employers should pay attention to the morale of their workforce. Employers can show employees that they are valued by providing positive feedback and recognition for a job well done. Initiatives should also provide opportunities for peer-to-peer recognition – the chance to offer recognition and praise benefits both the giver and the recipient.

4. **Helps employees adapt to change.** Change can be very stressful, whether it's a new company owner or a new way of performing a procedure. Resilient people adapt well to change. As an employer, transparency and a commitment to keeping your employees informed will create an environment in which individuals are better able to accept change.
What can employers do to help? Provide support for employees in adapting to change by getting feedback prior to implementing a change, leading by example, clearly communicating the benefits of the change, and by providing adequate training on implementing the change.
5. **Empowers employees to identify solutions.** Research suggests that individuals with strong problem-solving skills tend to be more resilient. Having a sense of control over one's circumstances also boosts resilience.
What can employers do? Help employees develop their problem-solving skills. Challenge your employees to make meaningful contributions, set goals and support those goals. Ask for their input and ideas for solving issues or improving conditions in the workplace, and then make sure employees know how their feedback is incorporated into new policies or procedures.

Program Start-Up Checklist

- **Create a Wellness and Resilience Steering Committee.**
The committee will take the lead on brainstorming, planning, achieving buy-in and implementing wellness and resilience initiatives. The steering committee should be made up of agency leadership as well as field personnel. If your EMS or fire department has a union, union leadership must be involved from the beginning, advises Lauren Kurth, Wellness Coordinator for Palm Beach County Fire Rescue. Others you may consider inviting to participate: registered dietitians, exercise physiologists, psychologists, and health educators.
- **Define your Agency's Culture of Wellness and Resilience.**
This is an opportunity to affirm your agency's commitment to your employees' mental, emotional and physical health. Your wellness and resilience steering committee can take the lead on creating this vision for wellness and resilience. You can use [NAEMT's EMS Culture of Personal Resilience and Well-Being](#) position statement as a starting point.
- **Identify and Prioritize Innovative Practices for your Agency.**
Surveying your EMS personnel about what issues they are most concerned about, what activities or initiatives they would be most likely to participate in, and what they would value the most can help you decide where to begin. This may involve trial and error. You may also review company health data to determine priorities: for example, smoking cessation, back health or weight loss programs.
- **Create a Culture of Wellness and Resilience Policy.**
Your policy (or policies) should define what the agency will offer to employees, and what employees are expected to do in return. If you have a collective bargaining agreement, the policy may need to become part of it.
- **Budget for Implementation of New Practices.**
Wellness and resilience is a broad concept that can encompass many levels of benefits and programming. By having agency leadership involved, you can determine how much money you have to work with.
- **Develop Relationships to Offset Costs for Implementing Your New Practices.**
EMS provides an essential service to the public. Ask local businesses, healthcare providers, philanthropies and service organizations to help you in taking care of the people who take care of them. Discounts, special offers, donations and grants can offset costs for your wellness and resilience program.
- **Ask Your EMS Practitioners for Feedback.**
Survey your employees about newly implemented practices to see what works, what employees value the most, and what programs interest them the most.
- **Document Progress.**
There are many ways to potentially measure the impact of wellness and resilience programs. Job satisfaction surveys, sick day use, attrition rates, drug tests, worker's comp payments, and health insurance costs are a few of them.

Mental & Emotional Health

An EMS wellness and resilience program ideally includes a variety of mental health services focused on both prevention and assistance to help individuals when they are suffering from mental health or emotional problems, either due to experiences on the job or other aspects of their lives. Prevention-focused programs help EMS personnel build resilience so that they can better cope with stress and other challenges and avoid developing depression or anxiety disorders. A health and wellness program should include initiatives to increase social connections, which research has shown positively impacts mental health. People who have positive relationships in the workplace are more likely to enjoy coming to work and being productive when they get there. Team days, work social events and employee recognition programs can all help. A wellness and resilience program should also identify sources of support to help individuals cope with traumatic situations, and make sure that employees know where to get help if they are struggling with depression, anxiety or other issues. Find a variety of mental health resources, including research, articles and education programs. To address mental and emotional health of their employees, EMS agencies offer a variety of programs. Here are some examples.

Counseling and Life Coaching

What Works: Ideas from EMS Agencies

Life coaches – JanCare Ambulance Service in Beckley, West Virginia, offers three sessions of life coaching through Life Strategies. Agency leaders reasoned that some responders may be more open to seeing a “coach” than a psychologist, noted Micheal Thomas, with JanCare.

Grief counselors – Sunstar Paramedics in Pinellas County, Florida, brings in grief counselors as a resource for crews as needed. Sunstar has had grief counselors available after traumatic calls and in response to the death of fellow responders, either on-duty or due to an illness or accident. Sunstar also has a memorial tree and garden. After a member of the staff dies, their colleagues come together at the tree to share memories and honor the individual.

First responder PTSD support group – The Mental Health Association of Indian River County in Florida offers a free PTSD Support Group for First Responders that’s open to police, fire, corrections, dispatch and EMS personnel, active and retired. Focused on providing support in understanding and reducing the negative effects of routine exposure to traumatic events, the support group is a unique opportunity to process experiences and connect with peers in a comfortable, confidential setting. The support group is led by a retired Boston firefighter and therapist at the Mental Health Association.

Peer-to-Peer Support – As part of the stress management program at Indian River County Fire Rescue in Vero Beach, Florida, trained peer supporters are available to confidentially discuss personal and/or professional problems and current challenges, and provide support and education about critical incident stress.

Therapy animals – After recent hurricanes that hit their region, Sunstar Paramedics partnered with a local therapy animal group to bring in dogs trained as support animals. Interacting with animals has been shown to lower blood pressure and reduce stress.

Social Connections

What Works: Ideas from EMS Agencies

Events and outings – There are so many ways to show employees they’re appreciated and to provide opportunities for social engagement. JanCare hosts employee appreciation cook-outs three times a year for each of their five divisions. Sunstar Paramedics plans monthly outings for employees. Events have included discount tickets to sporting events, ‘dinner around the world’ at a restaurant featuring cuisine from different regions of the world, and family events such as breakfast with Santa and an Easter picnic. Every month their agency achieves compliance with the county contract, directors and managers put on their grill aprons and celebrate with a company barbecue. To build camaraderie, Sunstar employees also participate in walks for cancer charities and other causes, often in honor of a colleague.

Alumni mentoring – As a primarily BLS interfacility ambulance service in San Jose, Calif., Royal Ambulance has many EMTs who are just getting started in their careers and have aspirations to become firefighters, paramedics, nurses or physicians.

Royal Ambulance hosts mixers and panel discussions with alumni who have gone on to become firefighters, physician assistants or other careers, providing opportunities for current EMTs to learn more about potential career paths and how to get there.

TIP: Using social media to boost employee engagement Private agency Facebook pages can help get the word out about your wellness and resilience programs. JanCare Ambulance uses Facebook to post information about topics in health, safety and fitness, sleep tips and to spread the word about employee appreciation and engagement events. Supervisors also post shout-outs to employees who are spotted going the extra mile in the station or out in the community, following safety best practices, or to recognize outstanding performance on challenging calls. EMS practitioners can also post peer-to-peer shout outs. Royal Ambulance uses Workplace, an app by Facebook designed to build “meaningful communities in the work environment.” For \$3 a month per employee, Workplace enables Royal Ambulance to collaborate as teams, discuss common interests, and get answers quickly. For example, Royal has created groups on the app where employees can swap shifts, share praise and recognition, and participate in contests to win gift cards. Royal also uses Workplace in lieu of email to share company news and other information.

The role of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)

The most common form of mental health support for EMS practitioners provided by EMS agencies is an Employee Assistance Program. EAPs are typically part of the benefits package – paid for by employers and provided at little to no cost to employees through the health benefits/insurance provider.

Services that may be included in an EAP

- Health Risk Assessment (HRA), which may include a self-administered questionnaire about health behaviors and clinical screenings (height, weight, blood pressure, glucose and cholesterol)
- Mental health or family counseling
- Education assistance
- Legal help or financial counseling
- Substance use and alcoholism treatment referrals
- Weight loss or nutrition coaching
- Stress management programs
- Smoking cessation assistance

EAPs may provide involuntary, or mandated, counseling and assessment for employees with behavioral problems or poor job performance. Often, the EAP counselor will conduct the assessment, then refer the employee out for treatment. In this case, the EAP may serve as an intermediary between the outside provider and the employer, monitoring the employee’s compliance and progress in treatment and informing the employer of the outcomes.

Reasons Employees Don’t Use EAPs

- Don’t trust that it’s truly confidential
- Stigma associated with reaching out for help
- Think they need permission from boss or HR
- Are unaware that it exists
- Skeptical that counselors with no EMS knowledge can help

TIP: Employers need to continually educate employees about EAP services, starting with the fact that counseling is confidential. Remind employees that no reports come back to the organization from the EAP. EMS supervisors need to recognize the stigma around seeking help, and take steps to ensure that employees feel comfortable seeking help when they need it. This is more than putting a flyer up on the wall. EMS supervisors should have training in recognizing signs of mental distress, depression and substance abuse. When speaking with employees about a performance-related issue that you suspect may have something to do with problems outside of work or a mental health issue, ask them how they’re doing or if there is anything they want to talk about, advises Bruce Evans, fire chief at Upper Pine Valley Fire Protection District in Colorado. Sometimes the individual is just waiting for someone to ask them.

Critical Incident Stress Management

From school shootings to bus wrecks, EMS practitioners may be called on to respond to horrifying scenes. Some responders may find certain events particularly triggering. For example, a responder who is the parent of young children may find a tragic incident involving a child of a similar age extremely difficult to accept. In the recent past, responders were expected to keep their anguish to themselves and get back to work. In reality, responders weren't just shaking it off. Many suffered in silence. Today, it's well accepted that psychological turmoil after tragic events is a normal response, and that psychological injuries can be just as severe as physical injuries.

In the 80s, the go-to strategy for many fire and EMS agencies was the [critical incident stress debriefing](#), in which specially trained teams including a mental health professional and peer support personnel (such as a fellow EMT, paramedic or firefighter) were dispatched immediately after unusually difficult calls to meet with the responders involved. During the debriefing, which was often mandatory, responders were encouraged to recount what they saw and how it made them feel. But in the 1990s, mandatory debriefings fell out of favor after a series of research papers questioned the effectiveness and noted that for some people having to recount what happened made them intensely uncomfortable, and had the potential to do more harm than good. The approach and qualifications of the team handling the debriefing also had an effect on participants' experience, and whether they felt it was a useful or a negative experience.

Today, critical incident stress management has evolved. Many agencies still use debriefings, but they are handled differently. Managers are not involved, allowing responders to feel free to express difficult emotions without worrying that it will impact their job. Also, there is a recognition that rehashing the events may not be helpful for everyone, so participants aren't pushed into doing so. Other agencies have moved toward what's known as [psychological first-aid](#), a method of assisting responders and civilians in the immediate aftermath of disasters. PFA is broadly endorsed by expert consensus and integrated into guidelines for mental health and psychosocial support in disasters and extreme events. Yet challenges remain. While there is broad agreement that responders need and deserve support after extreme incidents, there is a lack of strong evidence showing what's most effective, who it's most effective for and in what circumstances.

For the full article and more resources click [here](#).