

Newsletter

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Volume 5, Edition 9



Responding with resilience: Mental wellness in EMS

EMS professionals are called to help people at some of the most difficult moments in their lives. Hear how these first responders maintain their mental wellness in the face of what they see and hear daily. [WATCH VIDEO](#).

Managing stress, resilience critical to mental health in EMS

By Bruce Evans

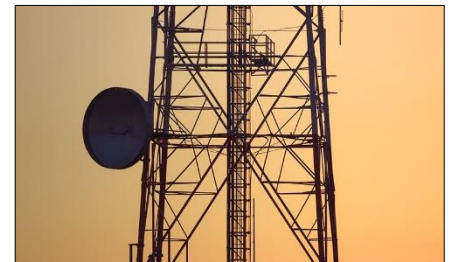
Fire Chief, Upper Pine River Fire Protection District and President of the National Association of EMTs

Being in emergency medical services is a pretty rewarding profession. You get a chance to make a difference in people's lives. Occasionally, you're lucky enough to save people.

But there are also a lot of stressors. And there's an incredible contrast between serving in an urban environment and serving in a small town. In urban areas, it's the constant call volume. One patient every hour.

In a small town, it's knowing the people you're helping on every run. The people involved in car accidents, or the people having a cardiac event, might be the folks

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Cell sites continue to launch in support of first responders, public safety

By AT&T

FirstNet gives first responders – and those critical to their mission – a purpose-built experience they can't get anywhere else. That includes dedicated coverage and capacity, when and where they need it.

[FirstNet](#) already covers over 99% of the U.S. population today. But to better serve public safety, we're continuing to extend the nationwide reach of FirstNet by rolling out high-quality spectrum, known as Band 14.

The FirstNet Authority – an independent government agency – granted AT&T the right to use Band 14 specifically to support public safety on FirstNet.

This gives agencies large and small the reliable, unthrottled connectivity and modern communications tools they need.

In areas where coverage already exists, Band 14 helps first responders get the capacity they need to get the job done. We're also launching new FirstNet cell sites

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RESPONDER HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Responding to the problem of suicide in public safety

By **Dr. Anna Courie**,
Director, Responder Wellness,
FirstNet Program at AT&T
and **Holly MacDonald**,
FirstNet Intern

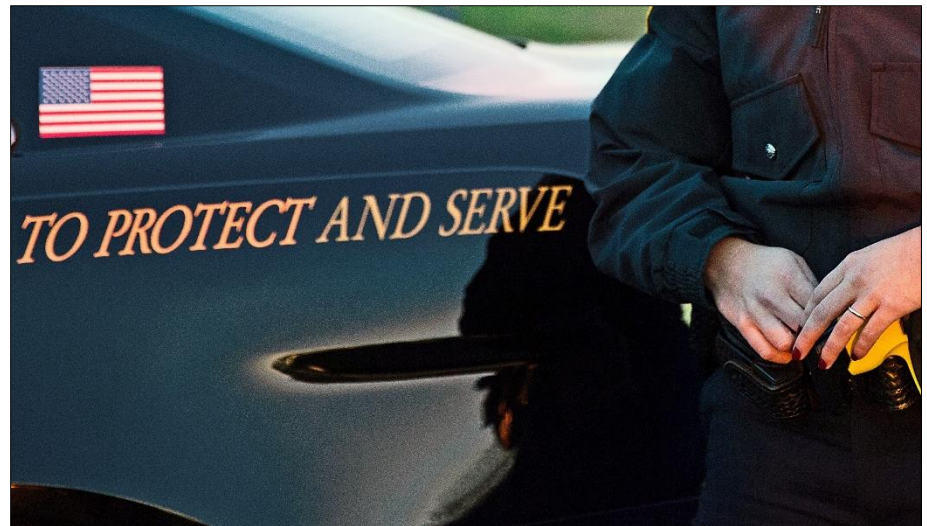
You wake up each morning, put on your uniform, say goodbye to your family or loved ones, and go to work. Perhaps it's going to be a routine day. But you know that even a routine day can quickly take an unexpected turn. Who knows what to expect? But you are brave, selfless, dedicated; willing to put yourself in the line of fire for your community.

You see tragedy often, sometimes on an unimaginable scale. And you witness horrors that many cannot fathom. You do all you can, yet sometimes don't make it in time. While those of you on the front lines understand the potential for danger you find yourself in, the effects of such a mentally- and physically-demanding job can create lasting mental health issues.

So, it's not difficult for first responders to develop mental health issues. First responders see death, grief, injury, pain, and loss more frequently than the average American. This exposure can result in emotional trauma. And left untreated, this trauma could result in serious mental health issues, including suicidal ideation and suicide¹.

Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. Suicide rates increased 33% between 1999 and 2019. And certain factors, such as occupation, can change your susceptibility to suicide or suicidal thought². Many of these risk factors weigh heavily on the first responder community simply by the nature of their work. Stress can manifest as acute or incident related; chronic, which means occurring over a period of time; occupational, and post-traumatic. Yet, when it comes to first responders, statistics fall short in depicting the severity of the issue³.

First responders are at a higher risk for suicide than the general population, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Law



Reports show that about 85% of first responders have experienced symptoms attributed to mental health conditions.

enforcement officers and firefighters are more likely to die from suicide than in the line of duty. And EMS providers are 1.39 times more likely to die by suicide than the general public. These higher-than average suicide rates, coupled with inadequate resources for trauma-informed mental health support, and the stigma surrounding suicide contribute to a growing problem.

Public safety is in dire need of feasible and sustainable solutions informed by evidence.

Some of these solutions can include:

- Implementing peer support groups within the first responder network
- Bolstering mental health programming in organizations
- Implementing suicide prevention frameworks
- And changing the cultural discussion regarding suicide and other mental health issues.

Knowing what to look for and what to do about signs of suicide is crucial.

And we must prioritize education on the matter. Implementing feasible solutions will improve work life and offer support to those who need it. This preventative solution will ensure we address the mental well-being of

first responders across the country. By understanding the problem, facilitating awareness, analyzing the factors involved, and developing evidence-based solutions, we can generate successful prevention tactics and give first responders the support they deserve.

Suicide is preventable. And there is much the first responder community can do to prevent suicide within its own ranks. Evidence-based resources are available at multiple levels to address suicide prevention.

1. At the individual level, resources such as [The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) or the [Crisis Text Line](#) can help. Both are 24/7 services that can aid distressed individuals with suicide prevention and crisis resources.
2. Should someone be worried about a family member, resources such as [The Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#) and [The CDC](#) are available. Both of these resources can help family members identify what to look for as well as what to do should they witness any concerning behaviors.
3. At the organizational level,

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RESPONDER HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Responding to the problem of suicide in public safety

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[The IACP Suicide Prevention Framework](#) and [The IAFF](#) are great resources to better understand and prevent first responder suicide within the organization.

Raising awareness is the most effective way to create sustainable changes. Failure to address mental health issues among first responders can lead to other various issues. This includes failure to complete tasks, poor decision making, and inability to assess risk⁴. These consequences of mental illness can escalate the danger on the job. And first responders are more susceptible to suicide just by virtue of the risk factors, many of which come with the job. However, there are steps you can take to combat this. Decompression sessions, suicide prevention training, and peer-to-peer counseling can help. Changing the cultural narrative among first responders can be a positive change. Reminding first responders that while bravery is commendable, mental illness does not equate to weakness, but rather strength. By identifying and implementing solutions, we can help to support our law enforcement officers, EMS, fire personnel and other public safety workers the way they support our communities.

To those first responders reading today, we thank you, sincerely, for your service, and encourage you to check in on your peers and yourself. When you notice symptoms of depression, anxiety,



The experience of burnout can vary from one person to the next. But there are general mitigation techniques you can try in order to handle job burnout.⁷ So, it's important to consider all of the options, as there is no "one size fits all" option.

feelings of despair, inability to concentrate or make decisions, or thoughts of self-harm in yourself or those around you, seek help. Take a moment to familiarize yourself with the support your organization offers. Know what steps you and those around you can take should you start to feel hopeless. And know you do not need to hide your mental health struggles from the world, as they only make you stronger.

Dr. Anna Fitch Courie, Director of Responder Wellness, FirstNet Program at AT&T, is a nurse, Army wife, former university faculty, and author. Dr. Courie has worked for over 20 years in the health care profession including bone marrow transplant, intensive care, public health, and health promotion practice.

Dr. Courie holds a Bachelor's in Nursing from Clemson University; a Master's in Nursing Education from the University of Wyoming; and a Doctor of Nursing Practice degree from Ohio State University. Dr. Courie's area of expertise is integration of public health strategy across disparate organizations to achieve health improvement goals.

¹[Addressing Suicide Among First Responders: How Colleagues, Friends, and Family Can Help | Counseling@Northwestern](#)

²[Fast Facts \(cdc.gov\)](#)

³[Suicides Among First Responders: A Call to Action | Blogs | CDC](#)

⁴[Addressing Suicide Among First Responders: How Colleagues, Friends, and Family Can Help | Counseling@Northwestern](#)

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RESPONDER HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Managing stress, resilience critical to mental health in EMS

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you see every day. It might be the dad who coaches your kid's little league team. Or it might be an elderly couple you know from the senior center or from one of the restaurants.

And that makes it a lot more personal. It's also a very intimate profession. A lot of times you're seeing people at their worst. You're in their home. You're in their bedroom, you're in their bathroom. Then you have them for a 20- to 40-minute transport in the back of the ambulance. Sometimes you get a chance to learn a little more about their lives or have an impact. And sometimes you don't.

Stress comes with the job

But there are also a lot of emotions involved when you're in an EMS environment. And your senses are really challenged. You can't unsee the things that you see. And it's not just what you see. It's what you smell. It's what you hear. Most people would tell you that the blood curdling scream of a mother when they realize that their child is gone is something you can never unhear.

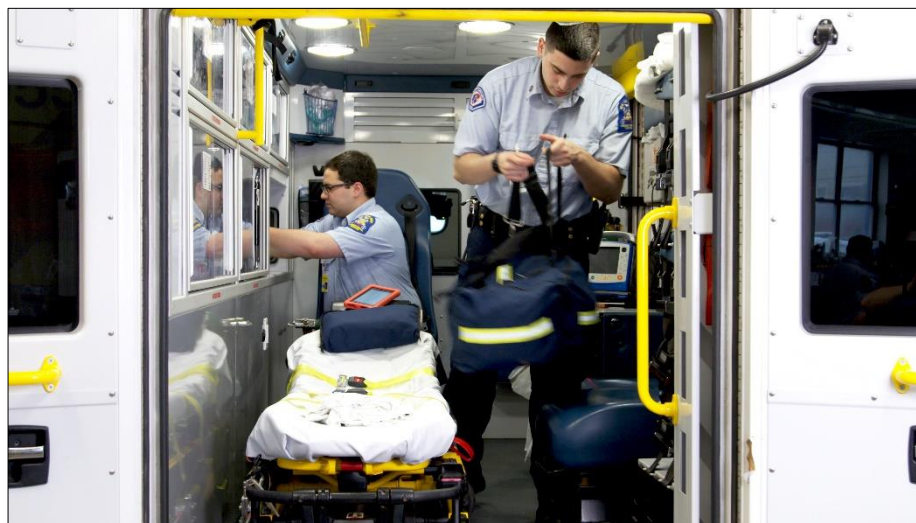
Others will tell you that the smells they smell in the back of an ambulance are something they can't un-smell. Again, all the things that you see visually, there's no way that you're going to unsee them.

So it's important we help our paramedics and EMTs develop techniques they can use to cope with these experiences.

Helping responders cope

One of the things that's really important is to make sure that you have a pretty balanced life. You need to have hobbies, you need to have friends and family, you need to have a peer support team. You need to eat right; exercise and you need to sleep. All those things are important because those are the things that put water back into your bucket so that you can serve other people. You need to take care of yourself so you can serve others.

One of my supervisors in Las Vegas had



"Without reliable communication, there are several risks. There is a safety risk if we need more resources – like a law enforcement agency, or a fire response – and we can't call for those additional resources," says George Tamborelle

a great reputation for being a caring, excellent paramedic. He would tell me that when stress built up to the point where he could feel it, he would take his boat out on the lake and go as fast as he could across that lake. He would take his sons and spend the day, and come back with his batteries recharged.

That's the concept of putting water back in your bucket. You have to ask yourself, what are you doing to have that happen? Is it mountain biking? Is it vacationing? Is it yoga? What is it that you're doing to help put water back in your bucket?

People who don't have a way to put water back in their bucket, who don't have a family or peer group around them to make that happen, are ultimately going to be damaged by what they experience. They're going to get injured. And they're going to probably suffer the long-term consequences of serving in a profession like this.

Importance of mental health

At the National Association of EMTs, through a lot of the listening sessions we've had with our members, we've

come to realize that post COVID, there's going to be a lot of PTSD amongst EMS providers and first responders in the United States.

There's a tsunami coming of mental health issues.

After the alarm response is over for COVID, there are going to be a lot of people that look back and say, "I ran four or five cardiac arrests per shift. I took people who were talking to me to the hospital and an hour later, they were gone. And I had to explain to their family what happened."

We know there's an incredible need for mental health services and peer to peer support. NAEMT has convened a group of excellent mental health professionals in emergency services, thanks to a grant from FirstNet®.

The team is led by a clinical psychologist who works as a fire officer on the east side of Florida. Her team has been working on curriculum that is going to be very impactful to our profession. And we're hoping to launch that in the fall at EMS Expo.

We hope it will provide some answers to folks looking for mental health services and who are going to be

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RESPONDER HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Managing stress, resilience critical to mental health in EMS

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dealing with the aftermath of COVID.

Peer to peer support

The mission of the resiliency course is really to train peers to have adequate skills to engage their coworkers in a positive way and know there are resources out there. There are techniques out there that have been vetted through the mental health community that they can engage with, as peers, before somebody has to get into a formal clinical relationship with a counselor or a therapist.

We know from our research that people are not comfortable engaging their employees' assistance programs. A lot of times they don't want their supervisor to know that information. But they will reach out to a peer. And when they reach out to a peer, we want to make sure that peer has an excellent education, and knows how to handle these situations.

A rewarding career

This profession is really an honorable profession. You're spending your time, your emotion, your energy to help people. And that's rewarding in the end. After 38 years of doing this, you look back and say there are hundreds of people whose lives you changed.

In this profession, you run a lot of cardiac calls. EMS systems are typically built around the response for cardiac arrest. And in excellent EMS systems you probably have about a 45 percent survival rate for cardiac arrest.

In our system last year, we had 100 percent cardiac arrest survival rate. Now, it was only three patients, but one of those three patients who suffered a cardiac arrest in our local fitness club had to be resuscitated. And we found out he went home about a week later.

He went back to his family. He's a local coach and he has a son and a daughter. So, it's very rewarding to find out that your hard work – the CPR, administration of medications and other



The mission of the resiliency course is really to train peers to have adequate skills to engage their coworkers in a positive way and know there are resources out there.

procedures that occur in the field – had a positive outcome that allowed people to go back to their families.

Another case involved a situation from a previous job. I got a call from my former employer saying, "Hey, there's this lady in town says that you transported her sister about a year and a half ago and she wants to talk to you."

Immediately, a part of you assumes it's about a lawsuit. In this particular case, the woman's sister had been in an auto pedestrian accident in front of the Stardust hotel. And she wanted to talk to us.

She had ridden in the front seat on the way to the hospital and witnessed some very excellent care her sister received in the back of the truck. She was so inspired that when she got back home to Wisconsin, she changed her major and decided to go be a nurse. She has since gone on to be a flight nurse, and now teaches paramedics and EMTs.

So if you're a young person, and you're coming into this profession, I would tell you, you're going to see a lot of incredible things. You're going to have some successes, and you're going to have some failures. But overall, when you look back at a 20- or 30-year career, you're going to be proud of the work that you did.

Bruce Evans has been the Fire Chief with the Upper Pine River Fire Protection District in Colorado for the last 10 years and in emergency medical services for 38 years. He started his career as an EMT at West Des Moines EMS in Iowa; then spent a couple years flying with Life Flight Des Moines as an EMT intermediate.

When he received his paramedic certification, he moved to Las Vegas and worked at a private EMS company. He left that company to work as a firefighter/paramedic at Henderson Fire, where he spent the next 18 years, working his way up as an EMS captain and fire captain.

He left Henderson Fire and went to North Las Vegas Fire as an EMS chief and worked his way up to the assistant chief role. He left that job to become the assistant chief at Upper Pine Fire Protection District. Chief Evans also ran the community college program at the College of Southern Nevada's fire science program for many years and has been an active member in many national organizations including the National Association of EMTs.

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LAUNCHING NEW CELL SITES

Cell sites continue to launch in support of first responders, public safety

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across the country to expand rural and remote coverage. So far, we've deployed Band 14 on existing cell sites in more than 700 markets nationwide. This includes areas where connectivity has created a challenge for emergency responses. Areas benefiting from a new, purpose-built FirstNet cell site include:

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- Connecticut
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- [Delaware](#)
 - [Townsend](#)
- [Florida](#)
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