



Your Department's Success Depends on the Wellness of Its People

Safeguarding First Responders Before,
During, and After a Critical Incident





Public safety is an essential component of our society. The mental and physical sacrifice first responders make to serve, protect, and care for our communities is incredibly honorable. Establishing programs, setting expectations, and providing access to relevant resources that support the psychological and physiological wellbeing of first responders is critical to the success of the individual and agency and must be treated as a top priority by the entire chain of command.

It's no secret that first responders often experience critical incidents, triggering events, and traumatic stress at a higher rate than the general population due to increased exposure to high-stake, challenging, and dangerous situations on the job. The fast-paced environment of public safety that often prevents first responders from properly recovering from a critical incident also lends to risk factors that result in reports of depression, PTSD symptoms, suicidal ideation, and other health conditions¹.

Alarming statistics impacting the mental and physical health of first responders include:



Law enforcement officers and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty².



85% of first responders have experienced symptoms related to mental health conditions³.

5X

Depression and PTSD are up to 5 times more common in first responders than in the general population⁴.

What can first responders and public safety agencies do to help better navigate critical incidents?

Vector Solutions' own Johnny Roberson, with 25 years in law enforcement, and Cathy and Javier Bustos ([That Peer Support Couple](#)), Texas Peace Officers with a combined 47 years in law enforcement, came together for a special three-part webinar series on [navigating critical incidents in public safety: before, during, and after](#).

Part 1

Preparing Your Organization for Critical Incidents

The Big Question: Where Do You Start?

Having a 360-degree view of the current state of your agency and personnel is an essential first step to developing a successful wellness program. Cathy recommends two methods to help gauge where your department stands among its members.



Member Surveys - Develop your own or utilize surveys already performed by trusted organizations, like the Fraternal Order of Police wellness surveys.



Visual Observation - Look for internal and external indicators for signs of members in distress, including sudden changes in appearance, conduct, sick leave usage, and safety practices.

Guardian Tracking is a unique performance management and Early Intervention (EI) system built to catch trending behaviors and potential issues in first responders that may stem from critical incidents and triggering events. Supervisors can easily track triggering events and get notifications when thresholds are met to provide help—mental health days, rest, counseling, training, etc.—before an adverse event occurs. Future reminders can easily be created for things like critical incident anniversary dates to help supervisors and peers provide the emotional support needed for those involved.

Protecting Your Department and Your People: Policies & Procedures

Once your department understands where it stands on wellness, it's essential to establish policies and procedures for guidance and implementation. Cathy and Javier suggest contacting other agencies to see if they have policies your department can use. "There are already policies out there....Setting up the policies and procedures should be the easiest part," Cathy shared. Javier added, "When you get example policies and procedures, you can then tailor it to fit your agency. It has to be tailored to the culture for buy-in."

Policies and procedures are more than just documents; more than just checking a box. They indicate a department's commitment from the top down. They set expectations for first responders of what's expected of them and what they can expect from the department when a critical incident occurs. Developing thoughtful policies and procedures that get buy-in from everyone in the department is what leads to real change.

Creating a Mental Health-focused Company Culture: Awareness & Resources

Establish Access to Culturally Competent Mental Health Professionals

City or county-provided clinicians may not always be the optimal resource for your Peer Support program as they may not understand the unique trauma first responders face. "Now, there are training and educational bases for culturally competent mental health professionals for first responders," Cathy shared, stressing the importance of partnering with counselors who are supportive of public safety and know the treatment modalities for trauma.

Strengthen Your Program with Ongoing Training

Part of your wellness program should include ongoing training around managing stress and mental health to support and reinforce your policies and procedures.

Vector LMS & Training Management is an online platform that enables agencies to deliver and track custom and Vector training courses, activities, policies, and more. The web-based software empowers emergency personnel to complete training at their own pace, when and where they want. Paired with Vector Evaluations+, a live skill evaluations app integrated with the Vector LMS training platform, your department can ensure personnel receive the training they need to be confident, competent, and compliant.

Vector courses related to stress and mental health for first responders include Critical Incident Stress Management for Patrol Officers, NFPA 1500 - PTSD in the Fire Department, EMS Workplace Stress, and The Fundamentals of Stress 101 and 201.

Ongoing mental health awareness training is just as important as tactical training. Investing in building a robust wellness program that includes a Peer Support Team, culturally competent mental health professionals, and ongoing training means your department will be ready to help when someone on your team is in need.

Additional resources to help get your wellness program off the ground:

- [Warrior's Rest Foundation](#)
- [Sigma Tactical Health and Wellness](#)
- [IACP Wellness Committee](#)
- [Asher Model Seven Point Approach, Police Chief Niel Gang, Pinole Police Department](#)



Part 2

Supporting First Responders During a Critical Incident

Creating an environment of health and wellness requires an ongoing commitment from the entire chain to:

- Normalize mental health treatment for first responders
- Reject the narrative that “functional dysfunction” is normal in public safety
- Uphold the confidence of your members with communication and transparency
- Reduce barriers to getting help with clear and easy access to tools and resources

“There has to be a culture of support where everyone knows the resources are there, the policies and procedures are in place, and we’re going to get through this together,” said Cathy.

Communication Tactics

Communication and transparency from the department to its people about critical incidents within the agency are important for maintaining trust between members and leadership. No one wants to learn about an incident in their own department from social media or neighboring departments.

Vector Scheduling simplifies staffing management and improves communication with a mobile app and 24/7 access that enables departments to optimize staffing schedules during an emergency with automated callbacks, strike team deployments, and mass communications to members in seconds.

Javier warns that large critical incidents can come with disinformation from the media and emphasizes the importance of communicating what you can when you can to dispel rumors and help the team focus on the task at hand.



The Power of Supportive Family

An informed and educated family knows and understands what to expect and how to support their first responder during a critical incident. Responding to a critical incident may mean members are unavailable for extended periods of time. It may mean the first responder may not be ready to talk right away. Having an action plan for the family sets expectations and helps alleviate stress for the first responder and their loved ones.

Keeping Members Out of the “Mental Woods”

Supervisors keeping a close eye on their team during a critical incident, watching out for signs of distress to intervene as necessary can also help reduce further trauma. Javier encourages supervisors to keep a lookout for the “thousand-yard stare” and to switch out crews who have been on the scene for hours for relief and defusing.

Having mentally and physically well supervisors is another important factor for keeping members out of the mental woods, as healed supervisors are more effective at helping down the chain.

The Importance of Agency Relationships

The department-member is a symbiotic relationship that requires commitment and communication in both directions between leadership and members. Providing a circle of support during a difficult time can help keep the trust strong between members of your department. Good communication, transparency, checking in on members, and providing access to resources all help maintain positive relationships within your agency.

Part 3

Helping First Responders Recover from a Critical Incident

Recovering from a critical incident may be difficult, but it is possible with a lot of work from the first responder and their agency. A prepared department can act faster and more effectively to help its people get their health and wellness back on track by fostering an environment of healing.

Post Critical Incident Assignments

Reassigning members who have gone through a critical incident is often the right decision, but departments must consider the nature of the reassignment to prevent further trauma.

When Javier experienced an officer-involved shooting in 2010 and his agency reassigned him to the Sex Crime Unit for administrative duty, he knew that would not be a good fit after just being involved in a traumatic event and spoke up. He shared, "I requested to go back to the Academy, which for me, as far as my stress levels and how I felt mentally, was 100% better than I would have been if they stuck me in sex crimes."

Being mindful of where you're placing your people after an incident and being transparent on the reasoning with your members who are already hurting can help keep them from feeling like their reassignment is a punishment.

Statement Considerations After a Critical Incident

Following a critical event, the first responder's statements are essential, but so is being cognizant of what that member just went through. Cathy provided the following considerations:

- Memory exclusions and challenges may occur immediately following a critical incident. Follow best practice recommendation of waiting 72 hours.
- Keep communication open. Isolating members from talking to others, watching their videos, or making statements for long periods can negatively affect their psychological wellbeing.
- Allow members to watch body-cam footage or videos when making statements.
Enable Peer Support representation in addition to their legal representation when members are providing statements for additional mental health support.

The “Ghosts” of Critical Incidents: Addressing Triggers

For first responders, working in the city that they live in often means the community holds good and bad memories. You can see that fatality accident, where a car hit a tree, where a baby died of SIDs. All those memories come back to you, and that’s part of the healing process.

Cathy elaborated, “Triggers can only continue to be triggers if we allow them. Part of addressing triggers is getting the help you need through [EMDR](#), and now [brainspotting](#)....They may never go away, but we have to control how greatly they affect our lives.”

It takes the entire department working together to help members recover from critical incidents. Supervisors, Peer Support Team, and fellow first responders all play important roles in facilitating healing.

Leadership Acknowledgment of Critical Incident Anniversaries

Paying tribute to critical incident anniversaries is important, but it must also be done with care and consideration of the individual(s) involved. Systematically tracking these events enables supervisors and leadership to ensure important dates are not missed and that your members feel supported. Javier added to the importance of administrators remembering critical incident anniversaries, “You know who’s never going to forget an anniversary? That first responder involved in the critical incident.”

Honoring the anniversary of fallen officers is another way to pay tribute while teaching future first responders about legacy and reinforcing that the department will never forget. Cathy mentioned Saving a Hero’s Place, an organization in Texas that makes honor chairs for fallen members. She added, “It’s important for the morale and the future of our legacy to continue the tradition of letting them know we’re going to remember their sacrifice for the community and department.”

First responders have the enormous responsibility of caring for the safety and wellbeing of our communities. Historically, from law enforcement officers to firefighters, EMTs to dispatchers and other emergency personnel, first responder mental health has not been a priority. As we learn more about how deeply traumatic stress can impact every aspect of our lives, public safety culture must also change to ensure the success of agencies and individuals.

As much as first responders are responsible for the care of their own wellbeing, departments can’t leave our heroes to fend for their wellness alone.

[Watch this timely three-part webinar series](#) for additional insights and real ways to support the mental and physical wellbeing of your people.

Resources

^{1, 4} “First Responders: Behavioral Health Concerns, Emergency Response, and Trauma” Disaster Technical Assistance Center Supplemental Research Bulletin, SAMHSA, May 2018.

² Miriam Heyman, et al., “The Ruderman White Paper on Mental Health and Suicide of First Responders,” Ruderman Family Foundation, April 2018.

³ “University of Phoenix Survey Finds Majority of First Responders Have Experienced Symptoms Related to Mental Health Issues,” University of Phoenix press release, April 20, 2017.