



Peer Support Team



Peer Support Program Manual



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Introduction

The purpose of the Peer Support Program (PST) is to offer confidential assistance and support to all Department employees and their family members in times of personal need or due to traumatic incidents that have caused acute or cumulative stress.

The PST will augment the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and does not replace psychological treatment. The objectives of the PST are to minimize psychological trauma or stressors that the Department employees and their families may experience throughout their career and to render assistance and guidance.

Peer Support Members will be trained to provide peer support services. The PST team members are not licensed counselors or therapists but act as peer support providers offering information, guidance and direction on how to best resolve emotionally charged matters in a confidential setting.

This manual provides information regarding the administration, selection of team members, training required and the deployment process for the PST.

I. Overview

A. Purpose and Philosophy

1. The PST is designed to use the Department's resources to benefit employees in times of need.
2. In modern society, work related or externally caused stressors have the potential to jeopardize relationships, health, safety and work performance. The PST is designed to help employees and their families reduce stress, deal with crises and family problems, and obtain immediate, short-term help during and after critical incidents. The members of the PST will be educated and trained on how to pick up on red flags and how to refer those members to get assistance if needed.

B. Peer Support Services

1. The Peer Support Program (PST) provides a network of concerned members offering volunteer services to peers in need. PST are trained by mental health professionals and are able to assist with many types of problems. PST members will receive basic training in Peer Support and Critical or High Stress Incident Management. Additionally, the PST team members will receive continuing education hours each quarter. One of the most significant skills PST members will possess is their ability to be listeners and effectively communicate with others, as well as be familiar with resources available and how to refer members to utilize these resources. An assigned Battalion Chief, in conjunction with the Peer Support Team Advisors, will supervise peer support members.

C. Peer Support Goal

1. Listen/Refer/Support- educate peers and develop a referral system of appropriate professional assistance utilizing mental health professionals or other human service agencies and self-help support groups.
2. To provide intervention, which will assist in defusing or mitigating problems before they become crisis situations.
3. To assist at time of crisis, keeping member safe while supporting and facilitating in use of appropriate resources.

To provide ongoing resiliency training which will assist members in implementing self-coping skills and quick recovery and return to functioning.

D. Administrative Structure

1. PST Team Lead

This individual is responsible for the overall management of the program. Management includes oversight of the team and funding requirements.

2. PST Team Coordinators

These individuals are responsible for acting as the operation managers of the team. Responsibilities include:

- a. Recruiting PST members
- b. Evaluation of critical incidents
- c. Coordination of Peer Team Responses/Deployment
- d. Team education and training
- e. Incident support
- f. Reporting and tracking

3. PST Team Members

Select individuals who handle most one-on-one contacts, defusing's, crew/station checks, station blitz's and follow-ups. These individuals provide resiliency and education to their peers, as well as follow the "Listen/Refer/Support" model when dealing with issues among members of the department or their families.

4. Department Chaplain

Responds to the needs of the department members and makes contact with individuals in crisis

5. Mental Health Coordinator

Licensed professional counselor or social worker to provide clinical oversight and guidance to the PST.

II. Operation and Deployment

A. Requests for Peer Support Team Services

Individuals requesting PST services may contact a team member by logging on to <http://firestrong.org/> under the Peer Team Resource tab for a list of names, phone numbers, and full biographies of each peer member. In addition, each station will have a poster with all Peer Members contact information

B. Authorized Peer Support Interaction

1. PST team members may be contacted at anytime by a member. If the PST member is on duty, they will need to explain to the member that they are on duty and might be subject to calls. When peer contacts occur off-duty, overtime will not be approved.
2. If a PST member is contacted while on duty and it is an urgent situation that requires the PST member to alter their normal course of duty, they need to contact their immediate supervisor for guidance and to call and authorize a change in duty status. If their immediate supervisor is not available, they will contact the next level supervisor in the Chain of Command for direction.

C. High Stress Incident Management

1. The Department recognizes employees may be subjected to high levels of stress during the performance of their duties. The nature of some calls into the 911 system may require public safety personnel to perform duties in harsh environments and in the face of great human tragedy, suffering and even loss. These stressors may have a direct impact on the employee and their family. A High Stress Incident (HSI) is any incident deemed serious enough by the magnitude of the circumstances based on the request or reactions of the on duty personnel.
2. Upon the occurrence of a HSI, Peer Support Team Coordinator will assist with assigning members of the peer support team to affected crew members for support. The coordinator taking the lead on the incident will begin the needed research and contact the Shift Commander in order to make an assessment of those affected by the incident. Once needs are determined, an intervention can be organized if necessary. If an intervention is deemed necessary, contact will be made with the Captains prior to the PST member being deployed. A PST member can then respond to the station to provide support and resources.

Team members will be notified with direction to contact the lead coordinator if they are available to respond. It is preferable to use on-duty personnel to assist where available, due to their work status and availability. In the event that a team member played a significant role in the critical incident, they will not be utilized to assist in the intervention, but will be encouraged rather to participate as an attendee in a group setting or assisted individually.

3. If it is determined that no PST member is needed to respond, The Battalion Chief and/or Captain will remind the crew of the resources and peer support contact information that can be found on FIRESTRONG.ORG.
4. Once a PST member has been deployed, a prior approval will have been made by the Shift Commander to allow the Captain's discretion in making the determination to remain in service or go out of service. This process will allow the members to discuss all aspects of the HSI and determine any further needs. Members will be reminded and shown where to look for resources on the FIRESTRONG.ORG website in addition to further references including EAP Services and Fire Department Chaplain.
5. In the event of a Critical Incident not being alerted through the paging system, any member can contact the On-duty Peer Coordinator as identified through TeleStaff.
6. Follow-ups will be a crucial part of this process and can be administered by the PST Mental Health Coordinator, the Chaplain or the PST members. PST members will remind individuals about normal symptoms and reactions to unusual events. The PST member can make recommendations to the Shift Commander which may include anything from additional time out of service up to the remainder of the shift off.
7. A list of current team members will be available and maintained on the FIRESTRONG.ORG website as well as posted at every station. This list will be available for all members of the department to view in the event that a PST member is sought to assist an individual or group.

III. Confidentiality

Confidentiality is essential to promoting trust and anonymity between peer support members and individuals requesting assistance. Confidentiality is essential to protect the identity of employees and the content of any information shared with a member of the PST team. It must be clear that team members are not licensed counselors or therapists but act as peer support offering information and direction to resolve emotionally charged matters in a confidential setting (Listen/Refer/Support). Each peer support member must complete the *Confidentiality Agreement* form. See *Appendix* for an example.

A. Confidentiality Guidelines

1. PST interactions are considered confidential by the Department in order to ensure trust, anonymity and the effectiveness of assistance requested. However, confidentiality cannot be absolute dependant upon the seriousness of a circumstance or legal requirement. While every reasonable effort to protect anonymity shall be taken by the peer support member, there are exceptions to the Department's confidentiality policy if a danger to self or danger to other is determined.
2. In order for the PST system to be effective, members must know that what they share regarding an incident is not for tactical review. In a group setting, if PST services are requested, it must be known that what is shared should remain within the group that is present.

B. Confidentiality Exceptions

The rights and privacy of employees will be safeguarded to the maximum extent possible, while balancing the Department's compelling interest in maintaining a safe and productive workplace and work force. There are some situations where confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. While every effort will be made to protect anonymity, the gravity of some situations will demand attention by supervisors. Confidentiality will be maintained except in the following circumstances:

1. When a crime has been committed.
2. When circumstances indicate that those being assisted are in danger or a threat to themselves or others.
3. When child/elder abuse is alleged or apparent.
4. When subpoenaed, the subpoenaed information should be discussed with a legal advisor to insure the requested information or testimony should be provided.

C. Breach of Confidentiality Consequences

Compromising a confidence for any reason other than those outlined above, will be considered a violation of Department policy. A team member, who violates confidentiality, may be removed from the team.

D. Breach of Confidentiality: Non-Emergency Procedures

1. Whenever a PST team member believes a confidentiality exception is present, the PST team member will, as soon as possible, contact the Peer Support Mental Health Coordinator and provide a briefing on the general circumstances of the situation.
2. If, in the judgment of the Mental Health Coordinator's, immediate attention is required, the team member will disclose all information about the situation including the identity of the employee or individual(s) involved. The Mental Health Coordinator will initiate appropriate steps to resolve the matter.
3. If, in the judgment of the Mental Health Coordinator, a confidentiality exception is not present, the issue will be considered confidential and the matter will go no further than the Mental Health Coordinator and the team member.

E. Breach of Confidentiality: Emergency Procedures

If a PST team member becomes aware of an emergency situation involving a confidentiality exception, they will contact the PST Team Lead and disclose all pertinent information.

IV. Peer Support Team Members

A. Selection Process

1. As PST members are needed, it will be solicited through various department media.
2. Applicants must submit a letter of interest and willingness to serve as a PST member.
3. All PST members selected will sign the following:
 - a. A Confidentiality Form (see Appendix)
 - b. An attestation agreeing to abide by the program guidelines; have read and fully understand the Peer Support Team Program Manual.
 - c. An attestation agreeing that they are not currently the object of a disciplinary investigation that could result in their suspension, demotion, or termination. If at any time the member becomes an object of the above, it is their responsibility to contact the Team Lead.
4. The Peer Support Committee will review the applicant's qualifications and work history. The quality of the applicant's job performance, as well as any previous disciplinary actions will be considered in the selection process.
5. Dependent upon number of applicants an interview process may be conducted.

B. Training Requirements

Members are required to complete 16 hours of voluntary basic training (provided by the PST) prior to becoming active. Thereafter, team members are to attend all quarterly CE's.

- Assisting Individuals in Crisis
- Group Crisis Intervention
- Advanced Group Crisis Intervention

Other pertinent and applicable training for PST members will be selected and provided as often as once a quarter through the Peer Team Coordinators. Any PST member failing to attend ongoing training may be removed from the program. C.

C. Removal of a Team Member

1. PST team members may be removed for cause from their positions. Conditions which will be considered for cause may include, but are not limited to:
 - a. Any substantiated breach of confidentiality (including substantiate rumors of a breach in confidentiality).
 - b. Failure to comply with training requirements.
2. Removal for cause of a team member shall be evaluated by and at the discretion of the Mental Health Coordinator.

D. Authorized Peer Team Member Callout

Services provided by a Peer Team member will be conducted while team members are in an “on-duty” status whenever possible.

E. Overtime Guidelines

Every effort will be made to use on-duty team members to reduce costs. Overtime is not authorized for call out or individual peer interactive sessions unless supervisor approval.

F. Scheduling Guidelines

1. Members will notify their immediate supervisor when participating in any Peer Services activity to ensure there are no scheduling conflicts.
 2. If a conflict occurs, the Peer Support team member will notify the PST Team Lead, who will work within the Chain of Command in an attempt to resolve the conflict.
 3. Peer Services activity will be considered off-duty time. No overtime will be granted.
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