
April 3, 2025

Opening Statement – Amy Foley, Executive Director of the Tri-State First Responder Peer Support Team

Good morning, esteemed members of the committee and Chairperson Stewart.

Thank you for allowing me to submit written testimony on the State Budget HB 96.

Our request is simple yet impactful. We urge the State to invest \$200,000 in each fiscal year of the next budget cycle for our Peer Support development and training programs.

The Need

This investment gives lifesaving skills to first responders. They save them themselves or another member of their department. Research indicates that 46.8% of fire fighters have suicidal ideation, 29.2% have suicide plans, and 15.5% have suicide attempts. This is at a higher rate than the general population which is around 5.6-14.3%, 3.9%, and 1.9-8.7% respectively (Streeb et al., 2019). Law enforcement officers face a 54% higher risk of dying by suicide (Violanti & Steege, 2021), underscoring the critical need for comprehensive wellness programs and support services that are culturally competent.

Research has found that law enforcement experience an average of 3.5 traumatic events for each six months they serve. In a 30-year career, that adds up to over 200% more traumatic experiences than the average person will have in their lifetime. **Studies also show that the risk of developing PTSD or other similar mental health conditions is 25.6 times higher for public safety officers than the general public.**

These crucial events can include responding to domestic violence, serious crimes including crimes against children, gruesome injuries, dead bodies, rescues from fires and car crashes, and more. They are also seeing an increase of violence toward the first responders themselves.

Recently, a first responder department called us to support them when one of their fire fighters suffered a physical emergency at a drug store in their own jurisdiction. The first responders who entered the Walgreens to assist them were the colleagues they worked with each day. Can you imagine giving aid to a co-worker not knowing if they will live or die? Can you imagine transporting them in the same ambulance where they rendered lifesaving care just a few hours before?



I am thankful to say this firefighter lived. Here is the message from their Chief about the impact of the Tri-State Peer Support Team (Because this is a public document, names are not given to protect privacy):

"I would like to offer my highest recommendation for continued funding of the TSPST. Over the past 14 months, the XXX Fire Department has called on TSPST twice to assist our employees after witnessing near-unthinkable tragedies, including one that affected me personally. The immediate response of the team, along with the care and compassion they showed, truly helped the healing process both in the short term and long term.

In a time when recruiting and retaining public safety employees has become increasingly challenging, providing mental health support and wellness is more important today than ever in my 31-year career."

The Tri-State Peer Support Team was founded because of crisis' in our region including two Line of Duty Deaths. We know how to respond to a crisis. Over the past few years, our mission has changed from responding in crisis to offering training on prevention and early intervention. That is the impact of the funding you gave us in the previous budget. People are seeking help before their careers, families and lives are destroyed. They are hearing the message and getting help.

Building awareness about prevention and early intervention can be very fun and exciting and a few of our trainings exemplified that. We sponsored Ashley Ferris to speak about her Officer involved shooting and attendees rated her presentation 5 out of 5 stars. Two quotes from the Ashley Ferris event:

"One of the most important and impactful trainings I have ever been too."

"Every law enforcement officer should attend this training."

In addition to speakers:

- We organized 47 trainings with over 1000 attendees.
- We had contact with over 100 departments.
- We have responded to a request for support after critical incidents 54 times.
- Vetted Culturally Competent Clinicians, in-patient, and out-patient facilities.
- **Saved 5 lives with our Red Alert Suicide Awareness Campaign.**

"I didn't know it was this easy to get help" First Responder, Cincinnati, OH

First Responders call the Tri-State Peer Support Team for themselves and their departments. Our team of trained peers know the job because they do the job. They show up. They listen.



They support connections to clinical treatment. They remove guns from first responders so they don't take their own life. They say, "I have been there too. I know what you are going through."

And they do know.

When we improve mental health and wellness, and build resilience in first responders, the impact will be felt at home. We represent the families of first responders who carry a different burden, but they serve alongside their spouses. They serve alongside their parents. Attached is an essay written by the daughter of the Fire Chief who responded the night Dep. Bill Brewer was murdered. She was 10 years old when the event happened. She wrote an essay for her high school English Class. That day haunts many of us. Here is a snippet of her perspective:

"My Dad's job was dangerous. My Dad's job haunted the both of us, it seemed. I feared all the possible outcomes and he became so worn down because of his occupation. I could curse his job over and over until my voice was hoarse, but I knew he would never leave it. He loved helping people and he adored his coworkers more. Deputy Bill Brewer's death marked a turning point in my perspective, however, and while I will be eternally grateful that my Dad was not the one life lost in the line of duty that day, time has struck a chord with me. The value of time really does ring more important when one doesn't know how much of it they have left."

We want to give our first responders the chance to make every moment the best it can be- not overshadowed by traumatic images, isolation, and drinking too much alcohol to forget. We want them to have the chance to retire and live more than an average of 5 years post-retirement

The Solution

The Tri-State Peer Support Team is a resource that is trusted by first responder departments because we do the job. Our team has the credibility to build peer support in departments and respond to crisis. Our collaborative approach encourages departments and peer supporters to participate. How do we do this:

- Peer Support Training in accordance with the Ohio Revised Code. On-going training for ORC Peer Support Certification Compliance.
- Evaluation and Data collection to show the impact of our efforts. (See Red Alert Impact analysis)
- Regional point of reference for departments to understand training opportunities, ORC Compliance, and clinical resources. No one is siloed and developing programs on their own which saves time and money for departments.
- Developing cultural competence in EAP's, sleep centers, clinicians, and other treatment providers so they understand first responder culture.



- In-patient crisis treatment process development with Good Sam Hospital for suicidal first responders. (See Good Sam Room 16 Protocol)
- Weekly Peer Support educational opportunities to improve peer support skills including: weekly clinical consultation, opportunities to meet treatment providers, and peer support development discussions. These trainings include Trauma Informed Care Principles and Best Practices for Peer Support. (Toolbox Tuesday Flier)
- Giving trained Peer Supporters access to Peer Connect App with local resources, skills development and learning videos.
- Building County Teams in our smaller areas. Sharing culturally competent clinical resources and how to access them via Telehealth.
- Crisis support and response which includes peer supporters, clinicians, chaplains and pet therapy.
- Oversight from Board Members and Chiefs Advisory Council.

The Impact on Ohio

Healthy First Responders perform at the highest standards in their communities. Our region is a leader in developing, building and sustaining peer support in first responder departments. Our innovation means we bring in trainers and speakers that are on the forefront of peer support concepts and wellness programs. These excite our first responders and they bring new ideas back to their departments. Changing ideas and assumptions changes cultures at departments improving the mental health and wellness.

- Our 2024 Achievements are attached. The back is a list of the departments and Associations that support our efforts.
- Our training goal in 2025 is to increase engagement at the department level and the regional level. We estimate training impact on 1500 – 2000 first responders.
- We will develop data collection practices through a grant from the Departments of Justice to understand the impact of peer support. This is a deep dive into 5-6 departments with intensive data collection.
- Increased help seeking in by first responders because more departments are building peer support.
- Normalizing seeking help saving careers, lives and families.

Closing Statement



The Tri-State Peer Support Team funding is a strategic investment in the safety of our communities. The cost to replace a first responder that leaves his/her job is estimated to be between \$150,000 and \$200,000.00. Our funding is equivalent to about 1 first responder employee. If we use the statistics of the 5 lives we saved: $5 \times \$150,000$ (the cost to replace a trained responder) = \$750,000.00 saved by departments in the year. The monetary impact of these lives saved over the course of their career and the impact on the family, because they are still alive, is immeasurable. We respectfully ask for your support of \$200,000 per fiscal year to continue and expand this vital program. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Email: firstresponderps@gmail.com

Website: tsfirstresponderpst.org