

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

# Preventing Suicide in First Responders

There's a growing problem in this country that too few are discussing—suicide among first responders. The truth is more law enforcement officers and firefighters have died by suicide as compared to other line-of-duty related deaths. The number of public safety personnel who die by suicide is likely underreported, suggesting even higher actual numbers.

## Risk Factors: Occupational and Personal Stresses

According to First H.E.L.P., a national organization dedicated to collecting suicide data on firefighters, emergency medical personnel, corrections officers, and 911 telecommunications operators, there were 168 suicide-related deaths among first responders in 2023.<sup>1</sup> While that is lower than past years, including 256 reported in 2019, the rates of suicide continue to be higher among firefighters and paramedics than among the general public.<sup>2</sup>

Those who've studied suicide among the first responder community say the population is at a higher risk due, in large part, to acute and chronic work and personal stress.

More specifically, the suicide risk factors for first responders include:<sup>3</sup>

- Alcohol and substance misuse
- Availability and familiarity of weapons, such as firearms
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Relationship problems due to difficult or erratic work schedules
- Social scrutiny and other misperceptions
- Stigma, including the fear of being seen as weak or unable to perform duties as expected.

### By the Numbers

A survey of EMTs and paramedics in the U.S. found that 37% had contemplated suicide and 6.6% had attempted it.<sup>4</sup>

More police officers die by suicide than by gunfire and traffic crashes combined.<sup>4</sup>

A little over 25% of firefighters considered suicide, and around 12% made a suicide plan.<sup>5</sup>

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“Suicide prevention resources may be better received if delivered by a fellow first responder or someone well-trained in first responder culture and experience.”

## Resiliency & Effective Suicide Prevention

It's essential to acknowledge what the research shows about the ever-increasing issue among first responders: resiliency training is key to helping reduce the stress reaction that frequently occurs in this population. The Suicide Prevention Plan for Ohio supports this finding and includes a recommendation for increasing training among public safety and emergency systems, specifically through evidence-based suicide care.

OSPF offers first responder agencies evidence-based Question. Persuade. Refer. (QPR) and Counseling on Access to Lethal Means (CALM) Conversations training.

**QPR:** Just as people trained in CPR and the Heimlich Maneuver help save thousands of lives each year, first responders trained in QPR learn how to help someone in crisis seek the support they need. This training will equip key first responder personnel with the confidence and competence needed to initiate conversations about suicide with colleagues, instill hope, and refer at-risk colleagues to appropriate mental and behavioral health resources.

**CALM Conversations:** Many people do not access behavioral or physical health care despite having thoughts of being at risk of suicide. Yet many of them signal to others, directly or indirectly, that they are struggling. This interactive workshop provides first responders with information on how to recognize and respond to suicide risk, with an additional focus on reducing access to lethal means—especially firearms. First responders learn to talk with someone who might have these thoughts in a collaborative, non-judgmental, and supportive manner.

## More Prevention Strategies

An effective suicide prevention plan for first responders should include a postvention plan and postvention policies that help first responders and agencies connect with local mental health resources, facilities, and clinicians.

Family and friends, too, can equip themselves to help by learning the warning signs and risk factors for suicide, as well as how to have a caring conversation with their first responder loved one.

### References

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- 4 The Lighthouse Project. "Asking about Suicide is Vital for First Responders and the Public They Serve." <https://cssrs.columbia.edu/the-columbia-scale-c-srs/first-responders/>. Accessed April 17, 2025.
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### ABOUT

#### OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF) educates, advocates for, and builds connections and support for individuals, families, and communities to prevent suicide.



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