



BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE
RECOMMENDATIONS

MARCH / 2024





Behavioral Health Subcommittee Recommendations

Background:

The Behavioral Health Subcommittee was convened in January 2023 to make recommendations to the Governor's Fire Service Policy Council regarding "actionable strategies to reduce the risk of and mitigate behavioral health issues on the fire service and its stakeholders." It is widely known and substantiated that fire service personnel are experiencing behavioral health challenges and acute crises at higher rates than the general public. The causes of this high rate are multi-faceted and interlaced with many factors that comprise the work environment of fire service personnel.

The subcommittee was charged with:

- Assessing the problem from an individual and system perspective,
- Determining the capabilities of existing programs,
- Measuring the impact of those existing programs, and
- Developing recommendations to mitigate and reduce the risk of behavioral health challenges

The subcommittee solicited input from subject matter experts, surveyed fire agencies across the state, performed listening sessions with a wide array of front-line fire service stakeholders, and researched industry-wide best practices. In completing its charge and preparing to make recommendations, the subcommittee developed three products related to firefighter behavioral health: a statewide survey, a structural needs assessment, and a training plan for firefighters and affiliated individuals.

Discussion:

The subcommittee members appreciated the opportunity to represent their stakeholders and share their experiences and expertise in firefighter health and wellbeing. This discussion highlights the challenges and needs of the Oregon fire service. However, the subcommittee would like to acknowledge the contributions of individuals and organizations within the state to care for our firefighters. Having the opportunity to conduct this work on behalf of the Governor's Fire Service Policy Council is a testament to the awareness of behavioral health issues raised by our leaders, associations, fire agencies, state departments, and insurers over the years. The subcommittee recognizes its genesis was a culmination of the efforts of those who served before and continue to serve. The results of the subcommittee's activities point to the substantial need for increased investment in firefighter behavioral health. The subcommittee found that agencies throughout the state have a wide range of programs,

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from nonexistent to very robust. The extent of these programs is frequently correlated to an agency's size, type, location, and the availability of internal and external resources to the agency. The subcommittee combined new information and their long-term work in reviewing local, regional, statewide, and national efforts. These efforts each have strengths and could help support an agency or individual. However, these are rarely coordinated meaningfully and, since they are often informational resources, underutilized as fire agencies lack a system and the support to implement them. Individuals expressed frustration and experienced stasis due to the abundance of uncoordinated resources available and not having assistance or direction on where to start. Agencies also identified internal capacity and lack of funding as primary reasons for having limited or no behavioral health programs. After an in-depth review and discussion of these and other challenges facing the Oregon fire service, the subcommittee recognized that agencies need assistance and that a state-level organizational structure could serve as a clearinghouse for information, coordination, and resource allocation to support this work.

Within their review of literature and resources and hearing from individuals and agencies, the subcommittee found that behavioral health in the fire service cannot be addressed successfully as a standalone problem. Behavioral health is dependent upon and impacts the whole firefighter. Work environment, medical and physical fitness, social/familial dynamics, daily and on-scene decision-making, and other factors can exacerbate or improve a firefighter's behavioral health as much as one's behavioral health influences how they approach those same factors. The consensus of the subcommittee is that fire service members require a holistic approach to health, wellness, and safety to address behavioral health challenges and improve and sustain a solid behavioral health state.

After considering the exhaustive research and discussion, the subcommittee concluded that creating a statewide structure for collaboration is how we can successfully address the health and wellness of Oregon fire service personnel. This structure must address four primary issues facing health, wellness, and safety in the fire service:

- Behavioral health
- Physical health and fitness
- Cancer risk reduction
- Incident safety

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Recommendations:

For over a decade, individuals and organizations across Oregon have demonstrated initiative, great effort, and leadership in caring for our firefighters. With this demonstrated energy over such a sustained period, the subcommittee is confident that a well-resourced collaborative, which aligns efforts and supports local agencies/associations, will effectively improve firefighter health, wellness, and safety across the state. Therefore, the Firefighter Behavioral Health Subcommittee recommends that:

1. The Oregon State Fire Marshal establish an Oregon Fire Service Health and Safety Collaborative and provide support, such as staff to engage and involve fire service stakeholders in improving all aspects of firefighter health, safety, and well-being. This collaborative should consist of the OSFM, DPSST, OFMA, OFDDA, OVFA, OSFFC, OFCA, SDAO, CIS, and SMEs and create a statewide, regionalized network to include and serve all Oregon fire agencies;
2. The State of Oregon provide dedicated funding and resources to support firefighter health, wellness, and safety efforts;
3. OSFM and DPSST develop and distribute related training curricula and support services to the collaborative and Oregon fire agencies; and
4. The collaborative report quarterly to the Governor's Fire Service Policy Council and, as appropriate, provide additional recommendations to improve firefighter health, wellness, and safety.

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This report was prepared by:

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The Governor's Fire Service Policy Council

