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April 4, 2019

Honorable Members of the City Council
City of Los Angeles
200 N. Main Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Council File 19-0283 Los Angeles Fire Department Behavioral Health Program

Honorable Members of the Public Safety Committee:

In response to the March 19, 2019, Council Motion 19-0283, the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) appreciates the opportunity to submit the enclosed report regarding the LAFD's Behavioral Health and Peer Support Programs and how these programs address the 4 areas identified by the Council, which include Awareness, Prevention, Intervention, and Post Crises Strategies.

The report is hereby transmitted to the City Council's Public Safety Committee for consideration and approval.

Should you need additional information, please contact Battalion Chief Linda Cessor, Administration Operations at (213) 978-3860.

Sincerely,

RALPH M. TERRAZAS
Fire Chief

The Los Angeles Fire Department (Department) and the United Firefighters of Los Angeles (UFLAC) recognize the significance of job stress and its negative impact on firefighters. For many years the Peer Support Program, in coordination with a single mental health professional, was available to assist firefighters when needed. This service was commonly provided after a single tragic event or when a firefighter asked for assistance. Historically, this avenue for assistance was often underutilized, in part, due to a culture which did not accept or understand the importance of psychological wellness, and the negative stigma attached to seeking help.

In recent years, however, the negative stigma of accessing mental health services has given way to the recognition and acceptance that job stress is playing a major role in the increase in firefighter suicides and other types of mental health disorders. It is now known that the culmination of responding to accident scenes, homicides, infant and child deaths, work environment issues, and extended brush or other fire operations, coupled with long work hours and lack of sleep, contribute to mental health and substance abuse disorders in fire and emergency personnel. Similar to military personnel who experience combat operations, the experiences shared by many firefighters can result in Post-Traumatic Stress, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and a number of other mental health issues. Recent statistics reflect the number of firefighters who die annually from suicide is higher than the number of firefighters who die in the line of duty.

Recognizing positive mental health should be a priority for firefighters, the Department and UFLAC joined together in a mutual campaign to eradicate the negative stigma attached to seeking help and to create a robust behavioral health program which addressed the needs of all members.

The current LAFD/UFLAC Behavioral Health Program contains two main aspects - the Behavioral Health Program (BHP), which is managed by the Department, and the Peer Support Program, which is managed by UFLAC.

The Department Behavioral Health Program currently includes:

- Two Fire Psychologists, both of whom hold a Doctorate in Psychology
- Two office locations, one in Downtown Los Angeles and one in West Los Angeles
- A Senior Administrative Clerk position
- Use of Telehealth services to capture members that do not live in the area
- Access to research material, telehealth, and other mental health resources, and
- The ability to provide training, research, group/individual/couples therapy, peer support, and critical incident stress debriefings

The UFLAC Peer Support Program currently includes:

- One Mental Health Professional (MFT 7666) who also holds a Doctorate degree in Clinical Psychology.
- Over 70 firefighters trained in peer support and/or Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), and

- The ability to provide training, research, group/individual/couples therapy, peer support, and critical incident stress debriefings.

AWARENESS/ PREVENTION

Awareness of the types of job stress Firefighters face on a daily basis is the foundation for positive mental health and resiliency. The Department and UFLAC recognize the significance of this and are taking great strides in providing avenues to ensure our members are aware of the types of job stress and the negative effect they can have on mental health and to ensure members are knowledgeable in the resources available to assist them. Additionally, strengthening preventative measures and reducing risk factors plays a crucial role in the elimination and/or mitigation of mental health and substance abuse issues. Recognizing the importance of this, the Department, UFLAC and the BHP actively engage in a number of projects, which include:

LAFD/UCLA Partnership

The BHP is working on a partnership with the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), which will focus on surveying all LAFD Firefighters to determine baseline levels of PTSD, suicide, anxiety and/or depression experienced by LAFD members. The information will be used to identify training needs, preventions measures and other areas of need.

Culturally competent Clinicians

In partnership with allied resources, UFLAC is providing community outreach & training to other mental health professionals to ensure they are culturally competent while working with the firefighter population.

Therapeutic services

Therapeutic services for individuals, groups, couples and families, peer support, and referrals are available to members free of charge.

Physical Fitness

The correlation between regular exercise and stronger mental health cannot be disputed. While regular on-duty exercise has always been a priority for the Department, its mental health benefit has provided an additional emphasis on ensuring that all members engage in regular exercise. To this end, all Department members have free access to any LAFD facility and are provided a free gym membership through their health plan.

Early Symptom Intervention Program

This program, which is comprised of a wellness center, is geared toward the physical fitness of firefighters and includes access to certified athletic trainers who can provide massage therapy, pain management, functional restoration, and other non-OSHA recordable treatment for minor musculoskeletal injuries. The goal of this program is to assist our members to improve their overall physical health and wellness, which is directly correlated with positive mental health.

EAP/Clinical and Behavioral Addictions

Recognizing that Addictive behaviors and substance abuse are an issue within the fire service, UFLAC maintains a Certified Employee Assistance Professional, who is UFLACS Director of Clinical and Behavioral Addictions. The Director of this program follows through all stages of issues relevant to Addictions, which include Intervention, Assessment, Treatment, and Recovery.

These services are available to all members. The Director also provides training on addictions to Peer Support Team members to help them be more effective in their role as Peers.

Training

Training is a key factor in ensuring our members are armed with the knowledge of identifying symptoms, accessing services, engaging in healthy habits, and assisting themselves and others. The following includes the method of promulgating information and the types of training and other measures provided by the Department/UFLAC.

- A BHP web page can be accessed through any Department computer or registered portable devices.
- A UFLAC web page with a Peer Support, IAFF, Behavioral Health, Fire Strong.org, and UFLAC 112 tabs.
- CISM Training for all FEMA USAR Task Force members.
- CISM and Peer support training provided to all Peer Support team members.
- Participating in the development of the On-Line Behavioral Wellness Training with the Regional Training Group (RTG) for Los Angeles. First lesson release in April 2019, followed by the release of a second lesson by the end of 2019.
- Providing live feed training on mental health via fire service panel discussions.
- Attend regular training events and Chief Officer and Captain's meetings. During these engagements, members are provided education on the services provided and how to access any of the BHP Doctors.
- Regular and frequent station visits by the Peer Support Team and BHP clinicians. These visits include training on the BHP program resources, current trends in mental health such as suicide, depression and anxiety, and prevention measures.
- Training provided to every recruit class. This training focuses on developing appropriate coping skills for what each recruit may encounter in the field as well as being mindful of their own emotional states.
- Recently provided voluntary off-duty training course, Mental Health First Aid for Fire and EMS. This training is being developed for presentation to all Department members. Currently, a pilot of the program is being presented utilizing probationary firefighters, and will soon be presented Department-wide.
- Accessibility to the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) Behavioral Health Awareness Course is also being developed.

INTERVENTION/POST CRISES STRATEGIES

Intervention and post-crises actions have always been the hallmark of the behavioral health program. Officers are trained to identify significant incidents or other crisis situations and directed to immediately contact one of the BHP clinicians. The BHP clinician(s) and Peer Support respond to either incident scenes, fire stations or other locations based on the need request of the incident commander or the requesting supervisor. Other supporting measures include:

- Critical incident stress management
- Group or individual de-briefings
- Peer support
- Follow-up group sessions and/or individual therapy
- 24/7 availability of the Department/UFLAC Clinicians and the Peer Support team
- Consultations with members expressing concern for another member and subsequent outreach to the member of concern
- Debriefings following critical incidents, significant brush deployments, serious injury or death of a firefighter on or off duty.

Conclusion

Firefighters, who dedicate their lives to helping others, often find it difficult to seek help for themselves. Although a more accepting view within the LAFD is coming to light, there are still significant gains to be made within our culture. With this in mind, the Department and UFLAC continue to build upon the Behavioral Health and Peer Support Programs in an effort to ensure every firefighter remains emotionally healthy, mentally strong, and physically fit.