

Mental Health Support
for First Responders



Developing a Peer Support Policy

Developing a policy statement

Employees in first responder organizations can benefit from the hope and recovery that peer support programs can provide. Workplace-based peer support brings trained peer support workers who are occupationally aware and may have lived experience of mental health challenges together with peers who themselves are going through challenges. Whether first responders experience a response to a workplace incident or to life stressors outside of work, the empathy, understanding, and support that a peer-to-peer experience brings can be profound.

To be most effective, peer support needs committed volunteers willing to engage with peers who may be suffering or in crisis. For this to succeed, the organization needs to embrace peer support. Organizational leaders need to support an autonomous program conceptually, structurally, and financially. They also need to ensure that those doing peer support work are cared for to avoid injury and burnout. An important step in that process is to create a peer support policy. This will set the stage for everything else to come.

The following is a suggested approach to creating an effective peer support policy.

1. Review current support mechanisms for first responders

How are workers currently supported? Does the organization already have elements of peer support that are not yet formalized?

2. Draft a policy statement for your workplace

The policy statement should outline the purpose of the peer support team and why the organization will benefit from one.

3. Define peer support

Provide a clear definition of peer support, how it will operate in your organization, and how it can assist workers who have mental health challenges.

4. Apply the policy statement

Outline to whom and what the policy will apply.

5. Develop guidelines

To be most effective, peer support needs to operate autonomously and be a core component of an organization's mental health system. It needs to be separate and distinct from other aspects of the organization, and be supported by management but driven by the peer support members. The overall mental health policy should outline the amount of mental health funding to go to peer support and define staffing and other elements of the peer support initiative. It should also define boundaries and limits, confidentiality, and the training, support, and care that will be provided to peer support team members.

6. Commit resources

The organization must commit appropriate resources to develop and maintain a peer support program, including regular and ongoing training for peer support members, and psychological oversight to gauge their health and resiliency. For more on training, see the document *Overview of Peer Support Programs*.

7. Inform everyone about the policy

Ensure all employees are aware of the program. This could be done via presentations or written literature on the program. Depending on the scope of peer support being offered, consider what training will be provided to raise awareness and understanding of peer support among all those in the organization who may access it.

8. Review the peer support program annually

Seek feedback to ensure the peer support program is achieving its purpose in supporting the mental health of first responders.

Template: Peer support policy

This is an example of a peer support policy for first responder organizations. It can be adapted to meet the needs of individual workplaces.

Our peer support program for first responders

<Organization name> is committed to providing peer support and referral services to first responders who are experiencing occupational stress and trauma or dealing with a personal life stressor or crisis.

Currently, our organization supports first responders in the following ways:

<Provide examples of how the organization supports first responders.>

Our organization will formalize support for first responders by creating a voluntary Peer Support Program.

Our peer support policy statement

<Organization name> recognizes that employees may face emotional and psychological trauma due to their exposure to critical incidents and daily life stressors. Trained peers who are occupationally aware and may have similar lived experiences can listen, offer nonprofessional peer support, and refer workers for professional assistance and counselling. We commit to ensuring that confidential peer support services exist for first responders within our organization, and to providing training for peer support providers so they can effectively assist others while protecting their own mental health and wellness.

We have established the following boundaries and limits for peer support:

<Outline the boundaries that the peer support team has decided upon.>

Definition of peer support

The Mental Health Commission of Canada defines peer support as “a supportive relationship between people who have a lived experience in common in relation to either their own mental health challenge or illness or that of a loved one.”

Peer support is a form of employee assistance that links first responders who are experiencing personal or professional problems that may adversely affect their well-being with peers who are

trained to provide compassionate support and resource or referral assistance. Peer supporters are not medical or behavioral professionals, and are not expected to diagnose mental health injuries or recommend specific treatments. Peer support includes critical incident stress management (CISM), but is not limited to this.

After a critical incident or during a life crisis, a peer supporter may listen to another first responder's expression of feelings. The peer supporter can be an empathetic, active listener and provide information on available resources to assist the worker. This may involve referral to the employee assistance program, drug or counselling programs, or other counselling services. Peer supporters may reach out to first responders who they believe may be in need of support. Alternately, peer supporters may respond when a first responder expresses a need or when a concerned family member contacts them regarding a spouse, partner, or parent. Peer support must promote trust, allow for anonymity, and preserve confidentiality – unless the worker appears to be at imminent risk for self-harm or presents a risk of harm to others.

Application of the policy statement

This policy applies to <list all relevant parties> of <organization name> in all locations where these employees work or attend. Ideally, peer support will be delivered one-on-one and in-person – at the workplace, a worker's home, or an agreed-upon location – but support may also be offered or received electronically or over the phone.

Committing resources

<Organization name> will ensure there is a lead peer support individual to coordinate the program and recruit volunteer peers. The lead person, or peer support coordinator, will have strong interpersonal skills, be accessible, and be a good communicator. The peer support coordinator will also ensure volunteers are supported to avoid burnout. Peer supporters will be offered specialized ongoing training in assisting others dealing with adverse psychological reactions to critical incidents or other stressful life events. The organization will also ensure there is management commitment to the program and allow it operate autonomously. It will also ensure there is funding for training and adequate resources to implement and maintain the program. All new peer supporters will receive training when they join the program so they understand how to best support peers. Training will continue as needed, on an ongoing basis.

Peer support workers will receive training and be supported in the following ways:

<Outline the scope of training and the safeguards for support workers, such as check-ins with the peer support coordinator and annual psychological assessments.>

Awareness

Everyone at <organization name> will receive a copy of this policy. It will also be posted in buildings and at mobile work locations.

Annual review

<Organization name> will review the peer support program annually. Employees will be involved in all aspects of the program and we will seek feedback from first responders on the value and effectiveness of peer support. All employees and managers will receive a copy of the peer support policy.

Date created: _____ Annual review date: _____