



RESPONDERS FIRST

Decreasing chronic stress within the North Vancouver City Fire Department



WHAT IS IT?

Responders First is a program created for the North Vancouver City Fire Department (NVCFD).

The mission is to improve mental health literacy and support among first responders of the NVCFD, while facilitating access to professional and self-care activities.

Using a three-pronged approach, this intervention prioritizes the following risk factors for chronic stress:

- Mental health literacy
- Occupational stress related to having time for self-care activities
- Capability for emotional regulation
- Presence of expressive suppression
- Access to clinicians

This is done through educational workshops, having an on-staff therapist, and implementing a self-care financial bonus.

HOW WILL IT WORK?

Educational Workshops: This activity will provide 1x unique workshop per week for 12 weeks (one cohort at a time). These workshops will focus on increasing mental health literacy and decreasing expressive suppression. For example, one workshop might be on the effects of trauma on the body and the brain, while another may be a yoga or meditation class.

On-Staff Therapist: A therapist will be hired at NVCFD. They will conduct 6+ sessions per shift, 2-4x per week. This will increase first responder access to therapy without the need to dip into savings or benefits. It will also increase mental health literacy and decrease expressive suppression.

Self-Care Bonus: A per quarter bonus, equivalent to 8 hrs pay, will be given to the first responders to motivate individuals to engage in self-care activities. This will decrease occupational stressors related to not having enough time for well-being activities.

WHY IT IS NEEDED:

Literature

- The job is unique in that ~90% are exposed to critical incidents
- There are significantly increased rates of suicide among first responders
- There are short and long-term health complications related to chronic stress
- Stress management has been proven to be effective but there are few accessible resources in place

NVCFD Survey Results

- 90% feel they do not have enough time to get everything done
- 62% have a hard time relaxing
- 60% feel stressed
- Some written responses allude to low levels of mental health literacy
 - "It's our job and if you can't deal with it, get out"

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Short-Term Outcomes: Educational workshops and on-site therapy will create changes in awareness, attitudes, knowledge, and skill. While the self-care bonus will create changes in awareness, attitudes, knowledge, and motivation.

Mid-Term Outcomes: There will be an increase in educational workshop participation as well as an increase in the number of first responders seen by the therapist. Additionally, increased self-care behaviour will result from the self-care bonus.

Long-Term Outcomes: Over time we expect to see decreased levels of chronic stress within the NVCFD. Further down the road we also expect to see prevention of chronic stress and burnout.

EVALUATION DESIGN

Responders First will be evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively to ensure a clear and in-depth picture of program outcomes.

Educational workshops will use a quasi-experimental, Pretest-Posttest design.

On-site therapy will use a non-experimental, Time Series design to help increase internal validity.

Self-care bonuses will be evaluated using a non-experimental, Pretest-Posttest design which will allow for all NVCFD first responders to participate in the program for the full year.

POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

The first step would be to implement the Responders First program at the NVCFD for at least one year. Upon evaluation of the pilot, changes may need to be made.

Once the program has been tailored, and depending on the results, an expansion of the program to other fire departments on the North Shore and in Vancouver would be a possible next step.

If the program continues to be successful, Responders First could be implemented across the province and potentially across the nation. If the program results are positive and have high external validity, we may also consider rolling out the program to other first responders. For example, police or paramedics. These first responders also experience high levels of critical incidents.

Overall, the scale-up of this program will rely on the success of the pilot interventions as well as continued support of community partners and sponsors.