

Preventative Psychological Services Support for Municipal First Responders and Emergency Dispatchers

Moved by: City of St. Albert

Seconded by: TBD

WHEREAS the Government of Alberta has stated that improving emergency medical services response times is a priority;

WHEREAS municipalities support emergency medical service response through their provision of first responder services (firefighters, police officers, peace officers, and in some instances, paramedics) and emergency dispatcher services, with these services often working in coordination with Alberta Health Services' emergency medical response;

WHEREAS in supporting emergency medical response, municipal first responders and emergency dispatcher services can be exposed to traumatic incidents that cause psychological injury, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which may require treatment and extended medical leave, reducing municipal capacity to support emergency medical service response;

WHEREAS the *Workers Compensation Act* permits for the presumptive coverage of traumatic psychological injuries for first responders and emergency dispatchers, resulting in municipal taxpayers funding both the coverage required for recovery and return to service through increased premiums, in addition to the overtime required by active-duty personnel to cover such absences;

WHEREAS the provision of preventative psychological services reduces the frequency and severity of psychological injuries for first responders and emergency dispatchers, enabling fewer associated medical leaves and a more consistent and reliable roster of personnel on active duty;

WHEREAS the provision of preventative psychological services improves the mental health, well-being, and resiliency of first-responders and emergency dispatchers, strengthening their ability to perform their emergency medical response duties;

WHEREAS a more consistent and resilient roster of first responders and emergency dispatchers would both strengthen emergency medical service response times while also reducing the burden on taxpayers to cover associated *Workers Compensation Act* claims and overtime coverage for absences;

IT IS THEREFORE RESOLVED THAT Alberta Municipalities advocate to the Government of Alberta to provide a grant or funding mechanism to municipalities to provide preventative psychological services to municipal first responders and emergency dispatchers to reduce the risk of psychological injury and the associated burden on taxpayers to treat such injuries, in addition to bolstering emergency medical services response services in Alberta.

BACKGROUND:

The *Workers Compensation Act* defines “first responders” as firefighters, paramedics, peace officers, or police officers. The WCB, in its publication on *Presumptive Coverage for Traumatic Psychological injuries (first responders, emergency dispatchers and correctional officers)*, notes that “presumptive coverage for psychological injuries” sustained by first responders, emergency dispatchers and correctional officers is provided in certain situations¹. This coverage demonstrates a recognized occupational risk for first responders and emergency dispatchers to be exposed to traumatic situations that cause psychological injuries, in addition to a need to receive treatment and undergo recovery. Municipal taxpayers are financially impacted by this coverage and associated treatment costs through WCB premiums their municipality must pay; for the City of St. Albert, WCB premiums have been in a surcharge (over standard industry rates) for the past five years due to psychological injury claims.

Many Albertan Municipalities provide first-responder and other associated services, such as fire services, emergency dispatchers, and – in some cases – paramedics. The employees who work in these roles can be exposed to traumatic events which cause the equivalent of a psychological injury (e.g., Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). Some psychological injuries necessitate the filing of Workers Compensation Board (WCB) claims and associated leaves of absences to manage the psychological trauma and duress associated with these events, which results in:

- Higher WCB premiums being funded by municipal taxpayers;
- A reduction of personnel available for active duty that necessitates the use of staff overtime for coverage, which is also funded by municipal taxpayers;
- Reduced capacity to support emergency medical response.

Municipal first responders also support emergency medical response work under the responsibility of Alberta Health Services in situations where provincial resources are delayed, exposing these municipal first responders to risks of psychological injuries. In any case, leaves of absences for first responders to recover from psychological injuries reduces the capacity of municipal first responders to bolster provincial emergency response services.

As the consequences of psychological injuries impact the service provision of first responders and emergency dispatchers, organizations have been increasingly introducing preventative psychological services into their onboarding and professional development programs. One such service being utilized is the “Before Operational Stress” (BOS) program, which offers participants a robust, self-directed learning regiment – in addition to sessions facilitated by mental health clinicians – that covers topics such as the physiology and markers of operational stress, cognitive impacts, emotions and behaviour change, and communication. The program prepares participants to manage their operational stress, such as the experience of traumatic events, in a healthy and structured manner. Participation in the BOS program can:

- Improve mental health symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety, substance use and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder);
- Equip first-responders with tools to manage workplace stress;
- Enhance the sense of control over workplace stress and mental health.

A 2021 peer-reviewed study of the BOS program found statistically significant improvements in symptoms of PTSD, quality of life, stigma, and perceived social support in participants, in addition to other benefits such as improvements in symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, alcohol use, as well

as emotional regulation and resilienceⁱⁱ. The reduction in these symptoms aligns with efforts to reduce the frequency and severity of psychological injuries requiring a leave of absence and treatment for first responders and emergency dispatchers; furthermore, the stated benefits also support efforts to build resiliency among first-responders, strengthening their service provision. Other supplemental preventative psychological service initiatives could further support this effort.

As improving emergency medical response services is a Provincial priority, the provision of a grant by the Government of Alberta to fund the provision of preventative psychological services for first responders and emergency dispatchers would support this objective. Through improving the mental health symptoms of personnel who witness traumatic events, the risk of both receiving a psychological injury and requiring a WCB-funded leave of absence for treatment would be reduced, enabling a more consistently full roster of first responders and emergency dispatchers available to support emergency medical response. Encouraging and enabling municipalities to provide this service to their first responders and emergency dispatchers would reduce their risk of psychological injury, strengthen and maintain the roster of available municipal first responders, and reduce the burden on municipal taxpayers for the provision of services that support provincial health care service delivery priorities.

ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES COMMENTS:

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https://www.wcb.ab.ca/assets/pdfs/workers/WFS_Presumptive_coverage_for_traumatic_psychological_injuries.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.511755/full>