



MONITOR & MITIGATE

The Impact of COVID-19 on Public Safety

Morale and Mental Health

First Responder Morale: What's Happening in Your Department

The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting the morale and mental health of your agency's first responders and administrative staff across multiple dimensions:

- First responders are getting sick and many have lost their lives. Departments have expressed that there are “*added stresses that everybody's living with... knowing that the people that they're going out and engaging with are...likely to be positive.*” (Interview 5803)
- Your first responders may fear for loved ones who are more vulnerable to COVID-19, “*and if [family members] have underlying health conditions the impact is exacerbated*” (Interview 6315)
- Necessary changes to normal operations have limited social interactions and disrupted routines at your department, affecting those in administration and on the frontlines.
- First responders enjoy helping community members, but the pandemic has led to fewer community events like ride-alongs, car seat checks, and public CPR trainings.
- It has also reduced professional development activities like advanced training
- Already trying to do more with less before the pandemic, your personnel are stretched even further as fewer people are asked to take on extra shifts and new responsibilities.

“**Social distancing while being at work, [is] not really conducive with the fire department tradition of being a family.**

Frontline Firefighter/EMT in large county agency (Int. 3501)

On-going Impact

- Fatigue and burn-out
- Additional early retirements
- Reduced motivation and productivity
- Not looking forward to coming to work
- Loneliness and isolation

Remember: Vaccinations protect first responders from COVID-19, but they do not address all their morale and mental health challenges. Fears for family safety, reduced public interactions, and other precautions at work may continue to negatively affect morale.



Resource Referrals

For project news and updates:

- Visit start.umd.edu/COVIDFirstResponders & secondstight-ts.com/covid19-topic-dashboard
- Subscribe to START's newsletter at start.umd.edu/newsletters
- Follow us on social media with #COVIDFirstResponders

IN THIS BRIEF

- ▶ The impact of COVID-19 on first responders' morale and mental health
- ▶ How departments have addressed morale concerns
- ▶ Ways to support personnel through the pandemic

RELEVANT FOR



PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The goal of the project is to measure the impact of COVID-19 on first responders, identify and share best practices organizations can put in place to protect themselves in the short term, and identify strategies to make first responder organizations more resilient to pandemics in the future.

This brief is based on findings from initial interviews with 29 first responders representing 29 distinct departments across 16 states.

How To Address the Mental Health of Your First Responders

Many agencies like yours have recognized these impacts and have made efforts to improve the morale of their personnel and to protect and promote mental health at their organizations.

- 1 Start with what you have:** Many agencies have resources for mental health support, like counselors or local hotlines. You can remind personnel of these frequently and post information prominently, as well as highlight the confidential nature of services. If you can, communicate that these resources exist for times like these.
- 2 Expand on what you have:** Unfortunately, interviews have shown that there have only been marginal increases in the use of existing services in many places. Consider more active measures like bringing in counselors for evaluations or having a mental health expert present at (virtual) department meetings.
- 3 Ask your personnel what they need:** Depending on the size and distribution of your organization, this could mean simply reserving time in morning briefs, creating an open-door policy, or setting up an anonymous suggestion box. To fully understand the extent and specific contours of low morale, some departments have conducted surveys, which can be created and conducted through [SurveyMonkey](#) or other free services.

“The peer support network, we've had for a couple of years...the people that are quarantined, they are assigned someone from the peer support team and someone from the peer support team will check on them and make sure they're doing ok. Do they need anything? How you doing at home? Stuff like that.”

Division chief in mid-sized Western county fire department (Interview 8950)

Surprising needs: An EMS Director of Operations in a medium-sized agency on the East Coast saw big improvements to morale when they got rid of their “really loud, annoying” alert system: “It makes their lives a lot easier...in the middle of the night, you don't have this same thing going off constantly.” (Interview 2651)

Quick Tips: Ideas to Improve Morale

- ▶ Structured crew and team-building activities that incorporate COVID-19 precautions, like fitness challenges segregated by apparatus crews or patrol units to limit exposure
 - ▶ Increased intra-unit training (following safety guidelines) to facilitate team bonding and human interaction
 - ▶ Providing meals for first responders and staff
 - ▶ Setting and communicating the priorities of your first responder agency, so that non-crucial and non-time sensitive tasks are less of a burden on the entire staff. This allows personnel to focus on the core mission of the agency when everyone's resources are already stretched thin
 - ▶ Agencies that have been able to afford hazard pay or more generous overtime can improve morale by helping first responders feel valued and more properly compensated for their work



HOW TO HELP FIRST RESPONDERS

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