



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

# RESPONDING TO PTE'S: PEER TEAM BEST PRACTICES

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# OBJECTIVES

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**WHAT IS A PTE**

**WHY WE NEED A PLAN FOR PTE'S**

**PEER SUPPORT VS CISM**

**BEST PRACTICES**

**LOGISTICS**



# POTENTIALLY TRAUMATIC EVENTS



Fatal structure or wildland fires  
Line of Duty Death  
Critical injury of a member  
Multiple casualty events  
Automobile accidents  
Abuse and neglect  
Fatal overdoses  
Natural disasters  
Mass shootings  
Chemical exposure  
Terrorist attacks  
Dead or severely injured kids  
Pediatric drownings  
Assault by civilian  
Responding to known civilian  
Suicide of civilian or coworker  
Mayday or near miss situations

# THE IMPORTANCE...

- Number of traumatic events most Americans experience in their lifetime
- Average number of traumatic events fire fighters experience in one year
- Average number of years a professional fire fighter works

3

9

25

Cumulative traumatic exposure far exceeds that of civilians.

# **DIFFERENTIATING PEER SUPPORT FROM CISM**

# WHAT IS CISM

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- The selection and implementation of the most appropriate crisis intervention tactics to best respond to the needs of the situation at hand.
- CISM has multiple components that can be used before, during, and after a crisis.
- The purpose of CISM is to mitigate the impact of an event, accelerate the recovery process, and assesses the need for additional or alternative services.

*According to National Interagency Fire Center*



# CISD - CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS DEBRIEFING

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- May reduce short-term distress
- Not strongly supported for PTSD prevention
- Mandatory sessions may be counterproductive

Single-session emotional debriefing is not sufficient and may not help long-term.



# PEER SUPPORT

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- High cultural acceptance
- Encourages help-seeking
- Ongoing relationship-based
- Flexible

Best aligns with fire service culture



# NEW WFI RECOMMENDATION

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- Departments shall ensure peer support is accessible at any time 24/7 and develop activation protocols for both routine use and response to critical incidents.
- Departments shall create administrative systems and infrastructure to facilitate peer support and maintain activation protocols and on-call rosters for routine and critical incident response.



# CLINICAL GUIDELINE POSITION

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- Routine single-session debriefing not recommended
- Major clinical guidelines recommend tiered, needs-based approaches instead.

*According to:*

*National Institute for Health and Care Excellence*

*American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*



# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Why This Matters

- We experience repeated trauma exposure
- Most recover naturally
- Some struggle quietly
- What we do early influences long-term outcomes

## What Research Supports

- Multicomponent, phased approach
- Ongoing peer support
- Monitoring over time
- Referral when symptoms persist
- Not single-session interventions alone

***These findings have shifted best-practice recommendations toward tiered, needs-based models such as Psychological First Aid and resilience-enhancing continuum approaches rather than universal debriefing mandates.***



# **BEST PRACTICES**

# BEST PRACTICES FOR DELIVERING PTE SUPPORT

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- Research supports a multicomponent, continuum-of-care approach rather than reliance on a single-session intervention.

*(Haugen et al., 2012; Ramella, 2017; Taylor-Gray, 2018).*



# PHASE 1 - PRE-INCIDENT PREPARATION

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- Resilience training
- Emotional regulation skills
- Stress recognition
- Culture of normalization

Consistent, intentional, and built into daily operations.



# PHASE 1 - PRE-INCIDENT PREPARATION

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- Scheduling recovery with the same intention as training
  - Splash face with cold water when returning to the station
  - Do tactical breathing to and from calls
  - Set intentions for the day
  - Reflect on good things at the end of the day
- Normalizing post-call PTE check-ins instead of bottling it up
  - Build connections with peers



# PHASE 1 - PRE-INCIDENT PREPARATION

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## RESILIENCE

- LEARN IT
- DRILL IT
- DO IT

*NEW WFI RECOMMENDATION*



# PHASE 2 - FIRST 72 HOURS

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- Psychological First Aid
- Informal peer check-ins
- Practical support first
- Station or crew-based support



# PHASE 2 - WHAT TYPE OF SUPPORT NEEDED

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- Individual contacts –one on one peer contacts
  - On duty
  - Off duty
- Group support (crew, battalion, on scene crews, others)
  - Same day
  - Next shift
- Department wide support –psycho ed and information dissemination meetings
- Family supports



# PHASE 2 - IMMEDIATE NEEDS

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- Time out of service
- Shower, eat, hydrate
- Call family
- Reset as a crew
- Stabilization
- Normalization
- Peer connection
- Clear reintegration plan



# PHASE 2 - ACTIVE INCIDENTS

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- Peer team presence
- Monitor fatigue
- Assist with family needs
- Rotate crews



# PHASE 2 - DEPT WIDE COMMUNICATION

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## Reduces anxiety

- Incident updates
- What happens next
- Investigation process explained
- Funeral coordination (if applicable)



# PHASE 3 - 1 WEEK POST INCIDENT

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- Station visits
- Crew-specific support
- Pre/post funeral support
- Peer presence at services



# PHASE 3 - ONGOING MONITORING

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Watch for:

- Sleep disruption
- Irritability
- Isolation
- Withdrawal
- Persistent intrusive memories



# REINTEGRATION PLANNING

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- Return to duty decisions
- Light duty if needed
- Time off if required
- Assigned follow-up



# LOGISTICS

# ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING

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- What happened
- Who was involved
- Department size and structure
- Special units affected
- Injuries or fatalities (community LODD)



# PST DEPLOYMENT STRUCTURE

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1. Local
2. State
3. Regional/District
4. National

- Department contacts union president
- Union President helps to decide type of deployment
- If more than your team can handle contact state president
- State president can assist with contacting local peer teams to assist
- If needs are greater then state president contacts the District president
- DP will then decide if national or regional supports needed



# NATIONAL IAFF HQ DEPLOYMENT RESPONSE

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- Multiple Line of Duty Death (LODD)
- Natural or Man-Made Disasters
- Terrorism and Acts of Violence
- Wildfires
- Any Event Approved by the GP



# MANAGING RESOURCES

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- Incident management team
- Budget
- Peer Support coordination (Tiered Response)
- Professional services
  - EAP
  - Crisis Response
  - Volunteer groups



# DOCUMENTATION

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The summary should include, but not limited to:

- names and local numbers of all PEERS deployed
- the number of work locations visited with # contacted at each location
- # of personal contacts or outreaches made
- # of referrals to MH professional
- resources used: K9s (if applicable), clinician follow up, resources gathered and left
- any other relevant information relating to the deployment.



# AFTER ACTION REPORT

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- Summary
- Planning
- Actions Taken
- Number of Peer Interactions
- Needed follow up
- Gaps in Response
- Lessons Learned



# KEY POINTS

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- ✓ Resilience before incidents
- ✓ Immediate practical support
- ✓ Peer connection
- ✓ Monitoring over weeks
- ✓ Referral when symptoms persist
- ✓ Avoid mandatory emotional debriefs

This is the evidence-informed model for fire departments.



## HOW A PERSON RESPONDS DEPENDS ON...

- Stress Levels Before the Crisis
- Coping Techniques
- View of the Problem
- Losses as a Result of the Event
- Age and Life Experience
- Available Support Systems



# WHAT LEADERS AND CREWS NEED TO IDENTIFY

City stressors

Departmental Stressors

Specific Station Stressors

Group Cohesiveness

Social support

Management professionalism, buy-in and support

Observed changes in work performance, mood/irritability

Awareness of family & financial stress & distress

Persistent negative self-evaluation

Legal issues



# INDIVIDUAL 1 TO 1 PEER SUPPORT CONTACTS

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- Calling members before their next shift
- Let member know you are Peer Support and are following up with members that responded to “xyz incident”.
- You are just checking on them to see how they are doing and to see if they need anything?
- Allow them to discuss incident if they want to
  - Let them describe their point of view and role on the incident
- Give them time to talk
- Try to engage them in other conversation i.e. how is the station, are things busy etc. just to build rapport.
- Remind them of the resources available
- Don't be in a hurry to get off the phone



# GROUP PEER SUPPORT CONTACTS

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- Station visits- gather around the kitchen table
- Why peer team visiting
- Provide updates and check in
- Provide psycho-education on self care and on watching each other.
- Provide resources



# SPOUSAL OR FAMILY SUPPORT CONTACTS

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- Provide updates on incident
- Provide self care education
- Provide signs and symptoms of normal responses and concerns.
- Assess needs
- Provide resources



# Ask vs. Assume their preferences on job-related talk

- Encourage your members to Have an intentional conversations with partners about what they want to know (and don't) about the job.
- Some spouses may be curious about crew dynamics or daily staffing challenges – But don't want to hear about PTE's.
- Other spouses may want to hear about PTE's that impact you
- Some spouses may not want to know anything about the job- have a conversation about boundaries



# DEPARTMENT WIDE PEER SUPPORT CONTACTS

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- This can be within 24-48 hours of a large PTE incident
- Good way to disseminate info to large groups and minimize rumors
- Disseminate What has happened and What will happen
- Resources
- Good for Chief and Union President to do deliver in person but video in some situations or email



# KEY TAKE AWAY

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*Culture determines whether  
members seek help*

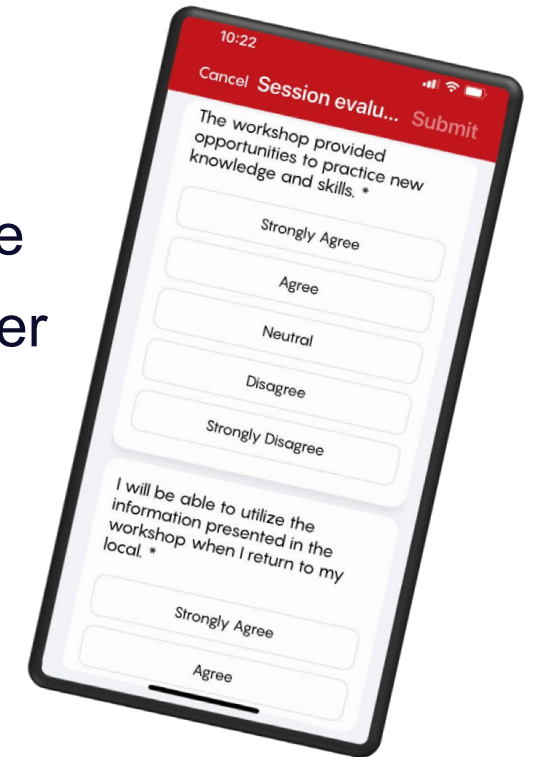




**THANK YOU!**  
**ANY QUESTIONS?**

# EVALUATION AND WIN AN IPAD!

- **Submit your workshop and overall evaluations to be automatically entered in two drawings for a new iPad!**
- **Complete your evaluations using the IAFF app:**
  1. Download the IAFF app and sign in with your iaff.org username
  2. Tap the 2026 Strive for Excellence Summit event image to enter the event's dashboard
  3. Tap "Sessions" and tap on the workshops you attended
  4. Tap "Evaluation" and complete the evaluation
  5. Tap "Submit"



**For the event's overall evaluation, follow steps 1 and 2, then tap "Event Evaluation" located in the event's Dashboard.**

