



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Ernesto Rodriguez, Chief
Austin – Travis County EMS

DATE: November 14, 2019

SUBJECT: Response to Resolution No. 20190619-092 – Mental Health Care for First Responders

The mental health and wellness of first responders is of paramount importance to our public safety agencies and our community. In November 2019, the Fire, EMS, and Police departments united to provide Wellness services to all first responder personnel. This action established an important first step towards the establishment of a standardized approach to provision of wellness, fitness, and mental health services to all first response personnel. Among the first actions taken by the unified wellness service center was to establish a steering team that will review how services are provided by the wellness center.

Research has shown that first responders are exposed to many traumatic events during their careers that can lead to conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), acute stress disorder (ASD), stress, anxiety, depression, substance use, and suicide. Although each agency focuses on different public safety areas, all first responders are exposed to a broad range of situations that push the psychological, mental health, and emotional limits of human beings. This requires special attention to caring for the mental health and emotional support of our community's public safety personnel. The City has established several methods to assist first responders with their needs.

Under the city's health and medical coverage, first responders that have been diagnosed with PTSD are eligible for worker's compensation benefits if the PTSD is a result of one or more events occurring in the course and scope of the first responder's employment. Additionally, outpatient and inpatient mental health benefits are available to first responder personnel through the three medical plans offered by the City.

The Police, EMS, and Fire departments provide a framework of services for frontline personnel that includes pre-hire evaluations, mental health and wellness training during academies, and a cadre of support services that include peer support, access to psychological services, chaplain services,

substance abuse services, and health and fitness services. More detailed descriptions of each department's services are attached.

Further evaluation of the options of care and support available to first responder personnel is needed with a focus on equity, accessibility, privacy, and protection from retaliation. These areas are difficult to measure because of privacy measures that are in place and further consideration is required to evaluate them.

There is much ongoing research, growth, and development in the area of mental health evaluation that is leaning toward increased understanding, training, and strengthening of first responder resilience. The Wellness Center staff are in the early stages of reviewing at least two tools that could further improve evaluation of frontline personnel and their ability to improve their resilience while protecting personal privacy and complying with federal law.

Presently, mental health evaluations are conducted by qualified mental health professionals under the umbrella of the Public Safety Wellness Center. As such, the practitioners, the center, our departments, insurance providers, and employees are covered entities or business associates identified by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). As such, they must comply with the provisions of the Act. This means that city operated data systems and information management processes that contain health information are secure and meet HIPAA requirements and personnel who work with health information receive privacy training.

While the City and its public safety agencies have made great progress in the area of caring for the mental health, wellness, and emotional wellbeing of first responders, there is always room for further growth and development. This is especially true in the area of mental health and wellness where there is much ongoing research, learning, and development.

cc: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
Rey Arellano, Assistant City Manager
Joel Baker, Chief, Austin Fire Department
Brian Manley, Chief, Austin Police Department