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First Responder Suicide Deterrence Task Force 2023 Annual Report

Department of Children and Families
Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Office of Suicide Prevention



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Key Abbreviations and Partner Agencies

Key abbreviations and partners in this report include the following:

Abbreviation	Full Text
2021 Task Force Report	2021 Florida First Responder Suicide Deterrence Task Force Annual Report
2022 Task Force Report	2022 Florida First Responder Suicide Deterrence Task Force Annual Report
211 Broward	211 Broward/ Hero4Hero Project
2 nd Alarm Project	Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University/ The 2 nd Alarm Project
BHAP	Behavioral Health Access Program
CCTB	Crisis Center of Tampa Bay
Department	Department of Children and Families
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FFSHC	Florida Firefighters Safety and Health Collaborative
FLVDRS	Florida Violent Death Reporting System
F.S.	Florida Statutes
IAFF	International Association of Fire Fighters
NVDRS	National Violent Death Reporting System
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
SAMH	Department of Children and Families Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health
SERP	State Emergency Response Plan
SJTF	Safety and Justice Task Force
SOSP	Florida Statewide Office for Suicide Prevention
SPCC	Florida Suicide Prevention Coordinating Council
Task Force	Florida First Responder Suicide Deterrence Task Force
Toolkit	Customizable Statewide Resource Toolkit
UCF	University of Central Florida RESTORES



Introduction

The completion of this report concludes the provisions within Section 14.2019(5), Florida Statutes (F.S.).

Background

The Statewide Office for Suicide Prevention (SOSP) is created within the Department of Children and Families (Department) Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health (SAMH). The Florida First Responder Suicide Deterrence Task Force (Task Force) was created by the Florida Legislature in 2020 adjacent to the Statewide Office for Suicide Prevention. The purpose of the task force is to make recommendations on how to reduce the incidence of suicide and attempted suicide among employed or retired first responders in Florida. The Task Force includes representatives from the SOSP, The Florida Professional Firefighters Association, The Florida Police Benevolent Association, The Florida State Lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police, The Florida Sheriffs Association, The Florida Police Chiefs Association, and The Florida Fire Chiefs' Association. A comprehensive roster of the Task Force members can be found in Appendix A. In accordance with Section 14.2019(5), F.S., an annual report on the taskforce findings and recommendations for training programs and material to deter suicide among active and retired first responders is required to be submitted to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives by July 1 of each year.

The 2022-2023 Florida First Responder Report is the result of collaboration between SAMH, the Task Force, and the SOSP.

First responders, including public service and law enforcement personnel, firefighters, emergency medical services workers, and 911 public safety telecommunicators, dedicate their careers to protecting our communities. These professionals are often the first personnel on-scene when a critical incident occurs, yet they are often the last to ask for help for themselves.¹ Despite low engagement in seeking mental health services, first responders regularly face grueling demands on both their physical and mental health. These demands persist during shifts that may last longer than 24 hours. First

¹Haugen, P. T., McCrillis, A. M., Smid, G. E., & Nijdam, M. J. (2017). Mental health stigma and barriers to mental health care for first responders: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of psychiatric research*, 94, 218-229. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2017.08.001>



responders sacrifice time spent away from loved ones during nights, weekends, and holidays. The cumulative exposure to stressors may partially explain why the first responder profession is associated with an increased susceptibility to sleep disturbances, depression, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, substance misuse, and suicide.^{2,3} Many first responders served in the military prior to becoming or resuming work as a first responder. As service members and Veterans are an identified at-risk population for suicide related thoughts and behaviors, this cumulates a first responders' risk for the aforementioned conditions.^{4,5} Tragically, first responders are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty.²

In response to the identified behavioral health needs and to take care of our first responders, who protect us daily, the Task Force was created to improve access to mental health and suicide prevention resources available to first responders in Florida. The Task Force is charged to make recommendations on how to reduce the incidence of suicide and attempted suicide among active or retired first responders in the state. The Task Force is comprised of leaders across first responder domains, including but not limited to public service and law enforcement personnel, firefighters, emergency medical services workers, and 911 public safety telecommunicators, adding color and context across an interdisciplinary array of expertise, including current and retired first responder leadership, individuals with lived suicide-related experience, academics, and policy makers.

Across the last year, the Task Force has had continued success in improving the lives of first responders and their families. This report provides further color and context to showcase the following key programmatic successes made in Florida over the past year. Advised by recommendations put forth by the Task Force, the Department invested twelve million dollars in piloting the Building First Responder Resiliency program to connect first responders and their families to behavioral health resources. The Department is thrilled to celebrate the programmatic success of the Building First Responder Resiliency program's inaugural year through an extension of the program into the next fiscal year. The profound coordination and implementation of disaster relief deployments following Hurricane Ian was the combined effort of many Task Force

²Heyman, M., Dill, J., & Douglas, R. (2018). *The Ruderman white paper on mental health and suicide of first responders* (Vol. 41). Boston, MA: Ruderman Family Foundation.

³Stanley, I. H., Hom, M. A., & Joiner, T. E. (2016). A systematic review of suicidal thoughts and behaviors among police officers, firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics. *Clinical psychology review, 44*, 25-44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2015.12.002>

⁴O'Dare, K. (2021). Data from surveys on mental health risk and resiliency protective factors in Florida first responders. (unpublished raw data).

⁵Pompili, M., Sher, L., Serafini, G., Forte, A., Innamorati, M., Dominici, G., ... & Girardi, P. (2013). Posttraumatic stress disorder and suicide risk among veterans: A literature review. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease, 201*, 802-812. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0b013e3182a21458>



members. The skill, organization, and execution of disaster relief efforts resulted in Floridians, devastated by Hurricane Ian, receiving the help they needed in a timely manner. From the labors and expertise of the Task Force, recent revisions of several Florida statutes better reflect a research-informed understanding of first responder mental health needs. Recommendations in this report reflect continued momentum from the previous year's successes which include promoting culturally competent crisis resources, adopting the Toolkit, and expanding data collection efforts to further refine our prevention strategies. Details regarding these successes can be reviewed in the following sections of this report: Building First Responder Resiliency, Hurricane Ian Relief, and Florida Legislative Changes Impacting First Responder, and Recommendations.

The Task Force has met monthly since December 2020, publishing the First Responder Suicide Deterrence Task Force annual report in July 2021 and 2022 respectively. To review the previous successes achieved and recommendations put forth by the Task Force, a copy of each report can be accessed at the following link:

<https://myflfamilies.com/first-responder-resiliency>.

First responders are so resilient, and do so much for us, and we want them to know that we have resources to support them.



Florida First Responder Initiative Highlights

This section includes highlights of 2023 statewide first responder initiatives to showcase the recent work of Task Force members.

Building First Responder Resiliency

The goal of the Building First Responder Resiliency program is to enhance access to information and referral, peer support, linkage to community resources, and follow-up support to promote mental health wellness among first responders and their families. Through the Department's partnership with First Lady Casey DeSantis, **\$12 million** in funding was dedicated to increase access to behavioral health services for first responders and their families. To support this initiative, the Department is partnering with the following providers:

- **Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University/2nd Alarm Project (2nd Alarm Project):** Northwest Region
- **Lutheran Services Florida Health Systems:** Northeast Region
- **University Central Florida RESTORES:** Central Region
- **Crisis Center of Tampa Bay:** SunCoast Region
- **First Call for Help of Broward:** Southeast Region

Strategic Planning

Each provider participated in comprehensive strategic planning to clearly specify first responder and family needs, identify locally available services to address these needs, and continuously enhance the quality of these services based on best-practices. The results of this strategic planning are used to refine the Building First Responder Resiliency Program's implementation.

Peer Support

Peer support is an evidence-based strategy promoting mental wellness among first responders. The power of peers comes from the peer having knowledge of first responder culture, understanding the unique stressors inherent to the job, and being able to engage callers with someone who can relate to these experiences. Individuals with a first responder background can elect to become a trained peer to support their fellow first responders. Peer-to-peer training may occur in-person or through support as a counselor on a first responder support line. The strength of the peer support model is enhanced by these peer relations that are acknowledged at first contact, paving the road for trust in subsequent interactions, such as follow-up calls. Over 814 peers have



been trained, and of these peers, over **300** are actively providing peer support services as a volunteer or paid employee.

In addition to providing emotional support, peers may offer referrals to community and mental health resources. The following serves to illustrate the process following referral to services offered through peer support during contact made to a help line.

What happens after a referral is made? Depending on the caller's preferences and needs, sometimes the caller will want to look into the referral themselves. Typically, the caller feels empowered to use the referral information to look into the resources when they are ready. In other instances, the caller may benefit from a warm handoff to the provider, which is a three-way conversation to familiarize the individual with the referral service prior to use. During follow-up, the caller is asked if the referral met their needs.

Are follow-ups given to further engage the caller? The peer support service delivery model offers follow-ups to all first responder callers. While the follow-up process is a core component of the peer support program, it is up to the first responder to accept the follow up contacts.

Were the needs of the caller met with the given referral? The purpose of each follow-up is to engage the caller and offer support according to their preferences. For example, a caller may decide not to utilize a referral but felt their needs were met through the peer support process. Peer support is successful when education, support, options, and linkage to resources are offered. Achieving any of these outcomes is positive. This information reaffirms the positive outcomes of simply providing emotional support during a time of need, regardless of whether a caller chose to utilize a resource offered.



What is the resolution of the peer-based interaction? Follow-up support is offered until the caller determines they no longer need it. Linkages are continuously made to resources throughout the follow-up process.

Peer Support Success Story

One instance of a first responder receiving the support they need.

Jim, a former first responder, called in looking for resources and expressed that his wife, who is a fire fighter, was struggling with substance use and suicidal ideation. Jim expressed that he did not have insurance, was unemployed and on disability, and needed a dual diagnosis program for his own mental health and substance needs. Resources were provided to Jim to meet his needs. When the provider followed up with Jim, Jim advised that he successfully connected to one of the resources provided and was in the process of getting treatment for his wife.



Awareness Campaigns

Through a series of efforts from all five providers, awareness campaigns to destigmatize mental health issues among first responders have reached over **103 million** Floridians. Spreading awareness is key to normalizing conversations about mental health and sharing when and where to receive support services.

The awareness campaigns have included billboards, bus wraps, printed materials distributed to first responder facilities, and social media.

First responders are the **“first to respond and last to ask for help.”** Messaging in awareness campaigns focuses on resiliency, strength, and reminds first responders that support is available.



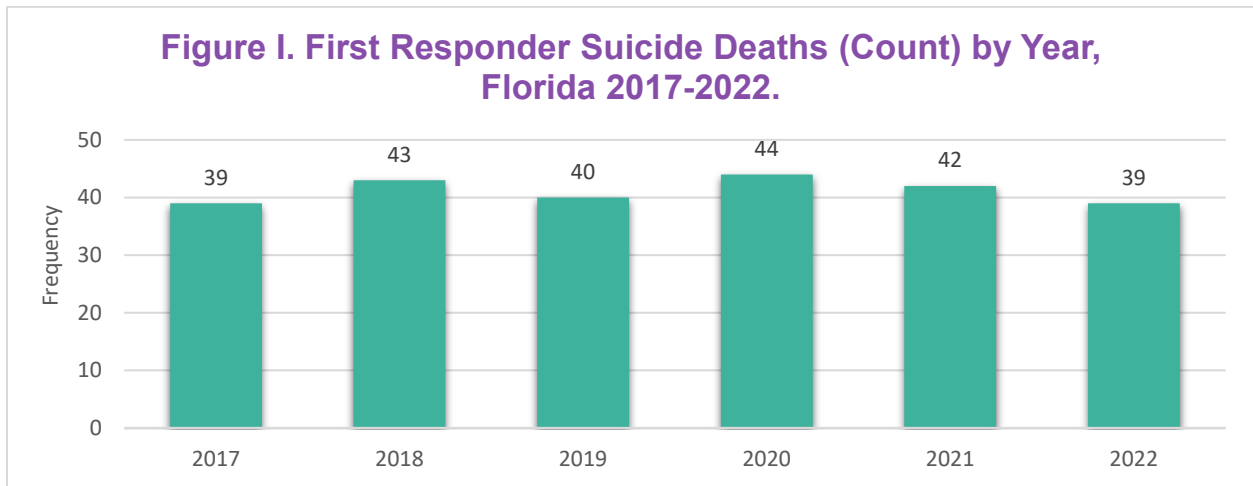


The following data chart provides an overview of suicide deaths among Florida’s first responders, and the programmatic success of the Building First Responder Resiliency program in expanding services offered to first responders and their families through information and referral services, peer support, and public awareness campaigns to combat suicide in Florida.

First Responder Suicides: 2017-2022

First responders are 1.4 percent of Florida’s workforce, yet their suicide rate is more than two times higher than the overall rate of working-age Floridians, accounting for 40.2 suicide deaths per 100,000 emergency responders.⁶

From 2017-2022, 247 Floridian First Responders lost their lives to suicide. (Figure I).



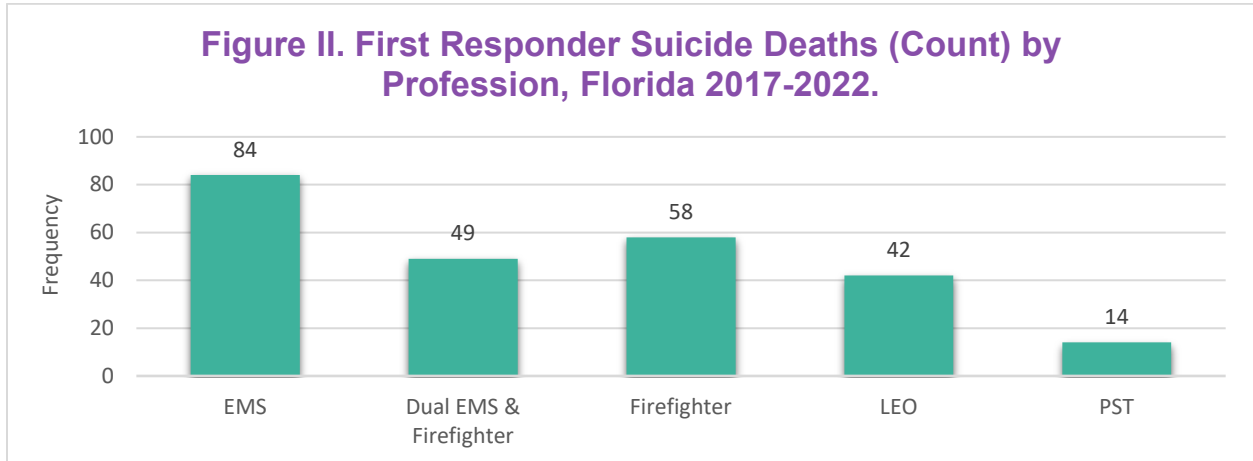
Data Sources: Florida Department of Health Bureau of Vital Statistics, Florida Department of Health EMS Licensure Data, The Division of State Fire Marshal Firefighter Licensure Data, Florida Department of Law Enforcement LEO Suicide Statistics.

⁶Occupation data obtained from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018-2020). Population estimates obtained from Florida Legislature's Office of Economic and Demographic Research (2018-2020).



Profession

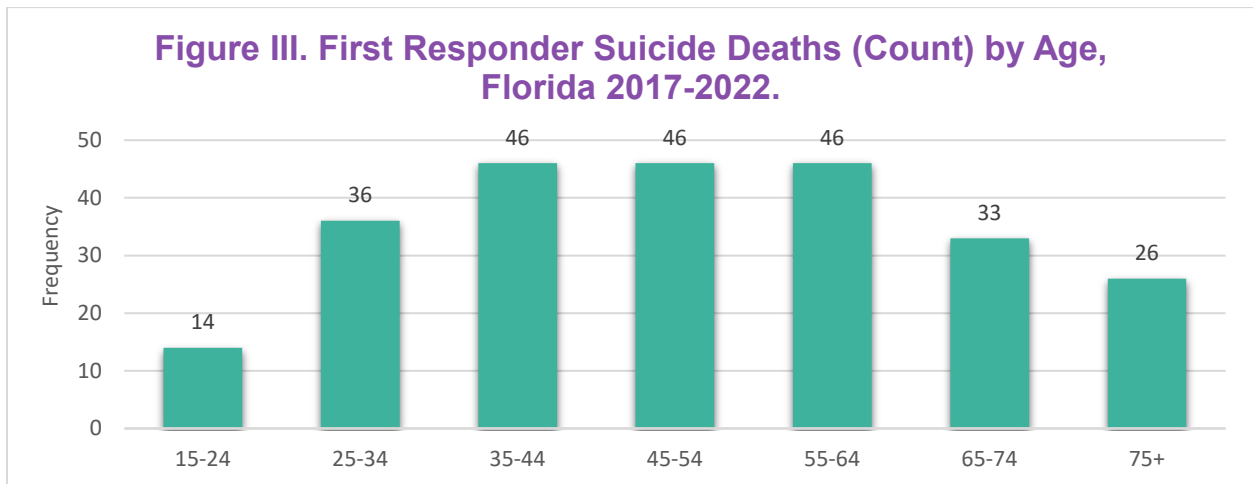
When comparing the number of first responder suicide deaths from 2017-2022, most of the suicide deaths are among EMS professionals and firefighters (Figure II)



Data Sources: Florida Department of Health Bureau of Vital Statistics, Florida Department of Health EMS Licensure Data, The Division of State Fire Marshal Firefighter Licensure Data, Florida Department of Law Enforcement LEO Suicide Statistics.

Age

Across the past six years (2017-2022), the number of first responder suicide deaths was the highest for ages 35-64 (Figure III).

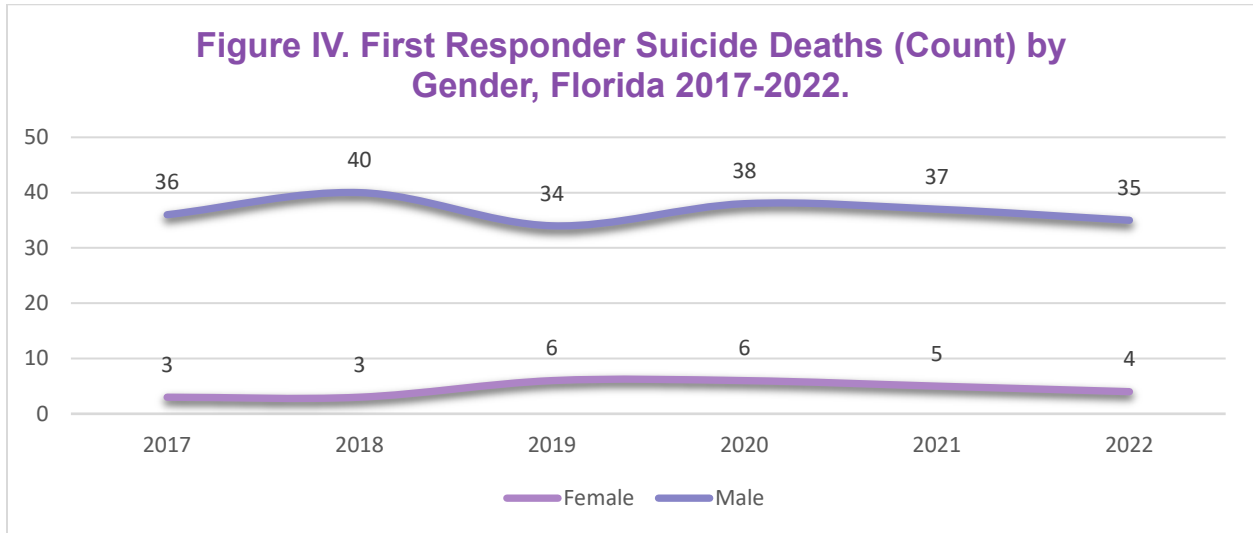


Data Sources: Florida Department of Health Bureau of Vital Statistics, Florida Department of Health EMS Licensure Data, The Division of State Fire Marshal Firefighter Licensure Data, Florida Department of Law Enforcement LEO Suicide Statistics.

Gender



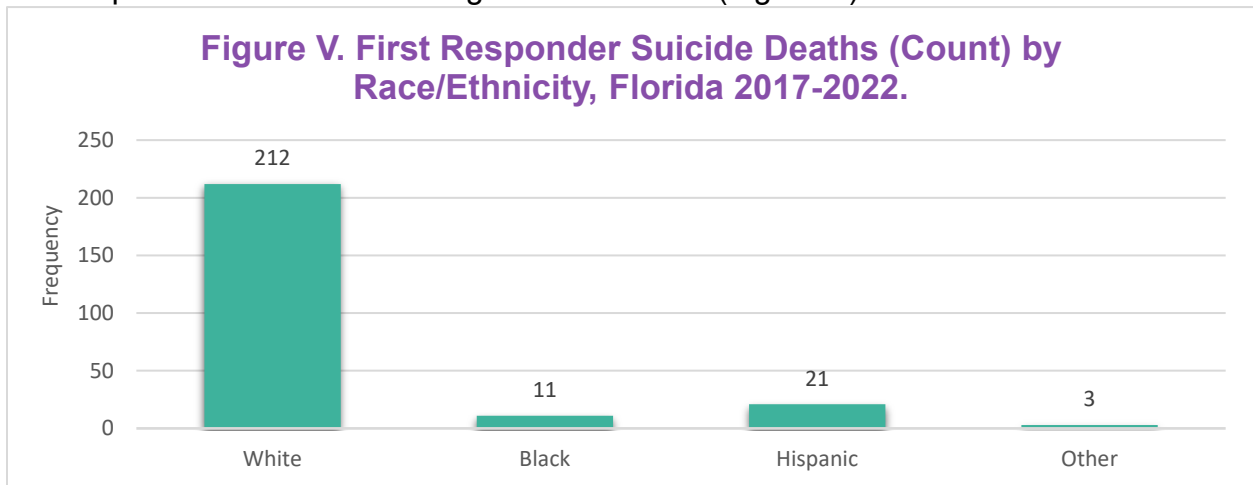
Most first responder suicide deaths are male. In 2022, the number of suicide deaths for males was 35 compared to 4 for females. Overall, these numbers have remained relatively stable from 2017-2022 (Figure IV).



Data Sources: Florida Department of Health Bureau of Vital Statistics, Florida Department of Health EMS Licensure Data, The Division of State Fire Marshal Firefighter Licensure Data, Florida Department of Law Enforcement LEO Suicide Statistics.

Race/Ethnicity

White males comprise the largest number of suicide deaths nationally and in Florida, first responder suicide deaths align with this trend (Figure V).



Data Sources: Florida Department of Health Bureau of Vital Statistics, Florida Department of Health EMS Licensure Data, The Division of State Fire Marshal Firefighter Licensure Data, Florida Department of Law Enforcement LEO Suicide Statistics.



Programmatic Data Totals: May 2022 – May 2023*

The following table details the primary data elements collected from the Building First Responder Resiliency program.

Table 1. Building First Responder Resiliency

Information and Referral Services		Peer Support		Public Awareness Campaign
Number of Contacts - All Types	307,291	Unduplicated Number of Persons Served	18,348	116,726,227 Number of Impressions
Number of Referrals - All	8,744	Number of Trained Peer Support	814	
Number of Direct Staff Hours	39,226	Number of Direct Staff Hours	173,991	

*At the time this report was published, data was only available through May 2023. Further data updates are anticipated in the 2023 Suicide Prevention Coordinating Council's annual report, expected in January 2024.



Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University/2nd Alarm Project: Northwest Region

The 2nd Alarm Project focused efforts on training new first responder peer supporters throughout Florida’s Northwest Region. While future efforts are needed to expand the scope of this work across Florida, to date, the 2nd Alarm Project conducted **15** Peer Support Trainings for **148** first responders.

In addition to Peer Support Training, the 2nd Alarm Project provides a variety of other trainings on first responder mental wellness and the development of Behavioral Health Access Programs (BHAP) in first responder departments. In total, the 2nd Alarm Project conducted **108** trainings for first responders, family members, and mental health clinicians in the past year. One of the most in-demand classes is the 2nd Alarm Project Mental Health Awareness In-service Class that is delivered onsite at first responder departments and is tailored to their profession, shift schedule, and their department overall. These trainings are often the beginning step in capacity building for departments and may lead to the development of Peer Support Teams, Family Support Programs, and the creation of additional BHAP programs and services. The 2nd Alarm Project assists departments in all aspects of BHAP development and capacity building.

Table 2. Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University / 2nd Alarm Project: Northwest Region

Information and Referral Services		Peer Support		Public Awareness Campaign
Number of Contacts - All Types	250,440	Unduplicated Number of Persons Served	10,555	42,132,662 Number of Impressions
Number of Referrals - All	0	Number of Trained Peer Support	148	
Number of Direct Staff Hours	6,240	Number of Direct Staff Hours	3,014	

In addition to the locally focused services and support, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University/2nd Alarm Project is finalizing a customizable statewide resource toolkit (Toolkit) for first responder departments that will be promoted on the Department’s website. This Toolkit is created to equip first responder departments with guidance on first responder training and supportive messaging to enhance their agency’s mental wellness programs and policies.



Lutheran Services Florida Health Systems: Northeast Region

As a mental health care leader in the state of Florida, Lutheran Services Florida Health Systems (LSF) provides training opportunities for service providers and partners within the 23-county Northeast and North Central Florida region to promote first responder mental wellness through offering first responder peer support, education, and mental wellness awareness.

Table 3. Lutheran Services Florida Health Systems: Northeast Region

Information and Referral Services		Peer Support		Public Awareness Campaign
Number of Contacts - All Types	1,049	Unduplicated Number of Persons Served	414	0 Number of Impressions
Number of Referrals - All	795	Number of Trained Peer Support	10	
Number of Direct Staff Hours	4,060	Number of Direct Staff Hours	1,555	

One of these trainings is the First Responder Peer Process Refresher, a program designed to provide mental health and substance abuse services to first responders and their family members. The objective of this training is to teach the Building First Responder Resiliency Program’s mission and how to provide information and referrals to first responders and their families.



University Central Florida RESTORES: Central Region

REACT (Recognize, Evaluate, Advocate, Coordinate, Track) provides peer support training with a focus on training individuals to identify mental health concerns. **REACT is an evidence-based peer-support training program designed specifically for first responders.** Initiated in early 2016 with firefighters and EMTs/paramedics, REACT quickly expanded to include law enforcement and corrections, and further expanded to include training for 911 telecommunicators.

Table 4. University Central Florida RESTORES: Central Region

Information and Referral Services		Peer Support		Public Awareness Campaign
Number of Contacts - All Types	10,456	Unduplicated Number of Persons Served	7,267	17,198,002 Number of Impressions
Number of Referrals - All	3,266	Number of Trained Peer Support	640	
Number of Direct Staff Hours	6,240	Number of Direct Staff Hours	1,248	

UCF RESTORES has been providing this evidence-based training since 2017 and since that time has trained first responders in over **150** unique agencies.

Since May 2022, UCF RESTORES has trained over **600** first responders with **334** of the trainees being in law enforcement. This is an important new development, as historically, fire and EMS are the primary participants in the trainings.

The purpose of REACT is to develop knowledge, confidence, and tools to discuss mental health concerns with other first responders, including suicidal thoughts and behaviors. REACT provides mental wellness education, skills, and time for skills practice to ensure mastery of the tools presented. REACT uses a peer-to-peer model focusing on the identification and mitigation of mental health symptoms in first responders, tools to help manage tough conversations, and a discussion of next steps when someone is struggling.

REACT training targets the following goals:

- Reduce the “toughen up” mentality.
- Identify warning signs of emotional distress, including suicidality.
- Learn to approach, discuss, and actively listen to sensitive mental health topics.
- Use skills to support an individual showing signs of distress.



- Practice how to discuss suicide.
- Offer options for referral.

The following video (accessed through the following link) showcases the UCF RESTORES program and philosophy toward treatment:

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ucfrestores_ptsdawareness-activity-7044720099622014976-Y8qq?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop

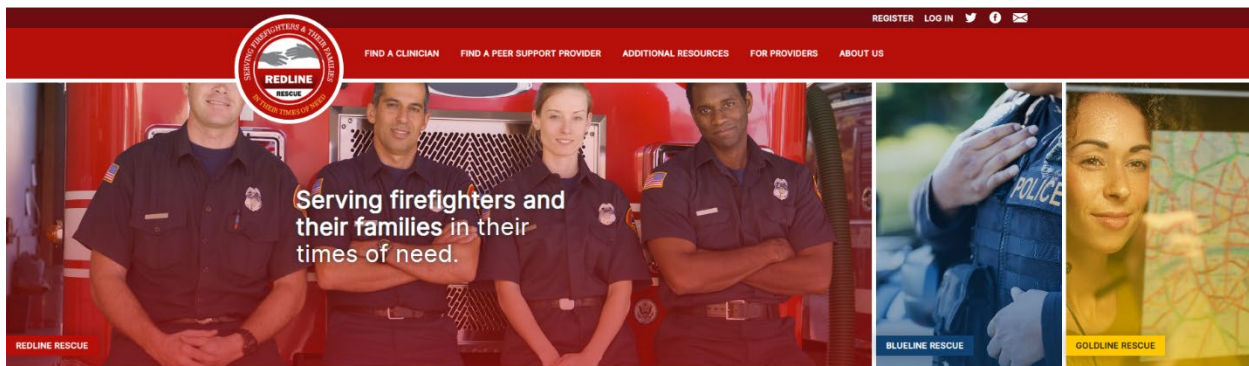
Redline Rescue is presently available through <https://redlinerescue.org/> and provides a comprehensive database of first responder resources, including a list of culturally competent clinicians to provide mental health counseling to firefighters.

Through the Department's funding, Blueline and Goldline rescue will also launch to support law enforcement mental wellness for police officers and dispatch personnel.

UCF developed and has sponsored Cultural Competency Training for Clinicians. In the past year, they have conducted three workshops, in collaboration with the Florida Firefighters Safety and Health Collaborative (FFSHC), regarding cultural competency for the fire service. On June 8, 2023, they will launch their first workshop for law enforcement.

The content of these trainings focuses on understanding the unique culture of law enforcement or fire service and how it applies to the provision of psychological services to this population. Both courses have been approved by the American Psychological Association (APA) for **seven** continuing education credits for clinicians.

Eligibility criteria can be found on the APA website, <https://www.apa.org/ed/ce/>.





Crisis Center of Tampa Bay: SunCoast Region

The Crisis Center of Tampa Bay (CCTB) operates a first responder support line staffed by peers with specialized training in talking with first responders to provide them with confidential emotional support and referral services. First responder peer support personnel answer the support line and provide follow-up services to address overall mental wellness in a 14-county service array in central Florida.

Table 5. Crisis Center of Tampa Bay: SunCoast Region

Information and Referral Services		Peer Support		Public Awareness Campaign
Number of Contacts - All Types	33,712	Unduplicated Number of Persons Served	83	5,247,879 Number of Impressions
Number of Referrals - All	1,925	Number of Trained Peer Support	8	
Number of Direct Staff Hours	16,989	Number of Direct Staff Hours	164,439	

Establishment of the Suncoast Alliance for First Responders

Suncoast Alliance for First Responders (SAFR) is a strategic planning partnership designed to expand behavioral health prevention efforts and promote wellbeing for first responders and their families. One of the SAFR’s recent achievements was to develop a strategic plan addressing resource gaps and prioritizing demographic and geographic locations of identified need. Data gathered from research along with presentations from professionals in the industry, interviews, and focus groups with first responders, organizations that serve first responders, and first responder peers contributed to the strategic plan. Data analysis identified gaps, determined demographic and geographic priorities, and developed goals that can be measured and monitored and transparently available to the community. The next step of SAFR is to oversee the strategic plan’s implementation, and the SAFR members will serve in an advisory board capacity, overseeing the plan and assisting with expansion goals. By June, there will be a documented Strategic Plan with activities and tactics to achieve each objective by April 2024.

The strategic plan is entitled - **REAL** Hope for First Responders and has four focus areas: **R**esources, **E**ducation, **A**ccessibility, **L**eadership.



First Call for Help of Broward: Southeast Region

The 211 Broward – Southeast Florida First Responder Support Coalition – Hero4Hero Program (Hero4Hero) operates First Call for Help of Broward to create a structured and trusted resource for first responders.

Hero4Hero serves first responders in Southeast Florida counties including Broward, Palm Beach, Martin, St. Lucie, Indian River, and Okeechobee and takes calls for assistance from first responders in Northeast Florida. Their trained and highly specialized peer support team includes veteran first responders from police, fire, and 911 dispatch who have extensive professional experience and the cultural competency to connect with current, retired, and families of first responders. They understand the unique stressors that first responders encounter daily. They also recognize the existing barriers and stigmas that can prevent first responders from seeking mental health support, substance abuse assistance, or financial resources.

Table 6. Data at-a-glance: First Call for Help of Broward: Southeast Region

Information and Referral Services		Peer Support		Public Awareness Campaign
Number of Contacts - All Types	11,634	Unduplicated Number of Persons Served	29	52,147,684 Number of Impressions
Number of Referrals - All	2,758	Number of Trained Peer Support	8	
Number of Direct Staff Hours	5,697	Number of Direct Staff Hours	3,735	

First responders who have been injured on the job, are under criminal investigation, or have been terminated from employment may experience a unique array of stress and emotion. **It is the mission of First Call for Help of Broward to connect first responders with social support and connection.** Anyone in the first responder community can call the helpline to receive services, connect with a First Responder Peer Support Specialist, and/or receive behavioral health services. The peer support service is anonymous, providing a safe space for the first responder to talk about what assistance they need while choosing what information, if any, they are willing to share. The First Responder Peer Support Specialists go through extensive training to be able to handle life threatening crisis calls from a first responder who may need an advocate while navigating the behavioral health system.

Hero4Hero Contact Information: 866-760-HERO (4376), <https://www.hero4hero.org/>, https://www.instagram.com/hero4hero_fl/.



When a first responder calls the Hero4Hero line, they will be connected directly with a first responder volunteer, who has specialized training in providing short-term counseling and referral services.

Hurricane Ian Response

In September 2022, Hurricane Ian made landfall in the SunCoast Region of Florida. The path of devastation continued across the central region of Florida up through Jacksonville in the Northeast region. Numerous first responder disaster relief deployments contributed to impactful initial relief efforts to rebuild the state and provide hope to the families whose lives were disrupted by the storm.

The 2nd Alarm Project team was proud to deploy as part of the mental wellness component of the State Emergency Response Plan (SERP)/State Fire Marshal's Office in response to Hurricane Ian. For two weeks, several team members served in collaboration with state partners on the First Responder Mental Wellness Incident Command team and 12 of 2nd Alarm's regional team members served as trained peers deployed as members of the peer support teams in Ft. Myers and other heavily impacted areas. Peer support teams consisted of trained peers, K9 crisis dogs, chaplains, and clinicians and provided psychological first aid, critical incident stress response, and emotional support to responders impacted by the storm. The 2nd Alarm Project's clinicians performed in field assessments and debriefings, answered statewide calls from first responders at their phone/text line, **850-480-9314**, and provided follow up care to impacted first responders.

During the first couple weeks of October, amidst immediate disaster relief efforts, University of Central Florida RESTORES assisted dozens of first responders by providing stress management, single session therapy, and connection to resources, such as longer-term treatment post deployment. UCF RESTORES assisted several first responder agencies and FEMA by providing post deployment debriefings to give those responding to the hurricane a space to discuss the sadness and grief they may have experienced.



The peer support teams also developed and delivered post deployment/demobilization rehabilitation plans for impacted responders. Peer support teams made more than **5,000** contacts with first responders over the deployment period, including creating and distributing palm cards (which can be viewed in Appendix D) listing additional support services for first responders. The 2nd Alarm Project is grateful for the opportunity to support this critical mission.

The Department promoted messaging during and after Hurricane Ian. The messaging included information regarding available resources for first responders who were impacted by responding to Hurricane Ian. The social media posts reached over **129,000** Floridians.

Peer Support Success Story

One instance of a first responder receiving the support they need.

Jane, a corrections officer living out of her car, called about financial support to find housing. She confided in a first responder helpline counselor about her current situation. The counselor was able to walk her through an application for affordable housing. After progress was made on the housing concern, the counselor asked if she would be interested in follow up calls to check-in, see how she is doing. Jane agreed; throughout these follow up calls, she has been connected with additional mental health and financial resources in addition to moving out of her car and into an apartment. Jane feels that she is in a “much better place of mind” and is empowered to take on the challenges at work, while making small steps in improving her finances. She is grateful for the program and the support it continues to give her as she navigates some tough spots.



FIRST RESPONDERS



Thank you for ALL that you do!



866-760-HERO
Hero4Hero.org
Get Connected



FIRST TO RESPOND. LAST TO ASK FOR HELP.

1-866-4FL-HERO
LastToAsk.com

FIRST RESPONDER
HOPE LINE





Statewide Resources

Florida hosts a myriad of great resources for Florida first responders and their families. The following highlights a few, including links to find additional information.

First Responder Toolkit

The Toolkit being developed by the 2nd Alarm Project in partnership with the Department, UCF RESTORES, the Florida Firefighters Safety and Health Collaborative, and contributing partners from the City of Coral Springs/Coral Springs Fire Department will help first responder departments provide their leadership, first responders, peer team leaders, family members, and retirees with an interactive guide. The Toolkit provides resources, fillable documents, and a blueprint to develop or reinforce behavioral health programs within first responder organizations. In addition, the Toolkit will include cultural competency resources for mental health clinicians to better serve first responders.

In the past, most mental wellness resources were static in nature and did not allow for easy customization. This Toolkit will allow first responder departments to easily adopt and adapt standard operating procedures, standard operating guides, training tools, and peer support resources. The information is digestible in easy-to-use formats, such as in a series of short video tutorials. Developed by industry experts and narrated by first responders, the Toolkit is a valuable resource for departments looking to implement or improve their mental wellness programs. The Toolkit includes modules covering a range of evidence-informed strategies and interventions tailored specifically to address the unique challenges first responders face. The modules include Peer Support Teams, K9 Programs, Family Support Resources, Agency-wide Education and Awareness Initiatives, Outpatient Counseling Services, Inpatient and Residential Services, Resources for Retirees, Critical Incident Outreach, Resources for Leadership, Chaplaincy Programs, and Resources for Clinicians. These modules provide first responder agencies with concrete tools, resources, and strategies to integrate the BHAP model into their day-to-day operations. The Toolkit is expected to be published in Summer 2023 and can be accessed via www.myflfamilies.com/first-responder-resiliency or the “Toolkit” tab on www.2ndalarmproject.org.

A major component of the Toolkit is information for building a Behavioral Health Access Program (BHAP). A BHAP is an evidence-informed, comprehensive, and operationalized framework which outlines mental health services geared toward first responders and their families, where those services are available within the community, and levels and standards of care that are expected in the provision of these services.



The BHAP is becoming a world standard of behavioral health care for first responders and is essential for addressing the behavioral health needs of responders and their families. While some first responder organizations are beginning to create BHAP guides, developing and implementing a BHAP can be time-consuming and overwhelming, particularly for departments with limited internal and external resources. Therefore, the Toolkit is intended as a guidance for first responders to develop and sustain their own BHAP.

Additional components of the Toolkit include the best practices for seeking help with tip guides, such as questions to ask to find a culturally competent first responder counselor or what to ask your insurance provider. Finding the right clinicians can be a process, and these tip guides are intended to make this process a little bit easier. Another resource for guidance in finding the right clinician can be accessed at the following https://www.iaff.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Finding_the_right_Clinician_Flyer_2018.pdf.

The Statewide Office for Suicide Prevention and the Suicide Prevention Coordinating Council

The Statewide Office for Suicide Prevention, established through 14.2019(5), F.S. is tasked to propagate suicide prevention efforts across the state. This work is conducted, in part, through the suicide prevention advisory committee, the Suicide Prevention Coordinating Council (SPCC). The SPCC hosts public, quarterly meetings to spread information and messaging about suicide prevention across the state. Guest speakers are commonly invited, and the SPCC was privileged to welcome a presentation from the 2nd Alarm Project and UCF RESTORES in Fall 2022. Their presentation detailed their program's work and provided an update regarding Hurricane Ian relief efforts.

More information can be viewed on the Department's Building First Responder Resiliency webpage, www.myflfamilies.com/first-responder-resiliency.



Florida Legislative Changes Impacting First Responders

The passage of Senate Bill 7012 Substance Abuse and Mental Health in 2020, sponsored by the Senate Children, Families, and Elder Affairs Committee and cosponsored by Senator Rouson and the Senate Appropriations Committee, revised section 14.2019, F.S. to establish the First Responders Suicide Deterrence Task Force within the Statewide Office of Suicide Prevention.

In 2020, House Bill 573 First Responders and Correctional Officers passed the legislature and was signed into law. This bill, sponsored by the House Judiciary Committee and Civil Justice Subcommittee, Representative Casello, Representative McClain and others, revised section 111.09 and 112.531-3, F.S. to provide confidentiality for peer support communications between a first responder and a first responder peer, including under testimony. The bill defined what a “first responder peer” is and what “peer support” means. This bill is viewed as an important accomplishment in the efforts to encourage first responders to seek help for occupational mental health issues.

Task Force Accomplishments

Combined with advocacy from Task Force partners and sponsored by Representative Jason Fischer and Representative Mike Giallombardo, House Bill 689 Workers' Compensation Benefits for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder was passed by the Florida Legislature during the 2022 legislative session. This bill amends 112.1815, F.S. to allow the extension of claim; either a notice of injury due within 90 days of a qualifying event or diagnosis of PTSD (rather than the manifestation of the disorder), whichever is later. In addition, the bill extends the claim filing deadline to one year after either the qualifying event or diagnosis of the disorder, whichever is later. The extension of the claim deadline to one year after a PTSD diagnosis was important because symptoms of PTSD may not appear until years after the event.

In 2023, House Bill 655 Suicide Prevention / Senate Bill 914 Suicide Prevention was introduced into the house by R. Ileana Garcia and R. Lauren Book. This bill proposes to amend s. 111.09, F.S., to allow an affiliated first responder organization to designate peers to provide support to first responders. Affiliated first responder organizations include but are not limited to regularly organized volunteer firefighting departments or volunteer ambulance services, or combination fire departments (as defined in current



law). The bill also specifies that a first responder peer includes active, volunteer, and retired responders. The bill was signed into law by the Governor and will take effect on July 1, 2023.

Recommendations

Suicide among active and retired first responders is a serious issue that requires a multifaceted approach to prevention. Suicide is often characterized as a response to a single event or set of circumstances. However, suicide is most often the result of multiple factors, spanning individual, family and other relationships, community, traumatic exposure, and other factors. The Task Force puts forth their final submission of recommendations to deter suicide among active and retired first responders in Florida.

These recommendations are a comprehensive listing of pertinent items from the lifetime of the Task Force and are informed in part by the 2021 and 2022 Task Force Reports:

Recommendation 1: Promote and improve culturally competent crisis resources.

Promote awareness of information and referral services, short-term, and ongoing counseling options to first responders and their families.

One way to achieve this recommendation is to promote mental wellbeing messaging on first responder agency websites and social media platforms. In addition to posting the resource, a brief synopsis detailing the service can be included, such as if short-term or ongoing support are provided.

The following is one example of messaging to consider sharing:

A First Responder support line accessed by dialing 866-4FL-HERO offers free, 24/7, confidential short-term crisis counseling. A first responder with specialized training in crisis de-escalation will answer your call. Reach out if you are feeling overwhelmed, upset, and need to talk.

Continue to refine and disseminate guidelines on reputable educational/training opportunities with proven efficacy. Leading subject matter experts in the field have identified the following four trainings as best practice for peer support training.



Florida specific trainings are listed first. All trainings are linked to their respective webpages.

- [UCF RESTORES REACT training](#) (trainings are offered both virtually and in-person)
- [NOVA Southeastern University](#) (SNU; trainings are offered both virtually and in-person)
- [North Carolina First Responder Peer Support](#) (trainings are offered in-person)
- [International Association of Fire Fighters IAFF](#) (trainings are offered in-person)

Improve resources across the state available to first responders that are culturally competent, timely, available, and affordable.

To support this recommendation, utilize the Toolkit that provides first responder departments with guidance on first responder training and supportive messaging to enhance their agency's mental wellness programs and policies.

The Toolkit is expected Summer 2023 and will be available at <https://myffamilies.com/first-responder-resiliency>.

Peer Support Success Story

One instance of a first responder receiving the support they need.

John, a family member of a firefighter, is experiencing deteriorating mental health as he grieves the loss of his eyesight. Compounding the loss of his sight, he is unemployed and facing eviction from his home. After disclosing his situation to a peer, the peer was able to connect him with several resources, including employment and housing support. John continues to receive peer support as needed. John expressed how much better he sleeps at night because of the support he is receiving and is very gracious in expressing his gratitude for the hope it brings to his situation.



Recommendation 2: Adopt the Statewide Toolkit.

Increase the number of Behavioral Health Access Programs (BHAPs) in Florida.

The Toolkit will provide materials for first responder departments to develop a BHAP. A BHAP is a comprehensive and operationalized plan which clearly specifies the services members and families need, where those services are available, and levels and standards of care that are expected in provision of these services.

Improve postvention protocols.

Work in alignment with the SOSP and the Florida Strategic Plan for Suicide Prevention. Goals and objectives for action in order to implement a model Standard Operating Guidelines template for public safety agencies to use as a guide in establishing protocols related to suicide death of an active or retired member.^{6,7}

- Establish a statewide network of resources for use after a death by suicide that includes personnel with lived experience who are willing to mentor.
- Enhance and integrate existing local support services for suicide loss and survivors of those who have attempted suicide (such as the national organization Survivors of Blue Suicide <https://www.survivorsofbluesuicide.org>).
- Prepare materials for social media, professional journals, or conferences with recommendations on dealing with the aftermath of suicide in the workplace (similar to the Manager's Guide produced by the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention or the National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide's recommendations from the publication *After a Suicide in Blue*).⁸
- Establish guidelines that are supported by mental health professionals and informed by current research regarding returning to work after a suicide attempt.

⁶Occupation data obtained from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018-2020). Population estimates obtained from Florida Legislature's Office of Economic and Demographic Research (2018-2020).

⁷Gulliver, S. B., Pennington, M. L., Leto, F., Cammarata, C., Ostiguy, W., Zavodny, C., ... & Kimbrel, N. A. (2016). In the wake of suicide: Developing guidelines for suicide postvention in fire service. *Death studies*, 40, 121-128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2015.1077357>

⁸Office of the Surgeon General, US & National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (US. 2012 national strategy for suicide prevention: goals and objectives for action: a report of the U.S. Surgeon General and of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, 2012).



Recommendation 3: Expand the Florida Violent Death Reporting System (FLVDRS)

Enhance the data surveillance system in Florida through partnerships with law enforcement, medical examiners, and through supporting the Department of Health in their data collection needs.

The Florida Violent Death Reporting System (FLVDRS) surveillances hundreds of data elements surrounding the conditions of a violent death in Florida. Continuous efforts are underway to improve robust data collection efforts and to subsequently inform prevention work. More work is needed to enhance comprehensive violent death data collection in Florida. The formalization of relationships between Law Enforcement agencies and FLVDRS is one way to move forward in this objective.

The collection of this data can enrich the understanding of why suicides occur, who is most at risk, and factors contributing to the type of deaths. The FLVDRS feeds into the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS). Presently, firefighter suicide data is available through various state reporting efforts into NVDRS, and this data system could be bolstered to improve the collection of first responder specific data in Florida.⁹

The Department of Health operates the FLVDRS and provided the following information and recommendation. The FLVDRS collects data from 30 counties: Miami-Dade, Duval, Broward, Palm Beach, Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco, Orange, St. Johns, Union, Levy, Flagler, Gilchrist, Hardee, Highlands, Charlotte, Bay, Osceola, Polk, Seminole, St. Lucie, Manatee, Alachua, Clay, Nassau, Hamilton, Columbia, Baker, Bradford, and Putnam, and will be expanding to additional counties to cover the entire state. A contract is in place for medical examiner and law enforcement report abstraction, and technical assistance with reviewing and analyzing FLVDRS data. Law enforcement's role in the FLVDRS is essential. Law enforcement data offers detailed information that can provide more insight into how and why a violent death occurred.

The FLVDRS is a valuable source of comprehensive information that will aid in the design and implementation of injury and violence prevention and intervention efforts in Florida and inform the efforts of state and local suicide prevention stakeholders. Currently, the FLVDRS is entering its fifth year of operation.

⁹Office of the Surgeon General, US & National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (US. 2012 national strategy for suicide prevention: goals and objectives for action: a report of the U.S. Surgeon General and of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, 2012).



Future Directions

The work of Florida’s First Responder Suicide Deterrence Task Force has laid the foundation for enhanced collaboration among first responder agencies and community partners to unite for suicide prevention.

The vision of a new First Responder Mental Health and Suicide Deterrence Subcommittee is to continue the work of the Task Force to inform the SPCC through each subcommittee member’s expertise as a first responder. Future updates regarding the subcommittee are anticipated in the Suicide Prevention Coordinating Council’s Annual Report. When published, the report can be accessed at the following link: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/suicideprevention>.

Thank you to all Task Force members for your time and dedication during the lifetime of the Task Force and for working together to prevent suicide.
Chief Charles Vazquez, Task Force Chair





Appendix A – Task Force Membership

Representing	Appointed Official
Florida Police Chiefs Association*	Chief Charles Vazquez, <i>Chair</i>
Statewide Office for Suicide Prevention*	Anna Sever, <i>Co-chair</i>
Florida Fire Chiefs Association*	Chief Christopher Bator Keith Cartwright (through January 2023)
Florida Professional Firefighters Association*	Mike Salzano
Florida Police Benevolent Association*	Michael “Mick” McHale
Florida State Lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police*	Rob Strout
Florida Sheriffs Association*	Matt Dunagan Allie McNair
2 nd Alarm Project	Dr. Kellie O’Dare Lance Butler Brandy Carlson-Moore
Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles	Captain Derrick Rahming
Department of Law Enforcement	Matt Walsh
Florida Firefighters Safety and Health Collaborative	Michelle Fayed Tina O’Brien
Florida Hero Helpline/Last to Ask for Help campaign Crisis Center of Tampa Bay	Eric Bledsoe Michael Thacker Eric Ratzmann
Lee County EMS	Nicci Reed James Nunez
Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Compassion Focus Counseling	Alisha Singh
Miami Gardens Police Department	Michael Dillon Sergeant Devin Lucius
Miami Gardens Police Department Crime Scene Unit	Willard Delancy
Polk County Fire Rescue	Chaplain Murphy Hanley
Retired Firefighter	Ryan Gallik
Southeast Florida Hero4Hero First Responder Support Coalition/ 211 Broward	Luis Lopez
St. Petersburg College	Mary VanHaute (through December 2022)
Struggle Well Program	Tim Adams
Town of Palm Beach Fire Rescue/ Florida Fire Chiefs Association Government Relations	Chief Darrel Donatto
UCF Restores	Dr. Deborah Beidel Suzie Nazzaro

*Indicates voting member



Appendix B – Defining Key Terms

Term	Definition
Behavioral Health Access Program (BHAP)	<p>A Behavioral Health Access Program (BHAP) is an evidence-informed, comprehensive, and operationalized framework which outlines mental health services geared toward first responders and their families, where those services are available within the community, and levels and standards of care that are expected in the provision of these services.</p> <p>The BHAP is becoming a world standard of behavioral health care for first responders and is essential for addressing the behavioral health needs of responders and their families. While some first responder organizations are beginning to create BHAP guides, developing and implementing a BHAP can be time-consuming and overwhelming, particularly for departments with limited internal and external resources. Therefore, the Toolkit is intended as a guidance for first responders to develop and sustain their own BHAP.</p>
First Responder Peer support	<p>First responder peer support is a specialized type of peer-support, where an individual with experience working in the capacity of a first responder volunteers to provide emotional support to their fellow first responder. This support can be in-person or over the phone through a confidential, peer support counseling line.</p>
Risk factor	<p>A characteristic that elevates someone’s susceptibility to disease. A risk factor does not mean someone will go on to get the disease, yet it raises someone’s chances.</p> <p>Example: A risk factor for suicide is a previous suicide attempt, yet few people with previous suicide attempts die by suicide.</p>
Warning sign	<p>An indicator that someone may be at imminent risk for disease/ death.</p> <p>Example: If someone is looking for a means to die by suicide, such as purchasing a firearm, this is a warning sign for suicide not to ignore.</p>



Appendix C – Resources Designed by First Responders for First Responders

The following lists a few Florida resources for first responders, including counseling lines that are answered by first responders with specialized training in giving information and referral and short-term counseling support. Additional resources for are found throughout the report.

Resource and Contact Information	Description
2nd Alarm Project Number: 850-480-9314 Website: https://2ndalarmproject.org/counseling/	Free counseling sessions offered to first responders by clinicians with specialized training in treating mental health conditions presenting in first responders. Crisis line: No
211 Broward/ Hero4Hero line Number: 866-760-HERO (4376) Website: https://www.hero4hero.org/ - https://www.instagram.com/hero4hero_fl/	Counseling line staffed by first responders providing information and referral and short-term crisis counseling. Crisis line: Yes
Crisis Center of Tampa Bay Number: 866-4FL-HERO (4376)	Counseling line staffed by first responders providing information and referral and short-term crisis counseling. Crisis line: Yes
University of Central Florida RESTORES Number: 407-823-1657 Website: ucfrestores.com	Single session consultation line staffed by first responders for mental health related concerns, individuals receive a personalized treatment strategy to be paired with ongoing services. Crisis line: No



Appendix D – Statewide Palm Card



HURRICANE IAN
RESOURCES FOR FIRST RESPONDERS & COMMUNITIES

VISIT floridadisaster.org/mentalhealth

for Emotional Support and Assistance for Families, First Responders, and Community Members

For Immediate Emotional Support:

Disaster Distress Helpline 1-800-985-5990	National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Dial 9-8-8
Florida 211 Network Crisis Counselors	Crisis Text Line Text HELLO to 741741



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RESOURCES FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

Redline Rescue	redlinerescue.org
UCF RESTORES	(407) 823-1657 ucfrestores.com
2nd Alarm Project	(850) 480-9314 2ndalarmproject.org
FL Veterans Support Line	(844) 693-5838
Safe Call Now	(206) 459-3020
First Responder Crisis Text Line	text BADGE to 741741



