

## **Community Safety Department Mental Health Programs Update**

Presented To:	Emergency Services Committee
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Meeting Date:	August 10, 2022
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Type:	Correspondence for Information Only
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Recommended by:	General Manager of Community Safety
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### **Report Summary**

This report provides information regarding the mental health and wellness strategies that have been implemented within Community Safety.

### **Relationship to the Strategic Plan, Health Impact Assessment and Community Energy & Emissions Plan (CEEP)**

This report refers to operational matters and has no direct connection to the Community Energy and Emissions Plan.

### **Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

### **Background**

This report provides information to the Emergency Services Committee on the mental health and wellness strategies that have been implemented within the Community Safety (CS) Department. These strategies include wellness policies, mental health education, physical fitness, rapid access to mental health treatment services, the implementation of a Peer Support Network, Paramedic/Fire PeerConnect app, Facility Dog program and the Employee Wellness Committee. These programs are to support all members in developing resiliency against Occupational Stress Injuries (OSI) and to promote wellness in the workplace. Mental health and wellness strategies have many benefits – an engaged, resilient, and productive workforce, a work environment free of stigma and a positive workplace culture.

Over the past two years, WSIB costs related to psychological claims by Community Safety staff is more than \$2 million. Community Safety continues to explore programs to provide preventative mental health and wellness programs to reduce the impact of OSI, reduce WSIB costs, and create a positive working environment.

#### **Peer Support Network**

One of the strategies that was implemented in May 2016 to support our staff was the Peer Support Network (PSN). The goal of the PSN is to provide proactive education for all Community Safety members regarding critical incident stress and other stress-related issues. The PSN Team works to minimize the harmful effects of stress during or following a crisis, emergency, or personal situation through reactive interventions when personnel request assistance.

Through individual peer-to-peer support and/or group defusing(s)/debriefing(s), the team provides paramedic/fire personnel with assistance in alleviating potential stress-related symptoms. The PSN's role is not to provide clinical services, psychotherapy, or professional counseling, but to provide immediate crisis intervention, support and referral information. Participation during any service provided by the team or its members is both voluntary and confidential.

Currently, there are 18 members within the PSN team. Members consist of paramedics, career and volunteer firefighters and managers from both Paramedic and Fire Services. In early June 2021, the PSN team conducted a three-day training session at the Lionel E. Lalonde Centre. The focus of the training included on-boarding of six new team members and to provide additional training and skills for the existing 12 members. Dr. Ethier, along with her colleagues from Breakwater Institute, delivered the training. Feedback from the PSN team after this session was very positive and PSN members indicated that they feel more prepared to assist all Community Safety members. Our PSN team has continued to participate in professional development sessions with a local clinical psychologist throughout 2022. These sessions are instrumental to provide on-going development of our PSN team.

Since being established in May 2016, the PSN team has made a total of 1,418 contacts to provide support to Community Safety members. The PSN team plays an integral role in supporting all Community Safety members and all staff. Everyone is routinely reminded to reach out to any member of the PSN if they require additional support.

In May 2022, the PSN was activated and supported City staff as a result of a workplace incident. The PSN was able to assist in providing support for the employees which included staff, managers, as well as people tasked with investigating the incident. This incident involved 11 PSN members who provided on-scene support to those affected, multiple peer sessions, drop-ins to the workplace and several one-on-one sessions with colleagues and managers of the deceased. Over 50 contacts were made during this time frame. During the group sessions and workplace drop-ins, our Community Safety Facility Dog, Neely, who is a registered National Service Dog (NSD), was utilized to provide Canine Assisted Intervention for both these sessions. The PSN was also requested by the Ontario Fire Marshall (OFM) to assist in supporting a Volunteer Fire Department outside of the City of Greater Sudbury who were also impacted by our tragic workplace incident.

In June, the PSN was involved with Community Safety support after the death of a career firefighter. This support ranged from phone calls, drops-ins and one-on-ones with staff. This incident involved 10 PSN members providing support at stations across the City. There were over 60 contacts made during this time frame. NSD Neely was also utilized to provide Canine Assisted Intervention at the stations. This is an ongoing event and PSN will continue to provide support as needed.

### **Paramedic/Fire PeerConnect App:**

In March 2021, the Ministry of the Solicitor General (SolGen) reached out to the Ministry of Health (MOH), inviting Paramedic Services to participate in a mental health wellness program. The program was a one-year pilot project, providing first responders across the Province with access to the First Response Mental Health's (FRMH) PeerConnect app. The PeerConnect app is a proactive peer support and wellness on-line tool.

The PeerConnect app supports existing programs we currently have in place, such as wellness tools, self-assessments, mental health programming, and peer support programs while also allowing for easier 24/7 access to our peer supporters. This tool is an Ontario-based solution that is already in use among several emergency medical services and first responder agencies in Ontario and across North America.

After March 31, 2022, the PeerConnect app pilot was evaluated for application usage and proactive support, (Table 1). Community Safety determined that the PeerConnect app provided a benefit to all Community Safety members and we will continue to utilize this app as a proactive peer support and wellness online tool for the remainder of 2022 and into 2023.

With the continued utilization of the PeerConnect app, our goal is to provide on-going communication and support for every Community Safety member, working towards the ultimate goal of a safe and supported work environment. PeerConnect is designed to increase access to mental health services and to provide the resources needed to take care of our members. The app ensures member privacy, security of information, and organization-controlled permissions.

### **PeerConnect App Support Summary 2021-2022**

<b>PeerConnect App Support Programs</b>	<b>Q2 (2021)</b>	<b>Q3 (2021)</b>	<b>Q4 (2021)</b>	<b>Q1 (2022)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Number of Completed Connections	0	57	28	54	139
Number of Recommendations	0	2	4	1	7
Number of Follow Ups	0	15	7	5	27
Number of Check-ins	0	40	17	46	103

Table 1

### **Facility Dog - Canine Assisted Intervention**

In October 2021, a Facility Dog was introduced to the Community Safety Department. The role of the Community Safety Facility Dog is to provide Canine Assisted Intervention to members of the Community Safety Department in a proactive and reactive role. Neely is from National Service Dogs (NSD) and is accredited by Assistance Dogs International.

Neely has assisted in numerous defusing(s)/debriefing(s) and attends Community Safety buildings to provide support and proactive visits with staff. Staff report feeling “less stress, better sleep, increased energy and better sense of wellbeing” after time spent with Neely.

Neely had an acclimation period where she needed to become more familiar with her handler and varying stations across the City in order to perform at an optimal level. Since ending her acclimation period, NSD Neely has provided support in at least 5 Community Safety defusing(s)/debriefing(s). Prior to her acclimation period ending, Neely provided support to approximately 10 people daily using skills taught at NSD training.

Neely was an integral part of the PSN support provided during the May and June incidents within the City. NSD Neely will be utilized on an ongoing basis to provide support in proactive and reactive roles.

### **Employee Wellness Committee**

In March 2021, the Employee Wellness Committee for Paramedic Services was established. The purpose of the Employee Wellness Committee is to assess, plan and implement activities that will help our members to be more aware, motivated, and skilled around life decisions to increase their own and others' wellbeing. The Committee's role is also to build a workplace environment that is supportive of living a healthy lifestyle. This Committee provides staff with suggested ideas, reference materials and activities to help support employee health and wellness. The goal of this Committee is to cultivate an organizational culture of healthy living. “Progress, not perfection. The mind is a powerful thing. When you fill it with positive thoughts, the world starts to change. Everyday might not be good but there is something good in every day.” by Faye Howard.

This Committee consists of paramedics, support staff, managers and CGS Human Resources representatives. The Committee has established monthly themes throughout the year such as Nutrition, Mind Body and Nature, Self-Care, and Month of Giving. This summer the Committee has organized a Wellness Softball Team. This is a great way for paramedics to bond and spend time together during the summer.

The Committee also posts reference materials that are provided to paramedic staff onto the PeerConnect app to allow access for all Community Safety members to review.

## Mental Health Program Benefits

Having mental health and wellness programs within an organization provides benefits to both the employee and the employer. Some of these benefits include improved employee health behaviors, reduced elevated health risks, reduced health care costs, improved productivity, and decreased absenteeism. As well, the programs help to improve employee recruitment and retention and build and help sustain high employee morale. Measuring the benefits of wellness programs are challenging for an organization as there are many financial and operational variables that are impacted for every OSI.

Within Community Safety it has been identified that there has been an increase of Psychological Health Care Claims, but a reduction in Psychological Lost Time Claims since 2015. An increase in Psychological Health Care Claims indicates that the employees are seeking assistance, while at the same time being able to remain working in their current role. A Psychological Lost Time Claim is created when a worker suffers a work-related injury/disease, which results in being off work past the day of accident, loss of wages/earnings, or a permanent disability/impairment. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of Community Safety members that have returned to work after a Psychological Lost Time Claim (Table 2 and 3). Having an increase in Psychological Health Care Claims, a reduction in Psychological Lost Time Claims and an increase in the number of Community Safety members returning to work after a Lost Time Claim indicates that the mental health wellness programs and other initiatives that have been implemented to assist Community Safety members are effective in supporting our staff to return to work. These programs also have a long-term financial benefit for the employer by helping to reducing WSIB costs.

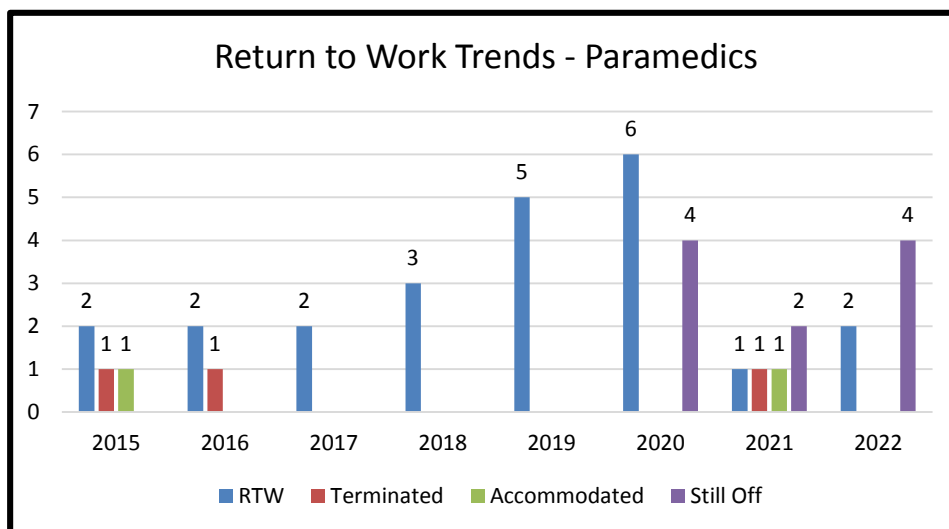


Table 2: Paramedic Return to Work Trends

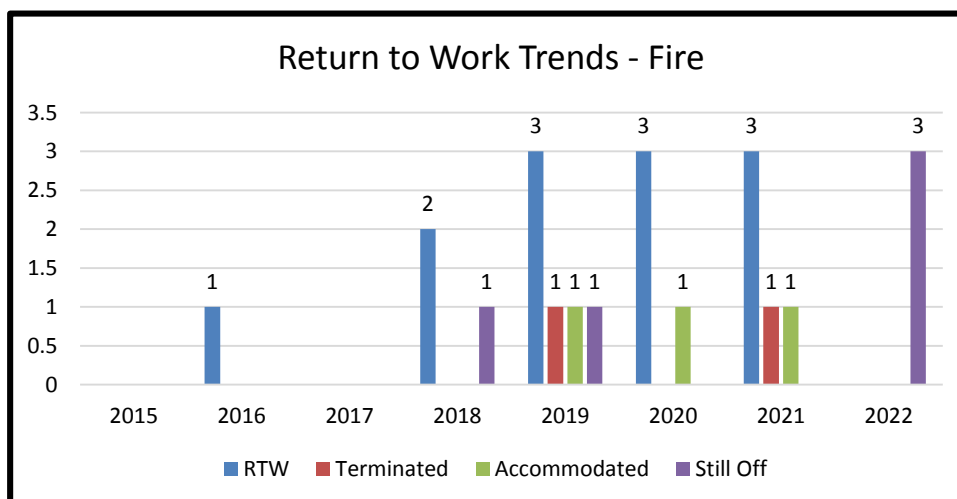


Table 3: Fire Return to Work Trends

## **Financial Implications**

Over the past two years WSIB costs related to psychological claims by Community Safety staff has exceeded over \$2 million. One of the long-term goals of establishing mental health and wellness programs is to reduce the personal impact on our employees while reducing WSIB costs. The PSN, PeerConnect app, Facility Dog program and Employee Wellness Committee have annual operating costs.

The annual cost to maintain the PSN team is approximately \$25,000. This cost includes the wages of the PSN members to attend monthly training sessions and a local clinical psychologist to deliver the training. In addition, when on-boarding of new members is required, the approximate cost is \$10,000 for the initial training, plus \$600 per member for the Personality Assessment.

Since 2016 when the PSN was established, there has been two on-boarding sessions. The next on-boarding session for new PSN members is projected to take place in 2024.

The Annual cost for the Paramedic/Fire PeerConnect app is approximately \$22,000. This cost covers the \$3.00/month app license for every Community Safety member.

The Annual cost for Community Safety Facility Dog, is approximately \$3,000. This covers the cost of items such as medical health insurance, preventative wellness plan and food.

The annual cost for the Employee Wellness Committee is approximately \$5,000. This cost covers Committee members' wages to attend training and to develop the information that are provided to Community Safety members.

## **Conclusion**

A mental health and wellness strategy has been developed for all Community Safety members. Some of these strategies include a Peer Support Network (PSN) team, Paramedic/Fire PeerConnect app, Facility Dog program and the Employee Wellness Committee. The goal of these strategies is for all Community Safety members to develop resiliency strategies against occupational stress injuries, promote wellness in the workplace, reduce WSIB costs, and create a positive working environment. Over the past five years there has been an increase in the number of Community Safety members that have returned to work after being off from an occupational stress injury, indicating that the strategies that have been put in place to support staff members is effective.