Welcome to the NVFC’s Train Strong Webinar Series.

Today’s webinar is “It Could Never Happen Here: Suicide and the Volunteer Fire Department.”
The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) is the leading nonprofit membership association representing the interests of the volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. The NVFC serves as the voice of the volunteer in the national arena and provides invaluable resources, programs, education, and advocacy for first responders across the nation.

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Membership

Become a member for only $18 a year. Join today at NVFC.org/Join.
Our Panelists

Hersch Wilson
Hondo (NM) Fire Department

Faith Applewhite
Santa Fe City (NM) Fire Department
The purpose of this presentation:

- Help officers (volunteers) understand the growing suicide epidemic, especially among first responders
- Understand the signs of a potential suicide
- Focus on proactive measures we can take to help prevent suicides
Corporal Robert Miller was seventeen when he joined the Marine Corps, Company B, 5th Marine Division (the “Spearhead”). They landed on Iwo Jima in February of 1944. They sustained the highest casualties of all the Marine Divisions that landed on Iwo. Today, in his nineties— sixty-nine years later—former Corporal Miller still sleeps with the TV on. He sleeps with the volume on high to drown out the sound of gunfire and screaming.

Next, Carolyn Carino, a Michigan-based therapist talks about her father Al’s experience. He was also a 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine veteran of the Pacific Campaign. In his eighties, he would sit in a chair in his living room, on guard at night, having taped all the curtains down. Drinking to dull the memories, he would stay low to the floor so that he was a smaller target for snipers.

Ms. Carino reported that all the survivors in her dad’s company, all of them—100%— had one time or another woken up in the middle of the night and tried to kill their wives, thinking they were the enemy.
The Point... 

- PTSD is a real, physiologic disorder

- It’s 2020, we now know that trauma can effect us, that it can cause depression and lead to PTSD and suicides

- As leaders, it is our responsibility in the fire service to 1) understand the issues and 2) use the best science to help prevent suicides.
Firefighter-Paramedic
Nicole Hladik RIP

- Hinsdale FD, Hinsdale, IL

- Died July, 2020

- RIP
• A study found that 103 firefighters and 140 police officers died by suicide in 2017, compared to 93 firefighter and 129 officer line-of-duty deaths (FireRescue 1, April 13, 2018)
The Truth. . .

- As a volunteer officer, you are more likely to lose a firefighter by suicide than by a line-of-duty death.
Understanding the Background

• According to the AMA: The latest data available (2018) show the highest age-adjusted suicide rate in the US since 1941
• According the APA, the rate of suicides from 1999 to 2017 has increased 33% and has increased sharply since 2006 (https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/03/trends-suicide)
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) WISQARS Leading Causes of Death Reports, in 2017:

- Suicide was the tenth leading cause of death overall in the United States, claiming the lives of over 47,000 people.
- Suicide was the second leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 10 and 34, and the fourth leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 35 and 54.
- There were more than twice as many suicides (47,173) in the United States as there were homicides (19,510).
“Deaths of despair” according to some sources, account for more than 65,000 deaths a year. Much of the decline (in longevity) stems from higher rates of suicide, opioid overdoses and alcohol-related illnesses — "deaths of despair." Americans "are drinking themselves to death, or poisoning themselves with drugs, or shooting or hanging themselves."
In sum, we are seeing an alarming increase in suicides and “deaths of despair.” Further, with the pandemic and the recession, it is possible that those numbers will continue to grow.
QUESTIONS?
Firefighters

• First responders are subject to the same societal pressures. They “swim” in the same sea.
Firefighters Have a Unique Set of Stressors

• Lack of sleep/interrupted sleep
• Bad nutrition
• Physical fitness requirement vs fitness
• High state of “alertness”
• The movies in our minds (average LO sees 180 “critical incidents" in their career, comparable for firefighters?)
Volunteers

- Working in their own communities
- Balancing work and volunteering
- Often “on duty” 24/7
- Less “wellness and mental health support than career firefighters”
As a Result...

- Depression and PTSD affect an estimated 30% of our nation’s first responders – compared to 20% of the general population. And while approximately 3.7% of Americans have contemplated suicide, that rate jumps to 37% for fire and EMS professionals. Further, 0.5% of Americans attempt suicide vs. 6.6% of fire and EMS professionals.

https://www.ems1.com/ptsd/articles/americas-first-responders-struggle-with-ptsd-and-depression-LsgD4IA5b0ycVuQH/
Signs
Recognizing Signs: No One Sign - Usually a Confluence of Factors

- Change in life circumstances
- Being laid off
- Divorce
- Financial challenges
- Addiction (Alcohol)
- Depression (and PTSD)
- Abuse
Access to Means of Suicide

- Guns
- Medication
The Triple Threat

• Depression or PTSD
• Easy access to a weapon
• Drinking (or drugs)
Signs individuals might be contemplating suicide
Signs

- Family history of suicide
- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no purpose
- Talking about feeling trapped or being in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious, agitated, or reckless
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

Prevention for Individuals

Learning Resilience
Resilience

“Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress” . . . It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences.”

American Psychological Association
Resilience Practices for Firefighters*

- Practice #1: Understand PTSD and suicide signs
- Practice #2: A strategy for coping with stress
- Practice #3: A regular exercise routine
- Practice #4: Optimism and humor
- Practice #5: Moral compass
- Practice #6: Be in a community
- Practice #7: Cognitive flexibility

*Margret Haglund, Nicole Cooper, 6 keys to resilience for PTSD and everyday stress, Current Psychiatry, Volume 6, No 4
Help from Officers
Officer Priorities

• Make mental and emotional health a priority along with scene and driver safety
• Educate, Educate Educate! (depression, PTSD, suicidal ideation)
• Model
• Resources
Traditional FD Culture (since 1736)

• Predominately and historically male culture
• “Suck it up”
• Don’t complain
• PTSD, depression are signs of weakness
• Don’t talk about it. . .

[Logo: NVFC]
The Cultures We Need

• Caring (on scene and off)
• Trust
• No bullying/sexism*
• Open
• Proactive about discussing and telling stories about mental health and issues
Women firefighters (n = 290) completed self-report measures of experiences with harassment on the job, career suicidality, and various psychiatric symptoms. Logistic regression analyses and one-way analyses of variance were used to address study aims. Of the sample, 21.7% reported having experienced sexual harassment and 20.3% reported having been threatened or harassed in another way on their firefighting job. Sexual harassment and other threats/harassment on the job were both significantly associated with a greater likelihood of reporting career suicidal ideation, as well as reporting more severe psychiatric symptoms. Harassment and threats experienced on the job may be associated with increased suicide risk and more severe psychiatric symptoms among women firefighters.

https://journals.lww.com/jonmd/Abstract/2017/12000/Women_Firefighters_and_Workplace_Harassment_.2.aspx
Peer Counseling
Leaders Influence and Use Culture

• How we “show” up
• The stories we tell
• Permission, process, and protection
Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance

Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance is a key resource for firefighter suicide prevention and dealing with the aftermath.
Post the Suicide Prevention Numbers:

1-800-273-8255
suicidepreventionlifeline.org
Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals
Our Job. . .

- Save lives
- Protect our Brothers and Sisters
Q&A Session
Volunteer Voices

JOIN THE CONVERSATION!

#CANCER  #FUNDING  #TRAINING  #RECRUITMENT  #SAFETY  #RETENTION

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Thank You!

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