

# CAPITOL -TO- CAPITOL

SACRAMENTO, CA WASHINGTON, D.C.

## PUBLIC SAFETY

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## FIRST RESPONDER HEALTH AND WELLNESS

### Requested Action

The Public Safety Team is a coalition of first responders, elected officials, business leaders, and community members requesting that the federal government devotes the necessary attention to first responder mental health and wellness, including:

- Support for Public Safety Health and Wellness Legislative Efforts:** Specifically, endorsement of the HERO Act (HR 3671) and its companion bill in the Senate, S.1925, to address behavioral health issues through increased data collection and the implementation of peer-support health and wellness programs.
- Increase annual funding for the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Program:** This vital program funds projects that support state and local law enforcement agencies seeking to implement new or enhance existing programs that offer training and services on officer emotional and mental health, peer mentoring, suicide prevention, stress reduction, and support services for officers and their families. In FY 2023, the COPS Office awarded approximately \$9.1 million nationwide under LEMHWA, supporting only 1-3 programs in 32 states. The FY24 Minibus Appropriations bill (P.L. 118-42) provides level funding for the program, as does the FY25 Budget Request.
- Improve coordination within and between federal agencies** providing mental health services for first responders. Federal first responder mental health programs are generally conducted within executive departments with jurisdiction over the type of first responder, with few interagency initiatives and little overall coordination.

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## Business Nexus

First responders play a crucial role in safeguarding public safety and well-being throughout our communities. Their dedication to duty often exposes them to traumatic events, leading to heightened stress, mental health challenges, in addition to an impact on physical health. Recognizing the importance of prioritizing the well-being of first responders, federal efforts aimed at providing funding for programs that address their physical safety, mental health, and emotional resiliency are essential to ensuring that vital responders are available to protect life and property.

## Background

The work of first responders often places them at the forefront of traumatic events and high-stress situations, in-turn, comes along with a significant toll on their mental health. This group is considerably more likely to experience mental health conditions, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), at rates higher than the general population. The challenge is not merely anecdotal but is well-documented through various studies and surveys highlighting the urgency of addressing this crisis.

Research, including a landmark study by the Ruderman Family Foundation, reveals that first responders face a notably higher risk of suicide compared to the general public. In 2017, it was found that firefighters and police officers were more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty, emphasizing the severe mental health risks associated with these professions. Similarly, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reports that first responders are 10% more likely to suffer from behavioral health conditions like depression and PTSD, underscoring the impact of their work on their mental well-being.

Efforts have been initiated by the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to fund research and pilot programs aimed at improving support and resources for first responders' mental health. These include grants for developing peer support programs, crisis intervention training, and comprehensive mental health services tailored to the unique needs of first responders. However, the existing data and efforts underline the necessity for more robust legislative action and funding to expand and enhance mental health services for this critical workforce.

## Conclusion:

The call for federal legislation to support the mental health and emotional resiliency of first responders is not just a policy issue; it's a moral imperative. By prioritizing and investing in mental health programs, training, confidential resources, research, and the integration of mental health initiatives into standard protocols, we can offer tangible support to those who risk their lives for our safety. Enhanced mental health support for first responders not only contributes to their personal well-being but also to the overall effectiveness and resilience of our emergency response systems, ensuring a safer and more secure society for all.

## Sources

- [Federal Efforts to Address the Mental Health of First Responders: Resources and Issues for Congress, CRS 10/1/20](#)

*2024 Capitol-to-Capitol*

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