

**MENTAL HEALTH:** Ongoing trauma takes a toll on first responders

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adjustment in the thought process and culture surrounding the mental health of first responders and paying more attention to their well-being after tough calls,” said Tim Craig, deputy chief of operations/training at the Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District.

Craig spoke with *The Nugget* about the shift in firefighter and EMS culture and training in regard to focusing more on the well-being of first responders.

Craig spoke about the fact that this year in particular, there has been stress since March when the pandemic began and “it hasn’t really let up since.” Not only has COVID-19 created an extra stressor on first responders, but a string of recent fatal accidents among Sisters youth has also had a significant impact and created a need for looking at the well-being of first responders after a critical incident.

Craig has been in the fire service for over 25 years and has had his share of “bad calls.” But not all of the calls that cause stress to crews are those stereotypical “bad calls.”

“A lot of times a specific call for a crew member can cause a stress-related response based on if they have something that ties them to what is happening,” said Craig.

There has been a shift within the firefighter culture from the suck-it-up attitude

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to a culture of trust and an environment where people could feel as if they could self-report what is going on and if they need help.

“This kind of thing is just another type of injury,” Craig said. “It is not visible, but it is an injury to one of our people. We don’t put someone out there with a broken ankle, why would we allow them to run around with demons in the head? They become a sustained stress injury unless properly treated and addressed.”

This culture shift and developing an environment of trust has allowed for new programs and training in mental health to emerge within the curriculum for fire training.

Fire Chief Roger Johnson with Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District, also spoke with *The Nugget* about the well-being of his crew in light of recent events.

“Generally, responders are doing well, and there is resilience but there is still an effort to communicate more,” said Johnson.

The district relies heavily on the chaplaincy program

to check in with the crews and Johnson said, “The guys really notice changes with each other because they live together basically for 48 hours on shift. The guys have access to a 24-hour counselor as well as there are staff programs for training and there is the availability to lots of resources.”

Over the past few years, training programs and awareness toward checking in on crews has emerged from an operational level within fire services. In particular, there has been the development of peer-support programs that aim to train responders in treating their fellow crew members when stress is impacting them and assists in how to get them the help that they might need.

As stated by the Central Oregon Public Safety Chaplains website: “The peer support program mission is to provide our public safety employees an opportunity to receive physical, psychological and emotional support through times of personal or professional crisis and to help anticipate and address potential difficulties.”

Joel Stutzman, executive chaplain with Central Oregon Public Safety Chaplains, spoke about training initiatives and what their organization does to care for their first responders.

“A chaplaincy is an organization that cares for the first responder so they may better care for their communities,” said Stutzman.

The chaplains follow up with first responders after an incident and check in on them through various programs.

“A lot of the stuff we do

is behind the scenes — connecting one-on-one and going to the station physically to talk and check in, etcetera,” said Stutzman. “We try to bring calm to chaos because it is uncommon stuff that these guys witness.”

The main mission of the chaplains is to be a ministry of presence, which means they’re being someone that the first responders know is there for them to talk to.

“We do a lot of referring out depending on what they might need. We have a great network of relationships with counselors or pastors for those who need help,” said Stutzman.

Chaplains are trained in Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM). CISM is a comprehensive, organized approach for the reduction and control of the harmful aspects of stress in the emergency services. After a critical stress incident, they do a diffusing and debriefing process to allow time to process the experience and then work through it accordingly and teach tools in how to cope with what has happened.

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Often times, chaplains have first responder experience, making it easier for other first responders to open up, because they know what they’ve gone through and can understand.

“A lot of what we do is building relationships to build trust and that comes from talking with them,” said Stutzman.

Stutzman teaches a chaplaincy academy, a new start-up academy which teaches some basics on how to work through stress incidents with departments.

“We want to look at what we can do proactively, not responsively; while there are healthy tools in place for the major stuff, we want to look at the pre-stuff and be proactive about care,” he said.

COVID-19 has had an effect on certain aspects of the programs due to the fact that people are now more cut off from each other than ever before.

“One of the best ways to take care is to connect and talk with people, but that has now been diminished,” said Stutzman.

The training academy and the peer-support programs and chaplaincy have been moved to a more virtual platform but the work is still actively taking place, seeking to protect those who protect the community.



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