Preventing Post-traumatic Stress Disorders Amongst First-Responders

City of Hamilton

April 2017

The City of Hamilton (the City) is committed to the protection and promotion of the mental health and wellbeing of all employees. Mental health is fundamental to overall health. Good mental health allows an individual to cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and make a contribution to the workplace and community. The City strives to establish and maintain progressive workplace practices that promote positive mental health and wellbeing of all employees.

Workplace promotion, prevention and anti-stigma initiatives, training for management, and employee assistance programs all have a role to play in maintaining mental health and wellbeing.

In 2016, Senior Leadership Team and City Council adopted a Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy (Appendix A) and a Workplace Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy to make our workplaces more psychologically safe and to provide our employees with supports and skills to improve their own resiliency.

We recognize that our first-responders are at an ongoing risk of developing Post-traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD) because of the nature of their work and the long and short-term effects of exposure to traumatic events. Preventing PTSD, providing access to trauma supports and facilitating stay-at-work and return-to work programs are a priority under our Workplace Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

If identified and treated early, mental health concerns in first responders can be temporary and reversible. Employees and leaders who understand normal reactions to stress and how to manage these reactions are more resilient. They have the ability to recover from stress, traumatic events, and adverse situations. It is possible to train people to recognize changes in their own mental health and become more resilient (Mental Health Commission of Canada).

This report outlines the steps we have taken to date and our future plans to improve our efforts to prevent PTSD and support our first-responders.

Submitted by:

Michael Sanderson

Chief, Hamilton Paramedic Services

David Cunliffe

Chief, Hamilton Fire Department

Lora Fontana

Executive Director, Human Resources and Organizational Development

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# Hamilton Paramedic Services and Hamilton Fire Department Overview

**Hamilton Paramedic Services (HPS)**

HPS provides pre-hospital advanced medical, trauma care, and transport for victims of emergency incidents. The service also provides public education, promotion, and prevention activities in neighbourhoods, as well as maintaining the City’s network of public access defibrillators.

HPS is comprised of 254 Primary Care front-line Paramedics, 62 Advanced Care Paramedics, 16 Operations Supervisors (who also provide care) and 4 Performance and Development Supervisors. The service operates out of 18 stations. The paramedic complement includes a mix of full-time and part-time employees. The service is overseen by a Chief, three Deputy Chiefs and three Commanders.

In 2016, HPS performed 79,150 responses to 64,675 incidents or events. Ambulance dispatch services are not included within the City PTSD Prevention Plan as they are provided by the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care operated Central Ambulance Communications Centre.

**Hamilton Fire Department (HFD)**

HFD provides fire education, fire prevention, fire inspections, fire suppression, fire dispatching, fire apparatus repair and maintenance, fire data and report services, fire recruitment and continuing training, special operations response (hazardous materials, high angle rope rescue, confined space rescue), tiered medical response, rescue and extrication response, emergency infrastructure response (natural gas, spills, flooding, electrical, odours), tactical and pre-planning, and mutual/automatic aid to neighbouring communities.

HFD is a composite service made up of 468 career full time and 270 volunteer paid-on-call firefighters, operating out of 26 stations over a 1,117 square kms response area. There are also 77 employees working in administration and support divisions within the Department. The service is overseen by a Chief, two Deputy Chiefs, four Assistant Deputy Chiefs and an Area Commander.

In 2016 the operations division responded to 30,157 calls/incidents.  Prevention and education responses included 650 public events and 7515 inspections.

# Training for Staff on PTSD Recognition, Prevention and Response

To protect workers, it is imperative to provide training to employees that will assist them in recognizing the signs and symptoms of poor mental health, eliminate the stigma associated with mental illness and develop skills necessary to increase individual resiliency. The training will also help leaders identify who may be at risk after traumatic events.

**Hamilton Paramedic Services**

HPS was one of the first services in Ontario to adopt the Road to Mental Readiness (R2MR) training program and train all staff in the curriculum. The training was originally developed by the Department of National Defence. The Mental Health Commission of Canada coordinated the efforts to bring the program to police, fire and paramedic services across Canada.

R2MR Primary Course Goals:

* To improve short-term performance and long-term mental health outcomes
* To reduce barriers to care and encourage early access to care R2MR Leadership

Course Goals:

* To provide the tools and resources required to manage and support employees who may be experiencing a mental illness
* To assist supervisors in maintaining their own mental health as well as promoting positive mental health in their employees

All paramedics received a half-day course where they were provided with valuable information, skills, tools and resources specific to:

* stigma and barriers to care;
* unhealthy coping strategies;
* mental toughness; and
* the Mental Health Continuum Model, a self-assessment tool with indicators of positive, poor, and declining mental health.

Leaders in HPS were provided day-long training where, in addition to the topics covered in the employee course, leaders acquire tools and skills specific to:

* the role of leadership in promoting positive mental health in employees;
* ad hoc incident reviews; and
* early recognition.

The course materials were augmented with aide-memoires for leaders, workplace posters and resource sheets for each participant.

**Hamilton Fire Department**

The Hamilton Fire Department, the Hamilton Professional Fire Fighters Association and the Greater Hamilton Volunteer Firefighters Association have jointly established Peer Support Teams for full-time and volunteer firefighters comprised of staff from within the service, which has been in place for over twenty years. The team members were recently trained in best practices in peer support and response by Canuckcare, an organization specializing in first responder traumatic stress services. The instructors used techniques based on internationally recognized critical incident stress response practices.

The two-day training program involved both theoretical and practical exercises that provided the participants with the tools to:

* Recognize incidents that may cause stress.
* Recognize potential triggers that may cause undue stress reactions.
* Recognize reactions in individuals that may indicate uncharacteristic stress.
* Use recognized methods of bringing forward useful discussion of incidents.
* Provide non-judgemental assistance to their peers.
* Provide suggestion of dealing with the symptoms of critical incident stress.
* Provide advice on additional support resources that are available.

HFD has also recognized the effectiveness of R2MR and will be providing training to its employees beginning in 2018 with the possibility of an earlier rollout if resources become available.

# Responding to Traumatic Incidents

After particularly challenging, stressful or traumatic calls or incidents, paramedics, firefighters and others in emergency services are allowed time away from active service and are able to use this time to speak to trained peers or their supervisors. Supervisors are trained on following up with employees after these types of calls.

**Hamilton Fire Department**

When there is an incident involving any personnel that would be considered traumatic and/or potentially excessively stressful, then that person or the crew(s) is taken out of service to allow for the Peer Support Network team to respond. Such incidents could include fire or other events that have a fatality(s), serious injuries involving children, extended media coverage events, violent crime situations, prolonged time rescues, etc. These peer lead interventions are referred to as defusing. Firefighters can voluntarily talk, as a group or individually, about what has happened and how it is affecting them to team members who have been trained in the peer support role.

Team members attempt to validate what the firefighter has seen, done, thought and felt and offer strategies that promote resistance, resilience, and recovery. They also talk about internal and external referral options.

While in most cases interaction with Peer Support Network team members is voluntary, there are certain circumstances where the team is made available in the workplace and firefighters are encouraged to meet with ~~a~~ team members to discuss their wellbeing. The current draft procedures automatically require a debriefing in conjunction with mental health professionals following a *Line of Duty Death* of a co-worker and/or a multiple casualty incident.

In all cases, firefighters are provided with information on the support services available to them through the Employee & Family Assistance Programs, Return to Work Services, and professional counsellors in the community. Employees are encouraged to follow up with their own doctor.

**Hamilton Paramedic Services**

HPS supervisors apply the skills they learned and the tools available from the Road to Mental Readiness training to support the paramedics under their supervision. Building on implementation of the R2MR training program, HPS leadership, along with OPSEU Local 256 and CUPE 1041 unions, is establishing a Peer Support Team. Like the fire department, HPS has engaged with Canuckcare for assistance in setting up their peer support program. The selection of team members is underway.

# Return-to-work and Stay-at-work Strategies

Often, paramedics and firefighters experiencing PTSD or other mental health conditions are unable to initially perform their regular duties after being off work. In these cases, a return-to-work plan is required to transition the employee back to work. In other cases, an employee can be supported through a stay-at-work-plan without needing time off from work.

Return-to-work and stay-at-work plans are individualized, flexible and involve all key stakeholders (i.e. Employee, Union, Management, Return to Work Specialist, treatment provider/physician and WSIB/Insurance Carrier). All plans are coordinated by a Return to Work Specialist in Human Resources.

With the employee, union and management’s input, the Return to Work Specialist will facilitate return-to-work/stay-at-work discussions and provide clarification on function and medical precautions. As needed the Return to Work Specialist will access the expertise from the WSIB’s Work Transition Specialist (WTS) assigned to the City. The two WTS assigned to the City have specific training with traumatic mental health and PTSD needs/cases.

All return-to-work plans focus on the individual’s function with the objective of returning the employee to full regular duties. Function considers an employee’s restrictions and limitations and any transferable skills that would assist in finding appropriate alternative work, if needed. Leadership in the emergency services departments complete a needs analysis, seeking to match function and skills with suitable, available and meaningful work. Leadership may consider alternative work or specialized projects, supportive roles at stations away from front line activities, or gradual exposure to regular work duties as an “extra” on a crew.

Other strategies/tools available to help employees successfully transition back to regular work include:

* gradual increase in return-to-work plan hours
* gradual exposure to stations, crew, and other work environments such as hospitals
* gradual phase in of duties (e.g. stocking vehicles, riding fire rig, driving fire rig attending medical calls, participating in medical calls)
* access to stations/equipment for exposure therapy
* access to training supervisors to review policies and procedures, scenarios and changes with processes
* accommodations during training
* flexibility with work hours to attend treatment
* placement to work alongside regular crew

Key to successful return-to-work and stay-at-work plans is communication and follow-up. Employees are encouraged to provide copies of their plans to their treatment providers and regular functional updates to their Return to Work Specialist. They also have access to Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) services and, if needed, additional treatment may be accessed from the EFAP provider’s (Homewood Health) outpatient Trauma Care program or in patient programs (e.g. Program for Traumatic Stress Recovery, Integrated Mood and Anxiety Program, Addiction Medicine Service). Some paramedics and firefighters have accessed the peer and psychological support services of the Tema Conter Memorial Trust (tema.ca) for assistance in their recovery.

Plans are flexible and adjusted as needed to ensure the employee is set up for success. Management and union representatives also regularly touch base with the employee and are often key to overcoming barriers or setbacks on a timely basis.

Return-to-work and stay-at-work plans are actively monitored until successful transition to regular work and confirmed by all key stakeholders.

# Role of the Employee & Family Assistance Program

City of Hamilton employees and their dependents have access to the services of Homewood Health to help deal with everyday challenges and to get counselling services when pressures become overwhelming. In addition to counselling, employees can access assistance on:

* Childcare and Parenting
* Elder and Family Care
* New Parent Outreach
* Legal Advisory
* Financial Advisory
* Relationship Solutions
* Smoking Cessation Counselling
* Nutritional Counselling
* 12 Weeks to Wellness program
* Career Counselling
* Pre-Retirement Planning
* Shift Worker Support

Homewood Health also provides individual services that our employees can access including:

* Trauma Care
* Depression Care
* Alcohol and Drug Addiction/Abuse
* Depression and Anxiety Disorders
* Combined Addiction and Mental Health Disorders
* Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

# Appendix A – Workplace Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy

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| ***Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy*** |
| **POLICY STATEMENT** | The City of Hamilton (the City) is committed to the protection and promotion of the mental health and wellbeing of all employees. Mental health is fundamental to overall health. Good mental health allows an individual to cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and make a contribution to the workplace and community. The role of the workplace in promotion of mental health and the prevention of mental illness is vital to our community. |
| **PURPOSE** | Thepurpose of this policy is to establish and maintain progressive workplace practices that promote positive mental health and wellbeing of all employees.  |
| **SCOPE** | This policy applies to all City employees, including but not limited to regular, temporary and contract employee (collectively called “employees”). This policy also applies to volunteers, students and interns.  |
| **DEFINITIONS****Mental health**  | The following terms referenced in this Policy are defined as:A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her own community (World Health Organization, 2001) |
| **PRINCIPLES** **(if applicable)** | The following principles apply to this Policy:1. The City is committed to promoting and fostering a safe, secure and healthy work environment
2. The City will strive to eliminate the stigma in the workplace associated with poor mental health and mental illness
3. The City recognizes the mental health and wellbeing of our employees is key to organizational success and sustainability
4. The City recognizes employee mental health and wellbeing is a key consideration in decision making
5. The City will promote mental health throughout the organization by establishing and maintaining processes that are grounded on evidence-based best practices and enhance mental health and wellbeing
6. The City will strive to improve employee mental health and create a positive culture for the organization by identifying, eliminating, isolating or minimizing all harmful processes, procedures and behaviours that may cause psychological harm or illness to our employees
7. The City will regularly review and evaluate its mental health and well-being strategies and programs
8. Sensitive employee information will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
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| **RESPONSIBILITIES** **(if applicable)****Senior Leadership****Employees** **Wellness Committees****Supervisors****Human Resources** | The following positions and/or departments are responsible for fulfilling the responsibilities detailed in this Policy as follows:* Reinforce the development and sustainability of a mentally healthy and supportive environment based on a foundation of our City’s ethics, cultural pillars and values
* Support all front line management/supervisors and employees in the implementation of the policy’s principles
* Establish key objectives for continual improvement
* Lead and influence organizational culture in a positive way - “Walk the Talk”
* Ensure psychological health and safety is part of decision-making processes
* Encourage employee participation in workplace mental health initiatives by:
	1. providing time and resources
	2. identifying and removing barriers to participation
* Support and contribute to the City’s aim of providing a mentally healthy and supportive environment for all employees
* Take reasonable care of their own mental health and wellbeing
* Ensure that their actions do not affect the health and safety of others in the workplace
* Seek clarification of this policy when required
* Consider this policy while completing work-related duties and at any time while representing the City of Hamilton
* Support and contribute to the City’s aim of providing a mentally healthy and supportive environment for all employees by reinforcing the Policy in everyday activities and being an active representative of the Policy’s principles
* Actively work with and engage all employees represented by the committee through regular communication
* Engage in policy development, data generation and planning
* Ensure that all employees are made aware of this policy
* Actively support and contribute to the implementation of this policy
* Support employees who require assistance by providing information on Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) and other corporate programs and supports

Health, Safety and Wellness * Review this policy on an annual basis
* Consult with relevant stakeholders to determine and evaluate the effectiveness of policy
* Ensure effective communication and promotion of the policy
* Solicit feedback from employees

Policy and Planning * Ensure the policy is accessible
* Notify employees of any changes to policy
* Ensure effective communication of policy
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| **COMPLIANCE** | Any employee who fails to comply with this Policy through the promotion of practices that negatively impact mental health and wellbeing may face disciplinary action, up to and including termination. |
| **RELATED** **RESOURCES** | The following related documents and resources support this Policy:* Code of Conduct for Employees
* Harassment and Discrimination Prevention Policy
* Resolving Harassment and Discrimination Issues Procedure
* Personal Harassment Prevention Policy
* Breastfeeding on City Premises Policy
* Critical Incident Peer Support Team Policy
* Employee and Family Assistance Program
* Health Assessment Review Procedures
* Healthy Food and Beverage Policy
* Occupational Health & Safety Policies & Procedures
* Smoke-Free Workplace Policy
* Workplace Breastfeeding Policy
* Employee and Family Assistance Program
* National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace January 2013
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| **HISTORY** | This policy was approved by SLT on 2016-12-08 |