

PeerOnCall: A Cluster Randomized Trial of a Peer Support Mobile Health platform in Canadian Fire Service Organizations

Goal of project: To evaluate the impact of tailored organizational implementation strategies for PeerOnCall in the fire service. PeerOnCall is a mobile peer support app platform designed by and for Canadian public safety personnel.

Rationale: Firefighters face significant barriers to mental health support. Firefighting culture is highly gendered and often prioritizes strength over seeking help; many are unaware of their need for support or are resistant to reaching out. Access to therapy is limited due to cost, long waitlists, and a lack of specialized providers. Volunteer firefighters are particularly affected, as they often lack employment benefits. Mobile health technology shows promise in overcoming barriers to accessing quality information and peer support, however systematic research is needed to evaluate its adoption and impact. The study examines how different implementation approaches influence use of the PeerOnCall app, and overall impact of engagement. PeerOnCall is a mobile health platform that can be customized for fire service organizations, including links to information, self-management tools, links to local resources and secure, anonymous access to their choice of peer support provider via text or phone.

Methods: This study is a mixed-methods, cluster randomized trial comparing “standard” and “structured” approaches to implementing PeerOnCall in 20 Canadian fire service organizations. Over a 12-month period, both groups will have access to the PeerOnCall app and to trained peer support providers either within or outside their organization. The structured group will include additional support for implementation including weekly reminders, updated weekly content and regular feedback reports. Data collection will include interviews with champions (every 3 months) and focus groups with app users (at 3 and 9 months), as well as continuous analytics data regarding app use (opens, peer support outreach), in-app mental health reporting (monthly), and resources (cost) required to support implementation.

Research questions:

RQ1: Does promoting weekly app use increase engagement AND peer support outreach?

RQ2: Does uptake of PeerOnCall improve mental health and work outcomes?

RQ3: Which firefighters most use and benefit from PeerOnCall app?

RQ4: What are the cost-benefit implications for organizations implementing PeerOnCall?