

RESEARCH THAT HAS IMPACT



**Peer Support and Crisis-Focused  
Psychological Intervention Programs  
in Canadian First Responders:  
Blue Paper**

University  
of Regina

# Peer Support and Crisis-Focused Psychological Intervention Programs in Canadian First Responders: **Blue Paper**

**R**esults from a review conducted by a team of researchers at the University of Regina have shown that there is an urgent need for more research on the effectiveness of peer support and crisis-focused psychological intervention programs designed to help First Responders — police, paramedics, and fire and rescue personnel — cope with the trauma often associated with their work. The Blue Paper was published by a research team led by Dr. Shadi Beshai and Dr. R. Nicholas Carleton with the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment (CIPSRT).

The “operational stressors” that First Responders regularly confront at work, including death, violence, and threats to their own lives, put them at risk for psychological challenges, including post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and anger. Such challenges can lead to other problems, such as substance abuse, relationship difficulties, and absenteeism.

Many workplaces now offer programs designed to help First Responders manage the operational stressors they experience. Some programs are crisis-focused, while others try to build resiliency with programming before, during, and after critical incidents. Despite the prevalence of such programs, more work is needed.

The Blue Paper **a)** identifies the peer support and crisis-focused psychological intervention programs used by First Responder agencies, **b)** reviews existing research from both national and international sources, and **c)** evaluates the evidence for the effectiveness of several of these programs. In addition, the researchers designed, distributed, and analyzed results from a survey of First Responder agencies across Canada in order to learn more about programs currently being implemented.

The results of this project indicate that, although First Responders appreciate having peer support and crisis-focused psychological intervention programs, there is little or no empirical evidence supporting or refuting the effectiveness of such programs.

The research team concludes that First Responder agencies would benefit from the adoption of more uniform models for peer support and crisis management. Increased uniformity would ensure minimum standards, facilitate research, and provide enhanced support for First Responders enduring the effects of traumatic experiences on the job.

The research team also identifies a need for “methodologically rigorous” research that examines the effectiveness of peer support and crisis-focused psychological intervention programs. Among the few studies conducted to date, many have significant methodological limitations.

Other recommendations in the Blue Paper include: ongoing training, supervision, and support for personnel involved in implementing programs; gathering regular and more rigorous feedback from First Responders; and ongoing research conducted by independent, appropriately qualified, and established researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of programs.

## **According to the Blue Paper:**

**“Increasing standardization and incorporating rigorous methodological designs and outcome measures would be critical improvements for ensuring and improving the effectiveness of peer support programs and crisis-focused psychological intervention programs.”**