



8-Point Plan Provides Wellness Supports for Clifton Park & Halfmoon EMS Staff

When New York State's Office of Mental Health (OMH) released CARES UP funding in April 2022, Clifton Park & Halfmoon Emergency Corps (CPHM) was ready to hit the ground running. The agency had a variety of wellness initiatives already in place: staff gardens, therapy dogs, and a strong network of peer counselors trained in both individual and group peer counseling. The new grant provided the framework needed to build on this foundation.

"We were excited for the opportunity to develop a comprehensive set of mental health supports," said Executive Director Alan Bell. "We've been committed to doing this work for some time. CARES UP is helping us make it a priority."

The focus of their CARES UP grant is on full-time uniformed employees—for emergency medical services (EMS), this means the people going out in ambulances. But, with permission

from OMH, CPHM took it on themselves to extend the work to all of its 90 staff members, uniformed and civilian, full- and part-time.

"Mental health doesn't just affect people who are full-time or uniformed. It can affect anyone. [Administrative] staff hear calls go out. They see people come back. It can be just as traumatizing to them," says Bell.

Grant coordinator and administrative staff member Sue Syzdek agrees: "We're all friends. Coworkers. We share the same kitchen. We develop relationships with the folks going out there. We're often the people they turn to after a difficult call. Being part of this work positions us to better help our colleagues."

Building on lessons learned from its current work and supplemented by findings from the CARES UP staff mental health survey, CPHM developed a robust 8-point plan to guide its CARES UP work.



CLIFTON PARK & HALFMOON'S 8-POINT PLAN

CARES UP at Clifton Park & Halfmoon

Over the next two years, CPHM will implement an 8-point plan that builds on its solid foundation of wellness supports:

1. Strengthen substance use supports
2. Provide quarterly wellness trainings
3. Promote EAP services
4. Identify mental health providers
5. Develop guidelines to increase transparency and ensure confidentiality
6. Extend wellness supports to family and friends
7. Prioritize acceptance and inclusion
8. Develop faith support network

1. Strengthen substance misuse training and supports.

CPHM currently provides staff with basic training on the signs and symptoms of drug misuse; moving forward, these sessions will also explore the nature of addiction.

"We're good at treating the heart attack, the diabetic, the breathing problems," says Bell.

"We're less comfortable working with people with substance use disorders. We need to understand that substance use is a disease." Bell also acknowledges the risks his own staff face because of the work they do: "We need to create an environment where people are comfortable seeking help for substance use—and then we need to make sure that they can get the help they need."

2. Provide quarterly wellness trainings.

CPHM will continue to rely on its team of peer counselors to provide quarterly trainings on a range of mental health topics, including resilience, stress management, and sleep wellness. Dissemination strategies include short videos, posters, and contests. For Bell and Syzdek, the key to success is regularity: "When we put things on a time frame, staff start to look forward to it."

3. Promote the employee assistance program (EAP), including the range of available services.

"EAPs provide support around nutrition, job coaching, financial planning. These are all related to mental health and wellness, but people may be more comfortable contacting the EAP for these reasons than for something labeled 'mental health,'" says Syzdek.

4. Identify mental health providers. CPHM is working closely with the Saratoga County Department of Mental Health to develop a list of vetted community health providers who can be available to meet with staff at a moment's notice. "It takes a lot of convincing to get people help," says Bell. "Sometimes you just have one shot, or you lose them." Vetted providers also need to understand the life of an EMS responder: "We run in when others run out. We can't walk away from a stressful situation, like other people can."

5. Develop guidelines to increase transparency and ensure confidentiality. CPHM is in the process of developing written policies to ensure the confidentiality of all mental health and wellness supports. The hope is that this will further reduce the stigma of seeking help from the agency's peer support team, in particular. Guidelines will clearly define the responsibilities of the peer counselors: what they can do, what they can't, and how and where they store information.

6. Strengthen wellness supports for families and friends. Bell is committed to extending the agency's wellness resources to family and friends, including inviting them to participate in mental health trainings. Greater access to these resources will help family members better understand the stressors that their loved ones' face at work and be better equipped to identify triggers they may be experiencing at home.

7. Prioritize acceptance and inclusion. Related supports will include trainings on conscious and unconscious bias and on the impact of language on mental health stigma. "We need to raise awareness of how our biases prevent us, and the people around us, from seeking help," says Bell. "We also need to understand how these biases affect

how we care for people who are suffering from a mental health crisis. More compassion for others will hopefully translate into more compassion for ourselves."

8. Develop a formalized faith support network. CPHM has informal relationships with a number of religious entities in the community, but it would like to formalize these contacts. The agency will also develop guidance on how staff can access these supports—for themselves, for their patients, and for their patients' families.

NEXT STEPS

Bell and Szydek are excited about the work ahead of them and by the enthusiastic response they have received from staff thus far. As they continue fleshing out their plan, they will pay close attention to how they communicate their progress, both internally and externally. "If staff don't understand what we're doing, or why—that's on us," says Bell. "We need to involve staff in the process and talk about what we're doing in ways that they can hear."

NY CARES UP 

TO LEARN MORE about CARES UP, a state-funded program to support veterans, first responders, and uniformed personnel through wellness and resiliency to lessen the stress inherent in their careers, go to: preventsuicideny.org/cares-up or email CARESUP@omh.ny.gov