



CARES UP SPOTLIGHT: Colonie EMS Brings New Supports to a Fast-Paced Workforce

At Colonie Emergency Medical Services (EMS), the work never stops. In 2021, the department answered more than 13,500 calls. For staff, that meant long hours, few breaks, regular exposure to trauma, and limited time for self-care. Over time, these daily stressors can also lead to high rates of burnout and lifestyle challenges that may pose a significant threat to members' overall mental health and wellbeing.

Colonie EMS is working hard to address these risks and support their team.

"We're at a tipping point," says Deputy Chief Erin Kelly. "Since I started this work almost 20 years ago, the demands of the job have increased significantly. The needs of our paramedics and emergency medical technicians (EMTs) are more acute than ever."

Over the next two years, the department will use its CARES UP funding to develop a comprehensive set of mental health supports tailored to these needs.

"EMS operates a little outside of the norm," says Kelly. "We don't fall under the law enforcement or fire umbrellas, so it can be hard to figure out where we fit in. As a result, it can be hard to find mental health and suicide prevention supports that are a good fit."



UNIQUE STRESSORS

According to Kelly, multiple factors can impact EMT mental health, including:

- › **Hospitals are short-staffed, leading to longer wait times for EMS staff.** “We can’t get people off the stretchers, which means we’re holding more calls in the field, which means there’s no break between leaving the hospital and going to the next call.”
- › **Compassion fatigue is common.** By nature, EMS professionals are extremely compassionate. But there are days when even her most compassionate staff have admitted to Kelly that they struggle to stay positive and “continue to feel” by the end of a long, 8-hour shift. “I remember feeling that way at times, myself. While it concerns me, I am not surprised,” says Kelly.
- › **Time for rest and self-care is limited.** Compared to people who work a 40-hour week, EMTs don’t have nights and weekends to decompress. Short-staffing also leads to longer shifts—often in the form of mandatory overtime. “When you work 12-, 18-, 24-hour shifts, back-to-back or at different locations, you can’t rely on the typical ways people often get respite, like going out to dinner or hanging out with friends,” says Kelly. “It becomes nearly impossible to maintain a healthy work/life balance.”

› **Opportunities to build relationships are few and far between.** Because of Colonie’s fast pace and high volume, finding time to build trusted relationships with co-workers can be challenging. There is also less time for activities such as group dinners and daily briefings, which can help to build a sense of unit camaraderie. “There aren’t the opportunities to foster the healthy workplace relationships you can later rely on in times of need,” says Kelly.

› **Turnover is high.** Ongoing staffing issues make it challenging to resolve identified stressors, affects group cohesion, and can be demoralizing for field trainers. “Our wonderful field training officers devote a lot of time to new staff who then don’t pan out. These trainers are doing this work on top of everything else they’re doing—for the greater good of getting people out in the field—but it’s also one more thing they need to do on their shifts,” says Kelly.

WORKING TOWARD CHANGE

Over time, Kelly will be exploring ways to change the structure of how EMTs work, to make it more conducive to a healthy, balanced lifestyle. But for now, she is eager to begin working on solutions that will help staff respond to these stressors in healthy ways. These include:

› **Developing a strong, peer support network.** Kelly’s door is always open, and she’s glad that staff feel comfortable contacting her when they are struggling. She recognizes, however, that her capacity is limited. She also knows that for every person who walks through her door, there are many others who don’t—but who still need support. “People care what their employers think. I think more people might come forward if there were alternatives,” says Kelly.

› **Identifying more local mental health clinicians who can see staff on short notice.** Colonie EMS currently has one clinician on call who is also a volunteer EMT; it's not enough. "It's months out to get people in for an initial session," says Kelly. "If they're seeking long-term care, that can be ok. But what happens when the shift is done? When something happens at home, and the steam is let out of the kettle a little too quickly? When the moment strikes and someone says they need help, I don't always have a place to send them."

› **Continuing to keep wellness front and center.** Colonie's employee assistance program does monthly wellness check-ins, and offers a variety of online mental health trainings that members can take at their convenience. The insurance program that the town offers includes a lot of wellness programming. New York State has also made wellness for EMTs a requirement for re-certification, and has added a number of online wellness options to their certification process. "We're always fighting the clock, so having resources available for people to take on their own time is key," says Kelly.

› **Participating in CARES UP trainings.** Withing the first year of the grant, all Colonie EMS staff will participate in both a foundational wellness training and a resilience training designed specifically for EMS. "People aren't always aware of ways they can get centered again on the fly—like listening to a podcast or squeezing in some exercise between calls. Having those tools can go a long way in helping a person cope."

Kelly is grateful that CARES UP has enabled the department to make mental health a priority.

"The list of controllable things in the world and in this profession is very short," says Kelly. "I'd love our members to have the skills to process, in healthy ways, the things they can't control. So they can thrive, rather than just survive or endure."

"If we want to have a robust workforce, we need to create a climate that promotes health and help-seeking. We can't change everything all at once, but slow and steady always wins the race. So, we'll get there."



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

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