



## Wellness at the Olean Fire Department: MAKING MENTAL HEALTH A PRIORITY

### At the Olean Fire Department (OFD), attitudes about mental health are changing.

With a new chief and a young core of officers—all cross-trained as EMTs or paramedics—the department is looking to develop a broader approach to staff wellness that includes both physical and mental health.

“The idea of us being tough guys and tough women, that we can just ‘suck it up, buttercup’, isn’t working,” says Fire Chief Tim Richardson. “We need to check the stigma [around seeking help] at the door. We’re losing people. And that’s heartbreaking.”

CARES-UP offers OFD the structure and funding to make mental health a priority. “We’re no good to the public if we’re not at our best. To keep the community healthy, we need to take care of ourselves,” says Richardson.

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## OLEAN'S APPROACH

Over the next two years, the department will use its CARES UP funding to do the following:

- › **Develop a cohort of mental health resilience officers.** As one of its CARES UP deliverables, each of OFD's 10 shift commanders will participate in the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) Peer Support Training. They will also take part in the National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians (NAEMT)'s Mental Health Resilience Officer course. "These trainings are designed to prepare leaders to engage with peers and direct reports around mental health issues," says Richardson. "We need people on site who have their fingers on the pulse of what's going on, who can recognize when there's a problem, and who are equipped to help."
- › **Increase awareness of employee assistance program (EAP) services.** Soon after the OFD received its grant, staff completed the CARES UP mental health self-assessment, which included questions about the EAP. Richardson described staff responses as "eerily similar." Most staff knew that the EAP existed, but few were aware of the breadth of services that it provided. "We need to let people know that EAP does more than short-term mental health counseling," says Richardson. "They also help with finance and domestic issues—these are things that weigh on people and can affect their performance."
- › **Enhance existing wellness activities.** OFD will continue its partnership with a local to-go meals company that delivers quick and hearty healthy meals. The company frequently donates meals to the department, trying out

## Distress among EMS

A 2015 survey by Fitch & Associates' Ambulance Service Manager Program suggested that mental health struggles and depression among fire and emergency medical services (EMS) professionals are widespread. In the survey, 37 percent reported contemplating suicide, nearly 10 times the rate of American adults, while 6.6 percent reported having attempted suicide. That's compared to just 0.5 percent of all adults.

Source: National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians. (2016, August). *2016 national survey on EMS mental health services*. Download [here](#).

new recipes on the staff to refine its menu. “It’s not uncommon for folks heading into a three- or four-day shift to load up on these meals as an alternative to fast food lunches,” says Richardson. Other wellness activities include personal trainers to make sure gym equipment is used safely, and regular yoga and meditation sessions are being planned.

- › **Develop a comprehensive list of mental health supports.** OFD is working with the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Cattaraugus County and the Southern Tier Community Health Care Network to develop the list, which it will continue to expand over time. “Firefighters need to be aware of what’s out there—for themselves, their families, and their patients. Knowing about available resources will help us be stronger mental health advocates for the community.”
- › **Strengthen existing partnerships.** Over the summer the OFD began formally attending the Suicide Prevention Coalition’s quarterly meetings. In September, the two groups developed a joint press release to raise awareness of the mental health and suicide risks that first responders face. “In the past, our connection [with the coalition] was only at a time of crisis,” says Richardson. “Now we can be more proactive and better informed. We can explore how we can be of better service to each other.”
- › **Educate to reduce stigma.** Richardson admits that talking about suicide can be frightening, but feels strongly that education is the only way to get ahead of the issue. “Over the past 15 years, we’ve made great progress in the areas of diabetes, smoking, and heart disease. If we can open up and talk about suicide, like we do these other issues, we can make the same kind of progress.”

## NEXT STEPS

OFD’s firefighters are excited about the changes. “Half of our staff have been on the job for less than seven years,” says Richardson. “They’re young, focused on their physical well-being, and more open to talking about their experiences on the job.”

Using the IAFF and NAEMT courses as their wellness road map, the OFD leadership team is ready to begin implementing its plans. “We’re doing our best to address each portion of the framework—eating the elephant one bite at a time,” says Richardson. “It’s very much a work in progress, but we’re collecting resources, talking with local experts, and refining our approach.

“This is a mess we’ve got to get ahead of. Suicide is taking the lives of too many of our brother and sister first responders. CARES UP will help us put this life-saving work front and center.”

**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](https://preventsuicideny.org/cares-up) or email [CARESUP@omh.ny.gov](mailto:CARESUP@omh.ny.gov)