



## Assessing mental wellness in the British Columbia fire service

In 2023 the BC Municipal Safety Association. Canadian Fire Service commissioned a research firm (neutral third party) to investigate:

*Perceptions of personal mental health and wellness among fire service workers and the degree of resistance towards accessing the services of outside healthcare providers.*

The purpose was to:

*Assess member interest in mental health training to tailor current and future training.*

**Data Collection:** A survey was conducted from January to June 2023, with 1,099 respondents across 5 occupational groups in various fire service roles. Respondent Profile:

- Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents are over the age of 40.
- 70% of respondents are either a full-time or paid-on-call firefighter.
- Almost half of the respondents have more than 15 years of experience as a first responder.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous.

### Key Findings:

*59% of respondents would only consider accessing mental healthcare if they experienced a significant setback that challenged their ability to cope.* Related to this is the findings that most fire service members do not, even in times of need, consider accessing mental healthcare and lack confidence that healthcare providers understand the stresses of their work.

*High interest in mental health training, stigma reduction, and self-care strategies.* 98% of respondents believed that mental health training will enhance their wellbeing, and that of their colleagues.

*Peer Support and Critical Incident Stress Management Teams have resistance to seeking MH support.* Despite being mental health advocates, members of Peer Support and CISM teams are less likely to access care compared to other firefighters. This is especially an issue because they tend to be in mid to late career and so are likely to have accumulated trauma.

*Skepticism towards Healthcare Providers:* 50% of respondents resisted healthcare professional services because they feel they would not understand what it's like to be a first responder. Over time, as firefighters age, this scepticism only increases.

*Many junior members view resilience as their responsibility, which adds pressure and potential isolation when facing challenges.* This issue is compounded by junior fire fighters lacking familiarity on what resources to access in times of need, only 65% junior members report being familiar with mental health services offered through their workplace. Even worse, junior members may not even recognize early signs of struggle, 52% were found to ignore stress-related symptoms.



*89% peer support/Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) trained respondents are familiar with the term 'psychological stress injury' and are more likely to engage in active self-care strategies compared to other respondents in the fire service.*

The above is a positive yet is mitigated by the finding that *peer support/CISM respondents are less likely to access mental healthcare in times of need (56%) compared to other members of the fire service (64%).*

### **Key recommendations from the study:**

*Peer Support & CISM:* Enhance support for members involved in Peer Support and Critical Incident Stress Management. They are less likely to seek outside help even though they are familiar with healthcare services.

*Addressing Stigma:* 89% of respondents are familiar with the stigma reduction term 'psychological stress injury'. The report recommends continuing efforts to reduce stigma around psychological stress injuries.

*Support for Junior Members:* Need to provide additional resources and support for junior members who tend to view resilience as an individual responsibility and may not be familiar with accessing healthcare resources.

### **Actions from the recommendation**

The [Fire Fighter Occupational Awareness Training Program](#) (FFOAT) came out of this study. This is a 12-module online program designed to enhance frontline knowledge of mental health injuries and reduce the emotional and behavioural impact of a career in public safety. The curriculum combines the lived experience of those serving on the frontline with recognized subject matter experts in the field of public safety mental health.

After viewing each module, people participate in structured group-based discussions to reinforce what they learn and normalise (destigmatise) psychological stress injuries.

As well as feeding people into conversations, this training is interesting because one year after training course participants are to be provided a toolkit of "self-rescue" strategies and pathway for accessing local healthcare resources, specific to and aware of the work they do.

### **Further reading**

[Firefighter mental health a priority, wildfire service says](#) by Courtney Dickson, Shelley Joyce - CBC News