

# Advancing First Responder Wellness

*A Strategic Collaboration Between PFFWCF and Rogers Behavioral Health*



## **PFFWCF: Champions of Community Safety**

The mission of the Professional Fire Fighters of Wisconsin Charitable Foundation (PFFWCF) is to champion community risk reduction initiatives; promote fire safety and prevention; and deliver meaningful support to burn survivors, fire fighters, and communities. Since 2015, PFFWCF has focused on reducing community risks, enhancing fire safety, and supporting burn survivors and fire fighters in Wisconsin. Our commitment spans across education, prevention, and direct assistance, all aimed at ensuring safety and well-being for our communities and brave first responders with a multifaceted approach that encompasses the following programs:

**Burn Survivor Support:** We offer vital support to burn survivors through key programs like the annual Summer Camp for Burn Injured Youth and Young Adult Leadership Retreat, aimed at promoting healing and personal growth.

**Fire Prevention:** Our educational initiatives, including the statewide Fire Safety Newspapers in Education program, and participation in the Wisconsin Smoke Alarm Fire Education (WiSAFE) Coalition and Fire Sprinkler Coalition, focus on reducing fire incidents through safety awareness and promotion of preventive measures.

**Fire Fighter Support:** At our core, we support fire fighter well-being with disaster financial assistance, mental health support, including peer support, and the upcoming Public Safety House for mental health care, complemented by tributes through the State Honor Guard and Fire Fighters Memorial.



## **Rogers Behavioral Health: Pioneers in Mental Health**

Rogers Behavioral Health is a leading provider of mental health and addiction services, dedicated to transforming lives through evidence-based treatments

for a wide spectrum of disorders. Established in 1907, Rogers has evolved into a comprehensive behavioral health organization with locations across the United States. Its mission is to provide exceptional, effective care that empowers individuals and families to overcome barriers and lead fulfilling, healthy lives.

At the heart of Rogers' approach are specialized programs that cater to diverse patient needs, spanning from obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety, to depression, eating disorders, trauma, and substance use. Its commitment extends beyond individual care to fostering community well-being, promoting mental health awareness, and advancing the field through pioneering research at the Rogers Research Center.

**Clinical Excellence:** Rogers is renowned for its depth of expertise. Its clinicians are leaders in developing innovative treatments that set new standards in behavioral health care. Each program is tailored to deliver the best outcomes based on rigorous, data-driven methodologies.

**Community and Education Initiatives:** Beyond clinical services, Rogers actively engages with communities to break down stigma associated with mental health conditions. Educational outreach and partnerships with local organizations help expand access to care and encourage early intervention.

**Research and Development:** At the Rogers Research Center, a multidisciplinary team conducts cutting-edge research to improve treatment protocols, enhance patient outcomes, and contribute to the global understanding of mental health challenges. This research informs every aspect of care at Rogers, ensuring that its services remain at the forefront of medical advances.

## Partnership in Focus: PFFWCF and Rogers Behavioral Health

The partnership between Rogers Behavioral Health and PFFWCF began in 2020, forging a powerful alliance focused on the mental health needs of Wisconsin's first responders. This collaboration harnesses Rogers' extensive expertise in behavioral health and PFFWCF's deep connection with the fire fighting community to address the significant mental health challenges faced by fire fighters and EMS personnel. Together, they have initiated comprehensive programs that not only provide immediate support in crisis situations but also foster long-term mental health resilience among these critical service providers.

### Addressing the Crisis: The Urgent Needs of First Responders

Within the Fire Fighter Support programming, the Professional Fire Fighters of Wisconsin Charitable Foundation (PFFWCF) places a strong emphasis on mental health due to its widespread and critical nature among first responders. Research indicates that fire fighters and EMS professionals confront profound mental health crises, predominantly triggered by the intense stressors and trauma encountered during their service. Compared to the general population, fire fighters face significantly higher mental health challenges:

- PTSD rates range from 14.6% to 22%, well above the lifetime prevalence of 6.8% in the general population.
- 11% of fire fighters suffer from depression, surpassing the general rate of 6.7%.
- 46.8% of fire fighters have experienced suicidal thoughts at some point.<sup>1</sup>

To better understand the magnitude of the mental health crises our own first responders are facing in Wisconsin, PFFWCF collaborated with Rogers Behavioral Health to develop and administer a 38-question mental health and addiction survey for all professional and volunteer Fire and EMS professionals across the state. Responses from these surveys the past four years have been alarming, but not unexpected. Of the 1,640 total respondents on the 2023 survey, 1,477 (90.1%) reported experiencing a critical incident or a traumatic event on the job and (77.9%) reported at least one sleep problem. 176 (11.9%) reported having thoughts of self-harm or suicide, 253 (15.4%) screened positive for anxiety in the last two weeks, 234 (14.3%) screened positive for depression in the last two weeks, and 266 (16.2%) screened positive for probable post-

Central to their partnership is the annual Wisconsin First Responder Mental Health Survey, administered by Rogers and distributed by PFFWCF. This survey collects essential data on the mental health status of fire and EMS professionals across the state, offering insights into the prevalence of PTSD, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation within this group. The findings from the survey inform the development of specific interventions tailored to meet the unique needs of first responders, enhancing the support mechanisms available to them.

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) within the last month. Only (64.8%) of respondents reported that they would seek behavioral health help for themselves while (98.%) reported they would encourage a firefighter co-worker to seek support if they needed help.

While 64.8% of all respondents agreed with the statement "I would feel comfortable asking for my own behavioral health support," only 45.4% of the respondents who reported thoughts of suicide or self-harm agreed. In addition, 50 respondents (28.4%) replied "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to the statement "If I needed behavioral health assistance, I would know where to go for it." For both full-time fire fighters and the total respondents, respondents would be most comfortable asking treatment providers or family/friends for behavioral health support or assistance. In 2023, 165 participants reported using their department EAP program. Out of these 165 participants, 57.8% found satisfaction in these services. Of the participants that used the Professional Fire Fighters of Wisconsin (PFFW) Member Assistance Program (MAP) services, 90.9% reported satisfaction with their services.

These findings highlight the profound mental health crises triggered by the intense stressors and trauma that fire fighters and EMS personnel endure. The data underscores a critical need for effective support systems to address and mitigate the impact of occupational stressors on Wisconsin's first responders. This growing awareness is driving efforts to provide more targeted and accessible mental health services to ensure the well-being of those who serve our communities.

<sup>1</sup>Heyman, M., Dill, J., & Douglas, R. (2018). *The Ruderman White Paper on Mental Health and Suicide of First Responders*. Ruderman Family Foundation.

## **Milestones Achieved: PFFWCF's Impact on First Responder Wellbeing**

PFFWCF has achieved significant milestones in supporting the mental and emotional health of fire fighters across Wisconsin since partnering with Rogers Behavioral Health in 2020. The annual mental health survey has become a critical tool in assessing the needs and well-being of fire fighters. Over the past four years, the survey has provided important insights, with data that underscores the critical need for robust mental health support for first responders. The survey has seen a considerable increase in engagement, from 777 responses in 2020 to 1,640 in 2023, marking continuous growth in outreach and impact.

Another key accomplishment has been the expansion of the MAP, which has been instrumental in providing peer support to fire fighters. Due to confidentiality, it's difficult to fully ascertain the reach and impact of the MAP program, but in 2023, 165 participants in the annual mental health survey reported using their department's EAP program. Out of these 165 participants, 57.8% were satisfied with these services. Of the participants that used the MAP services, 90.9%

reported satisfaction. The MAP program has been pivotal in offering confidential referrals and support, effectively recognizing and intervening in behavioral crises among fire fighters.

The development of the Public Safety House represents a significant stride in expanding resources available to first responders. While still in the development phase, this facility is set to offer a comprehensive suite of services tailored to the needs of those facing acute mental health crises. It is envisioned as a sanctuary where fire fighters can receive peer support, professional counseling, and necessary care in a confidential and supportive environment. These initiatives collectively reflect PFFWCF's ongoing commitment to enhancing the health and safety of Wisconsin's fire fighters, ensuring they receive the support needed to maintain their well-being and continue serving their communities effectively.

## **Next Steps: PFFWCF's Strategic Plans for Advancing Care**

The partnership between PFFWCF and Rogers Behavioral Health has evolved significantly since its inception, fostering innovative solutions tailored specifically for Wisconsin's first responders. Looking ahead, this collaboration is set to expand further, with ambitious projects aimed at enhancing the mental health services available to these community members facing critical mental health challenges.

A key initiative set to launch is the expansion of the Virtual Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP) to include first responders by 2025. This program, initially designed for veterans, offers specialized mental health support through a flexible, accessible online platform. The expansion of this program to first responders acknowledges the unique challenges faced by those on the front lines of emergency response and aims to provide them with vital, tailored mental health resources that accommodate their schedules and specific needs.

Further development of the Public Safety House is a significant component of PFFWCF and Rogers' future

plans. This facility is envisioned as a multifunctional space where first responders can find refuge during mental health crises. The Public Safety House will serve multiple functions: it will provide a confidential environment for peer support or clinical meetings, offer a safe haven for those who feel they cannot safely return to their homes or workplaces, and act as a transitional space for those preparing to re-enter everyday life following intensive mental health care. This initiative is designed to fill a gap in the support system for first responders, providing immediate and accessible care in a setting built to address their unique mental health challenges.

These upcoming projects highlight the proactive approach of the PFFWCF and Rogers Behavioral Health partnership in addressing the mental health needs of Wisconsin's first responders. By continuing to innovate and expand their services, they aim to significantly improve the well-being and operational readiness of those who dedicate their lives to serving their communities.