



Commonwealth of Virginia  
Office of the Governor

## Executive Order

**NUMBER THIRTY-EIGHT (2024)**

### **ESTABLISHING THE OFFICE OF FIRST RESPONDER WELLNESS**

By virtue of the authority vested in me as Governor of the Commonwealth, I hereby issue this Executive Order to support the emotional, physical, and overall mental wellness of the Commonwealth's First Responders and their families by formalizing the Department of Criminal Justice Services' Office of First Responder Wellness and establishing a new Chief Coordinating Officer role for First Responder Wellness within the Office of the Governor reporting to the Secretary of Public Safety & Homeland Security. Our first responder community requires higher levels of awareness, deserves this increased support, and we must adopt a comprehensive approach to support the mental and physical health of our law enforcement officers, firefighters, emergency medical services (EMS) providers, emergency communications officers, corrections officers, and retirees.

#### **Importance of the Initiative**

First responders are exposed to significant critical incidents involving human tragedy and suffering daily. An average citizen may experience three to eight traumatic incidents in their lifetime, whereas it is estimated that many first responders experience approximately 3.5 traumatic events in a six-month period throughout their entire career.<sup>1</sup> Emergency personnel are trained to respond to, assist, and care for those involved in the most horrifying and life-threatening incidents such as violent homicides, multi-vehicle accidents, house fires, sexual assaults, traumatic incidents involving children, domestic violence, natural disasters, and the loss of public safety colleagues. They knowingly put themselves in physically dangerous and mentally challenging situations to protect others. When not on the front lines, they are often left

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<sup>1</sup> Tara Hartley & Khachatur Sarkisian, et al., *PTSD Symptoms Among Police Officers: Associations with Frequency, Recent, and Types of Traumatic Events*, 15(4) *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health*, 241–253 (2013), available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4734407/>.

alone to cope with the daily accumulation of stressors, anxiety, and mental trauma associated with what they have seen and experienced.

The potential long-term effects of repeated trauma exposure on first responders may lead to substance abuse, behavioral dysfunction, physical health issues, and suicidal tendencies. The federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has estimated that thirty percent of first responders develop behavioral health conditions including, but not limited to, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), significantly higher than the general population.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, studies also show that the impact of a first responder's chosen profession can shorten his or her life expectancy by as much as 20 years.<sup>3</sup> First responders are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty. A 2023 study found that first responders made up one percent of all suicides from 2015-2017, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.<sup>4</sup> Issues such as alcoholism, drug abuse, and sleep deprivation affect not only the wellbeing of first responders but also that of the family and friends of these public servants.<sup>5</sup>

The Office of First Responder Wellness was originally established by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) in 2022, however, there is a history of first responder wellness initiatives dating back even further. The mission of the Office of First Responder Wellness is to adopt a public health approach to first responder wellness through primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery initiatives, including the development of resources that not only save the lives of our first responders but also improve their overall wellness.

The Office has secured two federal Justice Assistance Grants from the U.S. Department of Justice, hired full-time and part-time wellness training personnel officials, and expanded the number and types of available training to and for first responders. The Office created a first responder wellness website, [vafirstresponderwellness.org](http://vafirstresponderwellness.org), to provide resources, training opportunities, and important wellness information for all first responder groups. The Office also created a dedicated contact e-mail, [vafirstresponderwellness@dcjs.virginia.gov](mailto:vafirstresponderwellness@dcjs.virginia.gov), so that first responders can always reach out for help.

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<sup>2</sup> See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Disaster Technical Assistance Center Supplemental Research Bulletin: First Responders: Behavioral Health Concerns, Emergency Response, and Trauma* (2018), available at <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/dtac/supplementalresearchbulletin-firstresponders-may2018.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> See The 77 Foundation, *Demographic Overview*, available at <https://seventy-seven.org/demographic-overview/>.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Carson & Suzanne Marsh, et al., *An Analysis of Suicides Among First Responders—Findings from the National Violent Death Reporting System, 2015-2017*, 85 *Journal of Safety Research* 361-70 (2023), available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0022437523000415>.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Gilman, *Substance Use Disorders in First Responders: The Vicious Cycle of Chronic Traumatic Stress Exposure and Sleep Deprivation as Contributing Factors*, *Advances in Addiction & Recovery*, 16-19 (2020), available at [https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/aa&r\\_winter2020\\_substance\\_use\\_disorders\\_in\\_first\\_responders.pdf#:~:text=evidence%20that%20first%20responders%20exhibit%20ongoing](https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/aa&r_winter2020_substance_use_disorders_in_first_responders.pdf#:~:text=evidence%20that%20first%20responders%20exhibit%20ongoing).

This year, I issued a Proclamation recognizing the week of March 25<sup>th</sup> through March 29<sup>th</sup> as “First Responder Wellness Week,” and a successful webinar series with a total of 200 attendees was launched to address the first responder wellness initiatives in Virginia, unresolved trauma of first responders, their cognitive fitness, and overall spiritual and physical wellness.

The Office of First Responder Wellness has also expanded on training courses offered to first responders and is currently developing the Mobile First Responder Application to host on-demand training micro modules on wellness topics. Finally, several Public Service Announcements have been made to develop suicide prevention and awareness for law enforcement, break the stigma of law enforcement officers asking for mental health resources and assistance, and direct officers in need of immediate assistance to the COPLINE 24/7 hotline.

We will continue to ensure that those in public safety and first responder leadership have the necessary training and resources pertaining to prevention, intervention, and postvention to better understand and develop mental health and wellness best practices.

In doing so, we will further capitalize on the principles set forth in our *Right Help, Right Now* initiative by continuing to build out the continuum of care to better and more appropriately meet the needs of individuals. For too long, too many Virginians, including our first responders, have suffered silently and have forgone the urgent care they so desperately need. First responders are the backbone of the Commonwealth, and by maximizing the resources and care available to them, we will produce a safer, healthier, and more secure community for all Virginians.

### **Directive**

Accordingly, pursuant to the authority vested in me as the Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth, and pursuant to Article V of the Constitution of Virginia and the laws of the Commonwealth, I hereby direct my administration to implement the following measures to support our first responders through programs addressing, but not limited to, emotional, physical, and overall personal wellness.

1. The Secretary of Public Safety & Homeland Security shall establish and maintain an Office of First Responder Wellness under the Department of Criminal Justice Services. The Office of First Responder Wellness shall operate collaboratively with the Virginia State Police, Department of Corrections, Department of Juvenile Justice, Department of Emergency Management, and the Department of Fire Programs, as well as the Department of Health and the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, to serve as a centralized resource to help our first responders.
2. The Department of Criminal Justice Services’ Office of First Responder Wellness shall seek authorization to utilize unexpended Fiscal Year 2024 balances to offer grants for non-profits and local agencies supporting first responder wellness efforts.
3. The Secretary of Public Safety & Homeland Security shall designate a Chief Coordinating Officer to oversee first responder wellness programs, promote the Office of First Responder Wellness, work across state agencies, and to collaborate with law

enforcement, fire departments, emergency medical service organizations, correctional officers, and emergency communication dispatchers to ensure the wellness programs are meeting the needs of and reaching our first responders.

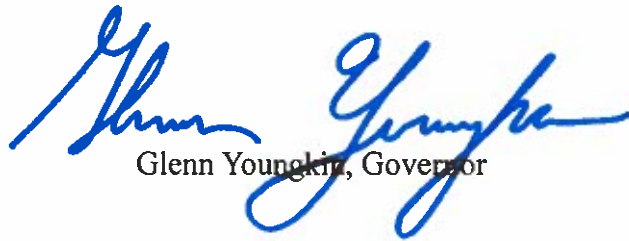
4. The Chief Coordinating Officer shall establish an ongoing working group to enhance coordination with the relevant state agencies listed above, as well as leaders from law enforcement, fire services, emergency medical services, emergency communications operators, clergy, mental health clinicians, and family members of first responders that have experienced trauma. The working group shall make recommendations for program enhancements to the Governor through the Secretary of Public Safety & Homeland Security.
5. The Office of First Responder Wellness shall provide and facilitate training opportunities for first responder agencies and their employees seeking to establish or enhance first responder wellness programs and peer support services for their responding employees. Training should include on demand e-learning modules to provide first responders with training and information on physical, financial, emotional, and spiritual wellness at their convenience and when needed.
6. The Office of First Responder Wellness shall maintain and disseminate information on first responder wellness, mental health, suicidal ideation, and trauma-related issues through training, conferences, a dedicated website, newsletters, and other Virginia-specific publications and resources.
7. The Chief Coordinating Officer in conjunction with the Department of Criminal Justice Services' Office of First Responder Wellness, the Virginia State Police, Department of Corrections, Department of Juvenile Justice, Department of Emergency Management, Department of Fire Programs, and the Office of Emergency Medical Services at the Department of Health shall conduct community outreach to promote public and private partnerships to provide additional resources for first responder wellness programs.
8. The Office of First Responder Wellness at the Department of Criminal Justice shall collaborate with the Virginia State Police, Department of Corrections, Department of Juvenile Justice, Department of Emergency Management, Office of Emergency Medical Services at the Department of Health, and the Department of Fire Programs to develop a model public safety training program focusing on physical and mental wellness for all first responders.
9. The Office of First Responder Wellness shall work with public and private partners to offer available resources and training to assist first responders with understanding and managing their individual situations. The Office of First Responder Wellness shall provide technical assistance to Virginia's first responder agencies in the development and implementation of initiatives promoting first responder wellness, peer support programs,

trauma support, and other mental health and wellness initiatives with such funds as may be available for such purpose.

**Effective Date**

This Executive Order shall be effective upon its signing and shall remain in force and effect unless amended or rescinded by further executive order or directive. Given under my hand and under the Seal of the Commonwealth of Virginia this 2nd day of October, 2024.



  
Glenn Youngkin, Governor

Attest:



Kelly Gee, Secretary of the Commonwealth