

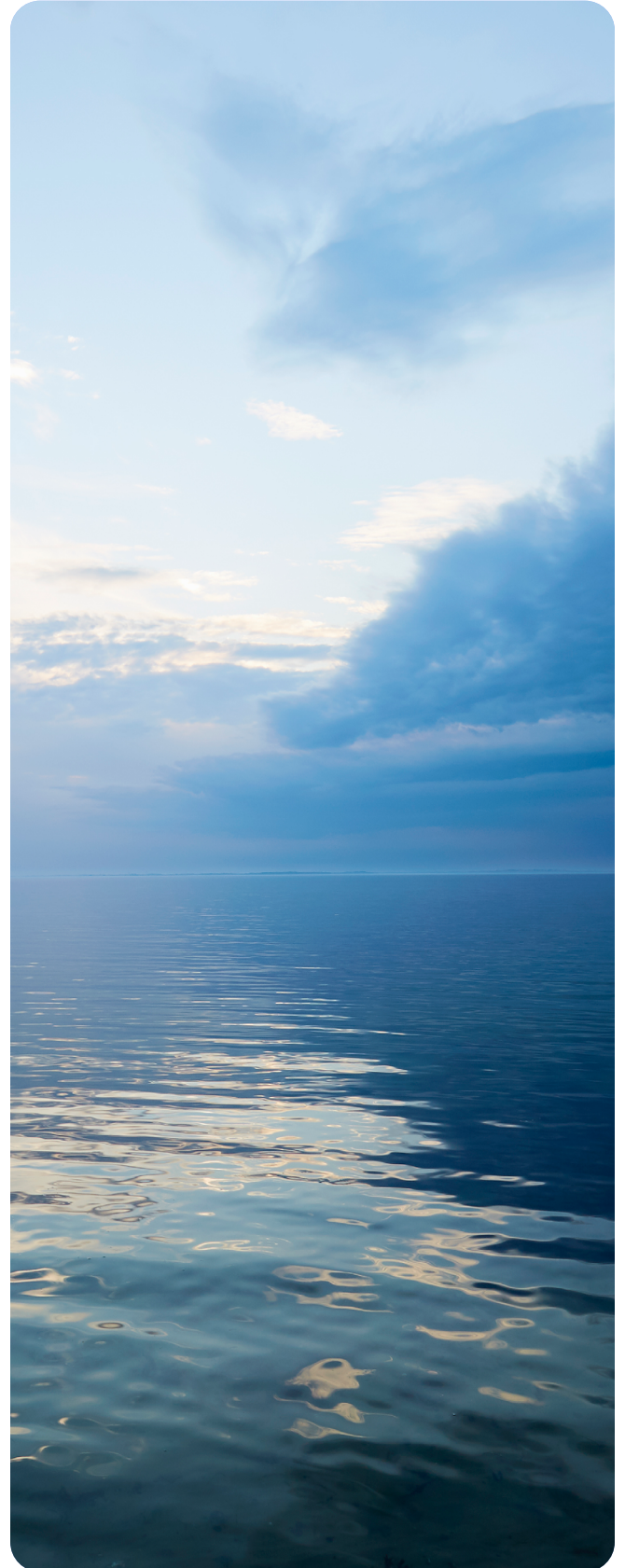
# Providing Spiritual Support to Your Agency

Spirituality is central to the identity of many first responders. They feel called to their jobs, which involve working with the public through what are often challenging and stressful circumstances, by something bigger than themselves. Coupled with the unique stresses encountered on the job, including routine brushes with death, it makes sense first responders are sometimes best served by a chaplain.

Chaplaincy in the United States traces its roots to the military. The Continental Congress provided a chaplain to each regiment of the Continental Army on July 29, 1775 even before there was a United States of America. This tradition lives on today in our military and hospitals, as well as many police, fire and EMS agencies, providing spiritual support to those on the front lines of service. In this tip sheet, we'll examine best practices for establishing a successful chaplaincy program at your agency.

## The Work of Chaplaincy

Chaplains have many roles to fill in today's busy public safety agencies. They might assist with community relations, death notifications, questions of morality and ethics, family problems, burial services, critical incident debriefs, peer support,



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spiritual guidance, and generally improving agency morale and perspective.

## **A trusted advisor within the ranks makes acceptance, growth and service possible**

Some chaplains are highly visible, complete with active social media profiles and public engagements. Others tend to be more low-key, operating quietly and primarily in private. It really depends on the personality of the chaplain, customs of their religious tradition and the needs of the department.

Chaplaincy is nondenominational and nonsectarian. Chaplains come from diverse religious backgrounds and with a wide variety of experience and education. In a pluralistic society such as ours, chaplains must respect the religious beliefs of everyone, even though they usually adhere to one religion or denomination on a personal level. A chaplain brings to bear their experience and training to guide first responders, their families and the wider public through spiritual and moral challenges.

## **Finding a Fit**

Chaplains can be paid or volunteer and typically serve a stipulated term, usually one year. Before signing a contract, it's a good idea for agency leadership and the potential chaplain to get to know each other. There are many important details a contract can't cover. Leaders, for

example, must take the time to be honest with the chaplain about the sorts of issues, as well as their scope, the agency faces. Finding a competent cultural fit is essential. You're looking for someone passionate and knowledgeable about helping others, regardless of religion, race, color, national origin, age, sex, marital status, partisan considerations, disability or genetic information.

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You also want someone in this role who won't be put off by the very real and ever-present challenges first responders face. A public safety chaplain experiences second-hand the violence and destruction a first responder endures, as well as first-hand the stress such a career entails.

## **Qualifications**

When recruiting chaplains to support your public safety agency, you'll want to look not only for the above qualities, but also ensure the candidates meet some important qualifications, including:

- Must possess religious authority and experience; typically they will be ecclesiastically certified, commissioned, ordained or possess religious leadership designation by an established religious organization, recognized religious leader or authority within their religious tradition

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- Minimum five years of continuous service in their religious role (recommended)
- Available on an on-call basis, 24/7, in the event of emergencies
- Familiar with community medical, psychiatric and other local resources
- Willing to participate in ongoing professional training
- Able to pass a comprehensive background check (criminal, employment and educational history)

## Conclusion

A culturally competent, spiritually attuned chaplain is an asset to any public safety agency and community. The link between mental and physical health is clear. But for many it is the realm of the spiritual that supersedes the rest. A trusted advisor within the ranks makes acceptance, growth and service possible, and this is just what a chaplain offers.

## Additional Resources

[Federation of Fire Chaplains](#)

[The International Conference of Police Chaplains](#)

[First Responder Chaplain Division of the Spiritual Care Association](#)



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