

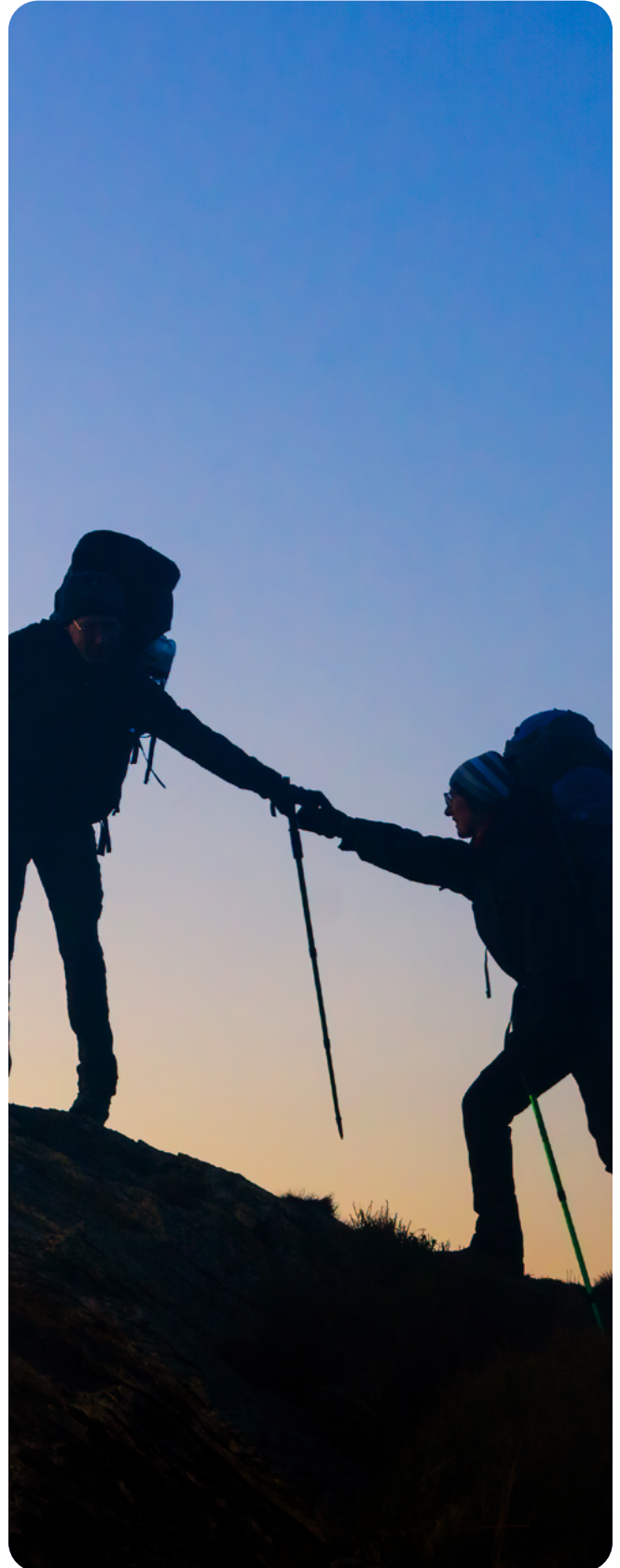
Establishing a Peer Support Program

Peer support, done right, is an unparalleled tool in first responder wellness. The idea behind it is simple: Provide help to those in need. By providing a team of trained peers to those who want or need support, first responders are able to have the sorts of conversations that don't—and can't—happen elsewhere. Peer support is not therapy, but it can be incredibly therapeutic.

Before starting a peer support team, it's imperative to establish scope. A few questions to ask at the onset: What sorts of problems are you hoping to alleviate? How common are they and how would peer support address them? And critically: How are you going to ensure all communications are confidential? Following are some additional tips to consider from the Lexipol Wellness team.

Seek Outside Advice

There is no single right way to do peer support in public safety. In fact, the more your team suits the skills and personalities of its members and reflects the needs and culture of your agency, the better. But if you are looking for help, working with a peer support advisor from outside your agency can be extremely helpful. This person might be a sounding board or confidante. They may bring experience from other agencies that will serve you well—especially in learning about mistakes others have made first-hand. Advisors will typically also bring educational and professional experience above and beyond what is required of peer support team members.





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Address Legal Concerns

Outside advice is particularly helpful when it comes to legal questions, especially those regarding confidentiality. For example, if a person comes to peer support who is clearly an imminent danger to themselves or others, the law is generally clear about the responsibilities of team members to intervene. But it is rarely that simple in real life. Statements are open to interpretation and laws vary by state. While many states provide some type of confidentiality protection for peer support communications, some don't. And confidential communication is different from privileged communication, which protects the communication from forced disclosure as part of a legal case.

People are the core of effective peer support.

It is imperative your peer support team members know how to navigate and clarify thorny situations with an understanding of applicable law. This is for their own protection, as well as that of the person they are seeking to help. Take the time to understand the applicable laws and equip your team with the knowledge.

Establish a Formal Committee and Guidelines

Most agencies find it helpful to establish a committee to oversee peer support. This committee is separate from the peer support team members themselves, and it can be a lasting committee or a task force that establishes the peer support team and then disbands.

This committee should include a diverse array of qualified sworn and civilian representatives, as well as at least one mental health professional. It should develop a policy that all peer support communications will be confidential (irrespective of whether state law requires such confidentiality). The committee should also consider what sorts of incidents the team should support. Typically, these might include hospital visitations; death notifications; substance abuse and EAP referrals; critical incidents (both on-scene and postincident); supporting family of sick, injured or killed personnel; and career advice. The steering committee establishes formal structure, policies, guidelines and resources, such as workbooks and training.

Plan and Budget for Training

In order to meet emerging standards of care, effective peer support requires ongoing training. Training should address legal issues, active listening, maintaining neutrality, understanding trauma, and watching for signs of suicidality or substance abuse. Where possible, it should meet the standards set forth by state and national training bodies.

Lexipol Wellness includes Peer Support Training and Certification that leverages industry-leading best practices—grounded in ethical and legal standards—to equip teams for proactive, reactive, and post-incident support. There are also federal resources available to first responders, such as Federal Law Enforcement Training Center's law enforcement peer support program. These are in addition to many local and state nonprofits that are happy to serve first responders with peer support needs.



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Select Team Members Who Are Trusted

People are the core of effective peer support. Although peer support members are not mental health clinicians, they should share certain identifiable characteristics, starting with trustworthiness. Trust is paramount to the success of a peer support team. During peer support, information is often shared that is of a private nature and must be kept as such. Therefore, anyone under consideration must foremost have the implicit trust of their colleagues. This is particularly true of anyone in a leadership or coordinating position.

While peer support is often a critical tool during acute crisis, its greatest strength and value is as a tool of prevention and resilience.

Peer support team members must also be natural leaders. That doesn't necessarily mean high-ranking. But identifying personnel who are respected, professional and competent in what they do is essential. Peer support is by nature often time-consuming and resource-intensive. This means members of the team must also have solid time-management and organizational skills. Finally, passion for wellness goes a long way!

Ensure Diverse Representation

Another important factor to consider as you put your team together is representation. A diverse and representative cross section of your agency ensures those seeking peer support—people who are likely under considerable duress—are as comfortable as possible in discussing challenging issues. In the professional sense, this means staffing the team with varying ranks and specialties. Beyond that, gender, sexual orientation, racial, physical abilities, religious and age differences within the team may provide options for more forthright conversations.

Consider, as well, the size of your group. Bigger is not necessarily better. Larger agencies often find success positioning a peer support representative at each district headquarters. But this requires considerable coordination and participation, which takes time to develop. Still other agencies have a single peer support coordinator who delegates all incoming requests. While this ensures consistency of response, it can be taxing on that individual and doesn't provide redundancy in case of an emergency. The size and scope of your peer support team depends on the needs of, and demands on, your personnel. It also depends on the people on the peer support team and what works best for them.

Build Trust and Acceptance

Encouraging participation in peer support can sometimes be a challenge. But if you've established confidentiality as your bedrock;



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have clear and well-understood procedures; and have a team that is diverse, competent and committed, you have created the essential components for personnel to trust the program.

A chief driver of support for peer support will be the team itself. Set up regular meetings of the team to discuss training, participation and issues encountered. While it's good to have data on participation and the sorts of issues presented, it's essential this information is anonymized before any discussion or presentation of it. A passionate and competent peer support team sells itself.

Finally, educate personnel and then celebrate the benefits of peer support. Outreach efforts might include an agency-wide email, posters, newsletter, events or videos. Not all personnel will fully understand what peer support is or how it can help them. Therefore, begin with educating staff on the rudiments, emphasizing the confidentiality of the program. Stigmas against seeking help should not be tolerated and must be directly addressed.

Frame peer support as a benefit to employees and stress that it's not limited to crisis situations. It's a lynchpin in an agency-wide culture of wellness. While peer support is often a critical tool during acute crisis, its greatest strength and value is as a tool of prevention and resilience.



Ready to put your agency at the forefront of wellness?

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