

For Immediate Release

New website offers mental health support for first responders

Halifax, N.S. – Those who experience trauma on the job in Nova Scotia have a new tool to help them – developed by fellow Nova Scotians who know what they’re going through.

A new website will help first responders – paramedics, firefighters, police officers, and health services workers – manage the toll of the trauma they experience at work, and support their recovery from traumatic psychological injury.

Developed *by* first responders, *for* first responders, www.FirstRespondersMentalHealthNS.com features vivid images of real first responders as part of a broader campaign that aims to address the stigma that still exists in emergency response occupations, and sometimes prevents workers from speaking up when they need help.

“I know firsthand what it’s like to live with PTSD,” says EHS Paramedic Debra Fortune. “It’s hard to speak up and ask for help. But if we can provide easy-to-access online resources and support, I think we can make a difference for first responders by connecting them with the help they need, when they need it.”

Debra serves on the Steering Committee that developed the website, along with 12 other front line first responders and leaders from fire, law enforcement, corrections, nursing, and emergency dispatch. The group plans to keep working together, to build more awareness and develop more supports.

“This website will create greater awareness and acceptance of mental health and well-being in first responder workplaces,” says Reid McCoombs, Halifax Regional Police Deputy Chief, who serves on the Steering Committee alongside Debra. “It will help employers like Halifax Regional Police support our employees, by providing resources that help reduce the risk of traumatic stress injuries, and help those who live with these injuries to manage their symptoms.”

The website connects First Responders with a mix of mental health resources for themselves, their families, and the places where they work or volunteer. It links to self-assessments, online counselling, mobile apps, and tools for supervisors. It’s modelled after a similar, successful program from British Columbia. The direct involvement of first responders, and the first-time collaboration among the various emergency service organizations from across Nova Scotia are what make it unique.

“We’ve seen a steady increase in PTSD claims over the past two years,” says Shelley Rowan, Vice President of Prevention and Service Delivery at WCB Nova Scotia. “But what we also see is a tremendous commitment from first responders and their employers to work together and develop the mental health supports they need. The WCB is very proud to participate in and support this work.”

The Committee will use social media and other channels to make sure first responders and their employers know about the website and the resources it offers.

The members of the Nova Scotia First Responders Steering Committee are:

Debra Fortune, EHS Paramedic and IUOE Local 27 (Paramedic's Union) Representative

Reid McCoombs, Deputy Chief – Support, Halifax Regional Police

Michelle MacDonald, RN, family member, and Helping the Helpers co-founder

Jennifer Schnarre, Manager, Awareness and Outreach, Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Advanced Education

Jason MacLean, President, Nova Scotia Government Employees Union

Karen Butterworth, Manager, Occupational Health and Safety, Cape Breton Regional Municipality

Melissa Jenkins, Manager, Health and Wellness, Emergency Medical Care Incorporated

Deepak Presad, Officer and Wellness Peer Support Coordinator, Royal Canadian Mounted Police

Scott Penner, Chaplain, Onslow Belmont Fire Brigade, and member of the Fire Services Association of Nova Scotia Critical Incident Stress Management Team

Janet Hazelton, President, Nova Scotia Nurses Union

Shelley Rowan, Vice President, Prevention and Service Delivery, WCB Nova Scotia

Mike Sears, Fire Fighter, and Secretary for the Halifax Professional Fire Fighters Association

Mark Hartlen, Executive Director, Halifax Regional Police Association

- 30 -

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