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Peer support team helps firefighters cope with stresses of the job

By Nick Marnell

Acknowledging that a cultural shift is necessary, and encouraged by the firefighters union, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District has instituted a peer support group to help suppression personnel deal with the unique struggles and traumas they experience on the job.

"Firefighters are human and not immune to things they see in their career," said Anthony Stephens, MOFD firefighter and executive vice president of United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County, Local 1230. Firefighters deal with potential life endangering emergency calls daily, and witness things that a local firefighter once said "people should never see." The peer support program is a concerted effort on the part of the membership to look out for one another.

Stephens said that in addition to taking care of each other on the local level, the aim of the support program is to eliminate the stigma of asking for help in the first place. "I've seen progress in the nature of social acceptability. Firefighters are excited that these programs now exist," Stephens said. "But it takes time."

Capt. Jon Bensley is the peer support team coordinator for MOFD. "I too have got to change the stigma that I've grown up with in the fire service," he said. "Define and identify the problem and see what resources are available to ourselves, and how self-care can help us not carry the problems home with us."

Sometimes to tragic levels. According to a study conducted by the Ruderman Family Foundation, a philanthropic organization that fights for the rights of people with disabilities, 103 firefighters nationwide died by suicide in 2017, compared to 93 firefighter line-of-duty deaths.

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District has had its Critical Incident Stress Management program in place for five years, and ConFire group coordinator Chris Hummel, also a member of the Local 1230 executive board, is helping MOFD implement its own program. "We do a great job of helping strangers but a poor job of taking care of ourselves," Hummel said.

After a particularly emotionally wrought incident, such as a pediatric death, or a long, one-on-one victim interaction that ends in death, Hummel said that the membership knows to expect a call from the peer support group. "It's easier to talk to a person who has experienced a similar situation," Stephens said. And though the peer support team can provide critical stress reduction, and immediate decompression, Stephens emphasized that the team role does not supersede the work of a professional therapist.

Slowly, the stigma of dealing with emotional injuries in the fire service is disappearing. On Oct. 1, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 1116, which establishes statewide standards for local and regional peer support and crisis referral programs for firefighters. The bill provides for a network of available peers who can discuss emotional or professional issues, including substance abuse, grief support and workplace issues.

"We're ahead of the game," Hummel said.

The CISM program has the total support of Fire Chief Dave Winnacker. "MOFD is proud to partner with Local 1230 to develop a peer support network. We ask our firefighters to respond to difficult situations in our time of need and this is one of the ways we can build their resiliency to help them deal with the long-term effects of repeated exposures over the length of their career."

"This generation is ready for it," Bensley said.

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