

# PEER SUPPORT FOR 9-1-1 TELECOMMUNICATORS: WHY IT MATTERS AND WHY IT WORKS

By Larry Fraser, CMCP

I believe that lived experience matters for effective peer support. Trauma changes us, and understanding that change firsthand helps us better recognize it in others.

I have worked for the past three years with Kentucky's Post-Critical Incident Seminar (PCIS) program as a peer supporter, assisting law enforcement officers, telecommunicators and military veterans. It was through this work that my passion for peer support took root. I am putting that passion to work as chair of an APCO national work group focused on developing national standards for peer support training.

## LIVED EXPERIENCE AND TRAUMA

My first traumatic event as a telecommunicator occurred on October 28, 1991, during the early morning hours as I finished a double shift and prepared to go home. My fiancée called and asked if she could bring me breakfast on her way to college. I happily said yes.

Ten to fifteen minutes later, I answered a 9-1-1 call reporting a motor vehicle crash involving a man and a small child. I immediately began dispatching resources. A second call came in with a description of the vehicle, and my hair stood up on the back of my neck. I had that unmistakable feeling that something was wrong. Throughout the call, one detail stayed with me: a man and a small child. My fiancée had short hair, but I tried to push the thought away.

As units arrived on scene, I attempted to get updates, but no one responded to my radio traffic. When the patient was loaded and enroute to the hospital, the sheriff finally came on the air and told me it was my fiancée and her son. She was pronounced deceased upon arrival at the hospital.

That single event set the tone for much of my life. In the early 1990s, counseling resources and awareness for first responders were not what they are today, and the stigma surrounding mental health support was significant.

It was not until my second traumatic event — more than two decades later — that I

realized I had been living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for 24 years. I was involved in a vehicle crash when a neighbor pulled out in front of me on his lawnmower. He survived until he reached the hospital, but later passed away. Following the incident and subsequent civil court proceedings, I underwent psychological testing and was formally diagnosed with PTSD. That diagnosis was attributed to not only the recent incident, but also to the 9-1-1 call I took in 1991.

## RETURNING TO DISPATCH AND FINDING HEALING

In 2019, after semi-retiring, I returned to dispatching with the Kentucky State Police when staffing shortages and COVID-19 placed additional strain on the system. At first, it felt like riding a bicycle; everything came back naturally, and on the surface, it was business as usual.

Over time my wife and my brother began noticing changes in my behavior. My brother told me about Kentucky's PCIS program, offered through the Department of Criminal Justice Training. I applied and attended in



February 2023. That experience changed my life and solidified my desire to help other first responders through peer support.

I often think about how different my career — and my life — might have been if peer support had existed as it does today when I took my first traumatic call in 1991.

#### WHAT IS PEER SUPPORT?

Peer support refers to structured programs in which individuals with similar professional experiences provide one another with emotional and practical support. In emergency communications, peer supporters are often fellow telecommunicators or public safety professionals who understand the

unique culture, stressors and emotional demands of the job.

While peer support is not psychotherapy, it plays a critical role as an early intervention tool. It helps reduce stigma, promotes shared understanding and often serves as a bridge to professional mental health services.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), responder peer support includes reflective listening, emotional validation and education on healthy coping strategies. Peer supporters also help colleagues recognize when clinical support is needed. SAMHSA emphasizes that peer support strengthens team cohesion, improves coping effectiveness,

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increases engagement with resources and reduces stigma surrounding mental health.

#### WHY PEER SUPPORT WORKS FOR TELECOMMUNICATORS

First, peer support works because of shared experience. A telecommunicator peer supporter can recognize stress responses in fellow telecommunicators more quickly than

someone without that background. They understand the pressure of silent radios, traumatic calls and cumulative exposure to crisis. That understanding validates experiences and reduces the isolation and shame that often accompany trauma.

Second, peer support helps reduce stigma around mental health treatment. PTSD is no longer something that should be associated only with military service. Telecommunicators experience trauma through the phone every day. Peer supporters help normalize conversations about mental health and demonstrate that seeking help is not a sign of weakness. This increases the likelihood that individuals will engage in self-care and professional services when needed.

Third, peer supporters can serve as clinical liaisons. Although peer support is non-clinical, proper training enables peers to recognize warning signs, observe risk indicators and encourage timely referrals to licensed mental health professionals.

#### WHAT PEER SUPPORT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?

Peer support availability varies by state and jurisdiction. Some emergency

communications centers (ECCs) maintain in-house peer support teams, while others rely on regional or statewide programs. National resources also exist, including 24/7 crisis and referral hotlines that offer responder-focused support.

My recommendation is simple: ask around. Many agencies are surprised to discover that peer support resources already exist nearby. If none are available, consider partnering with neighboring agencies or larger centers to build a program together.

#### STARTING A PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM

To establish a peer support program, agencies should begin with proper training and clear standards. Organizations such as the Virginia Peer Support Association (VAPSA) provide peer support training and certification across multiple disciplines, including dispatch, along with ongoing mentorship.

Standards and best-practice guidelines can be obtained from APCO, NENA and state peer support programs. These resources help ensure peer support programs are ethical, structured and effective. The APCO national

work group that I chair is currently developing peer support training standards.

#### WHY PEER SUPPORT IS ESSENTIAL FOR 9-1-1

Peer support acknowledges the unique stressors of emergency communications, including trauma by phone, vicarious trauma, burnout and chronic cumulative stress. These challenges accumulate over time and affect not only individual telecommunicators but also entire communications centers.

Effective peer support can reduce burnout, improve employee retention and strengthen a center's overall mental health. When one telecommunicator is struggling, the ripple effects can impact morale, performance and team cohesion.

As we move forward, let us be proactive. Seek out peer support teams or work to establish one if none exist. Help continue breaking the stigma that mental health care is a sign of weakness. Stand up for your fellow telecommunicators. Watch for behavioral changes after difficult calls. Check in with one another, encourage continued counseling and never underestimate the power of simply being present.



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Peer support saves careers — and sometimes lives. ●

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three decades of experience in emergency communications, including service with the Kentucky State Police and as the first 9-1-1 Director in Carlisle County. Larry serves as Second Vice President of Kentucky APCO and chairs an APCO national work group focused

on developing peer support training standards. He is an active peer supporter with Kentucky's Post-Critical Incident Seminar (PCIS) program and is passionate about improving wellness and resilience for 9-1-1 professionals nationwide.

## CDE EXAM #77093

- The author of this article is currently the River County KY Director but became a first time director for \_\_\_\_ county.
  - Kentucky State Police telecommunicator
  - Carlisle County, Kentucky
  - President of Kentucky APCO
  - Director of Kentucky's PCIS program
- What traumatic event occurred in the author's life on October 28, 1991?
  - A severe vehicle crash
  - A call involving his fiancée and her son
  - A diagnosis of PTSD
  - Attended the first peer support training
- Like the author, it can take more than \_\_\_\_ years to receive a PTSD diagnosis:
  - 10
  - 15
  - 24
  - 30
- What program helped Larry find healing and inspired his peer support work?
  - SAMHSA training
  - VAPSA certification
  - Kentucky's Post Critical Incident Seminar (PCIS)
  - APCO peer support workshop
- According to the article, peer support is best described as:
  - A form of psychotherapy provided by licensed counselors
  - Structured programs where individuals with similar professional experiences provide support
  - Mandatory counseling sessions after traumatic calls
  - A replacement for professional mental health services
- Which of the following is NOT listed as a benefit of peer support according to SAMHSA?
  - Strengthens team cohesion
  - Reduces stigma surrounding mental health
  - Eliminates the need for clinical intervention
  - Increases engagement with resources
- Why does peer support work particularly well for telecommunicators?
  - Telecommunicators prefer informal conversations over professional help
  - Peer supporters with shared experience can recognize stress responses more quickly
  - It costs less than other mental health services
  - It requires no training or certification
- What organization provides peer support training and certification mentioned in the article?
  - NENA
  - APCO
  - Virginia Peer Support Association (VAPSA)
  - Department of Criminal Justice Training
- What is the focus of the APCO national standard for peer support training group?
  - Developing national standards for peer support training
  - Creating new call-handling protocols
  - Designing software for 9-1-1 centers
  - Revising federal dispatch regulations
- What is the primary call to action in the article's conclusion?
  - Require all telecommunicators to undergo psychological testing
  - Be proactive in seeking out or establishing peer support teams
  - Eliminate all traumatic calls from dispatch operations
  - Replace professional counseling with peer support programs

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