

Inspiration From APCO's First 9-1-1 Wellness Summit

On February 6 APCO held its first-ever 9-1-1 Wellness Summit in Atlanta. The discussions at the Summit weren't always easy, but it was an incredibly worthwhile opportunity for the nearly 200 9-1-1 professionals to talk about the challenges and strategies for addressing wellness, and to come together and realize that no one needs to suffer alone. The lessons learned from the Summit were valuable for attendees looking to change themselves and their agencies, and they validated the need for further action to support wellness for 9-1-1 professionals.

Health and wellness challenges among 9-1-1 professionals demand attention. Research has shown that 9-1-1 professionals suffer from high rates of anxiety (56%), PTSD (18%) and some degree of depression (58%), with *one in seven* public safety telecommunicators reporting recent suicidal thinking. While these are alarming statistics, they likely don't show the full extent of the problem given that people tend to underreport these challenges.

One of the goals of the Summit was to create an environment in which individuals could be vulnerable with one another and acknowledge their shared experiences in dealing with trauma. Perhaps the most important lesson of the day was that although those struggling with trauma often feel alone, the 9-1-1 community is full of people who can understand what others are going through, and they're ready to support one another.

The importance of peer support and cultural change were recurring themes. Attendees remarked on the need to break the cycle of suffering in silence, eating our young and telling new teammates to "toughen up." Representatives from APCO's Health and Wellness Committee used their research on peer support programs to answer questions on a variety of issues, including how to select personnel to serve on peer support teams, how to engage employees in the program and how additional wellness initiatives can complement peer support. Resources on peer support programs and other wellness initiatives curated by the Health and Wellness Committee can be found at apointnl.org/wellness.

In addition to peer support programs, Summit attendees learned a wide range of strategies for improving wellness. One session, presented by FGM Architects and the Cook County 9-1-1 Center (Illinois), showcased how changes to the physical environment within an ECC can benefit health and wellness for personnel. Science-based comm center designs — considering color theory, texture, lighting and connections to nature — might receive less attention than tools like peer support, but they have great potential to reduce stress within the ECC. Another session highlighted best practices for working with

mental health clinicians and building employee assistance programs that benefit 9-1-1 professionals. In between sessions, practitioners led guided mediation and chair yoga trainings, exemplifying quick and easy ways to incorporate wellness promoting activities into daily routines.

Ironically, at an event that emphasized the value of connecting with others and peer support, the greatest impact to everyone's wellness during the event might have been the presence of Chase, a comfort dog with plenty of experience supporting 9-1-1 professionals.

One panel at the Summit offered considerations for ECCs interested in using support animals. Comfort dogs can provide significant emotional support for ECC personnel experiencing anxiety, depression or PTSD, particularly when an individual may not be ready to talk about what they're going through with colleagues or a mental health professional.

The Summit was a unique training opportunity that empowered 9-1-1 professionals to build new relationships, discuss strategies to support well-being and recognize that no one needs to endure trauma and mental health challenges in isolation. During the event, APCO President Becky Neugent challenged attendees with a call to action to use what they learned from the event to effect real change for themselves and their

agencies. The group that assembled in Atlanta left ready to answer the call. As one attendee stated, "This [event] allowed me to do some introspection about what I was doing in my own culture to actually promote wellness instead of just talking about it."

For the government relations office, the discussions at the 9-1-1 Wellness Summit validated our approach to one of our top legislative priorities, the PROTECT 9-1-1 Act (H.R. 2763). This legislation would support public safety telecommunicators' mental health by increasing access to resources like peer support programs, providing guidance for clinicians to better serve 9-1-1 professionals and developing best practices for addressing PTSD in public safety telecommunicators. As we advocate for the PROTECT 9-1-1 Act and other legislation to support the 9-1-1 community, we will continue to engage with APCO's members and ensure that wellness issues are a top priority. ●

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