

## Emergency preparedness and the work of first responders

By **Sara A. Jahnke**

The best defense against natural disasters or other emergencies is to have a good plan in place. Particularly when regional emergencies occur, there is a risk to expecting that first responders will be the first and last line of defense. While emergency response agencies make a concerted effort to respond to all community needs, when those needs overwhelm existing resources—as they might in a natural disaster or terrorist attack—it is important to have a plan B.

As resources are being taxed and needs are growing, first responder organizations are increasingly being tasked to do more with less. While first responders are well-trained in preparing for and responding to communities' needs, there are times when needs exceed the responder organizations' capabilities (e.g., communications challenges when telephone lines are overloaded during an emergency).

Being prepared for natural disasters, listening to early warnings from emergency response agencies and following their recommendations, as well as having friends, family and neighbors who are aware of one's specific needs are key components of being—and staying—safe. This is particularly true for older adults, who often have acute needs.

Several national agencies also have recommendations for being prepared. For instance, the American Red Cross encourages all citizens to “Be Red Cross Ready” ([tinyurl.com/yxher8lq](http://tinyurl.com/yxher8lq)). Ready.gov ([tinyurl.com/zdr4ljh](http://tinyurl.com/zdr4ljh)) has preparedness resources available for people across the life span; recommendations include having a back-up supply of water, food, batteries and flashlights, and first aid supplies, whistles to signal for help, maps and cell phone batteries.

Also, it is crucial to have a plan for how emergency notifications and warnings will be received, an evacuation route, a shelter plan and a plan for communicating with family. Having these plans in writing and practicing them also are highly recommended.

### **The Impacts of First Responder Work**

Being a first responder is a physically and mentally taxing job. Every day, firefighters, Emergency Medical Service (EMS) providers and law enforcement officers are tasked with responding to everyone's worst day: whether it involves a natural disaster, a fire, a car accident, a cardiac arrest or a school shooting, first responders are expected to show up and fix the situation.

Given the job's physical dangers, it is not surprising that first responders experience a high rate of injury and on-duty deaths. Exposures and job tasks also lead to increased risk for several types of cancers and risk of on-duty cardiovascular events ([tinyurl.com/yxqjhyvb](http://tinyurl.com/yxqjhyvb); [tinyurl.com/y5c7doln](http://tinyurl.com/y5c7doln)). And lately, there has been an increasing amount of attention paid to first responders' mental health and

the impacts of the job (research points to the neurobiological changes that occur due to trauma exposure; [tinyurl.com/yxpp3hmd](https://tinyurl.com/yxpp3hmd)). In addition, first responders often experience the impact of repeated exposure to trauma and the cumulative stress that occurs as a result.

Not surprisingly, rates of mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress response are found to be higher among first responder groups than in the general population. Another challenge is when first responders experience dual trauma. When communities are hit with emergencies, first responders are expected to show up and take care of the community, which becomes particularly challenging when the responders also are *part* of the community: responding to a wildfire when your own home is a total loss takes a toll.

### More Focus on Supporting Mental Health

Fortunately, there is increased focus on firefighters' mental health and how to prevent negative mental health outcomes. First responder organizations understand the need for providing ongoing support to their members. Rather than assuming that every incident affects individuals in the same way, there is awareness that different incidents affect different people in different ways at different times in their lives.

Peer-support programs are becoming more popular among first responder groups. The basic idea behind them is that first responders generally are resilient people and the best way to prevent the negative impacts of trauma is for responders to connect with one another. These peer teams are trained to support their fellow first responders, to identify people who are struggling and to learn how to talk about issues before problems arise. There also is a focus on shifting the conversation among first responder groups to reduce stigma around asking for help and to acknowledge that being on the job can affect mental health and family life.

Another area receiving more attention is the risk for people leaving their jobs—whether through retirement or separation of service due to injury or illness. While being a first responder has a protective effect against depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms when first responders are still in the community, often losing that “family” or the identity associated with being a firefighter, paramedic or law enforcement officer can have a negative impact post-retirement or at the end of service. It is important that first responders be aware of the impact of moving out of the responder role—particularly when community emergencies occur. ■

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### Trauma Programs for First Responders

✓ National Volunteer Fire Council's Share the Load Program

[tinyurl.com/y5g5gjby](https://tinyurl.com/y5g5gjby)

✓ Everyone Goes Home National Fallen Firefighter's Foundation, The Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives' Stress First Aid

[tinyurl.com/y6r7wmet](https://tinyurl.com/y6r7wmet)

✓ The International Association of Fire Fighters' 10 Steps to Build Your Peer Support Program

[tinyurl.com/y4kgdvyk](https://tinyurl.com/y4kgdvyk)

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