

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE



By Brittan Bolin
IAFPD Lobbyist

Lawmakers Focus on First Responder Mental Health

Many studies have documented the connection between exposure to trauma and mental illness. PTSD and depression rates among firefighters and police officers have been found to be as much as five times higher than the rates within the regular population, which causes these first responders to commit suicide at a considerably higher rate.¹ During the abbreviated spring legislative session, lawmakers acknowledged that mental health services are a critical need of first responders. Several bills to address this issue were introduced this spring, with one bill receiving final passage that will provide much needed funding for mental health treatment and programs.

House Bill 1321 (Public Act 102-911) creates the First Responders Mental Health Grant Program. Under the provisions of the bill, the program can provide grants to units of local government, law enforcement agencies, fire protection districts, school districts, public or private hospitals or ambulance services that employ first responders for expenses related to behavioral health care services. Under the provisions of the law, any services funded by the program may not be used as a reason to reduce a first responders' regular health care coverage. The program will be administered by the Illinois Department of Human Services.

Representative Lindsay LaPointe (D-Chicago) is the chief sponsor of House Bill 1321. Her background in social work gives her a keen understanding of mental health issues and her district in Chicago's Portage Park neighborhood is home to many current and retired first responders. In discussing mental health with her constituents, she found that there are distinct barriers to access for those serving in these professions. In addition to the stigma surrounding mental health treatment for workers who are defined by their strength and toughness, LaPointe learned that programs that are currently available are not geared toward the specific needs of first responders. She also discovered that certain types of first responders, namely dispatch workers, do not qualify for treatment under current program although they experience similar exposure to trauma.

LaPointe said that language of the bill is drafted broadly to fund a range of existing and prospective services and to serve all first responders. The representative plans to work closely with the Department of Human Services to craft rules that will allow for flexible funding streams and cover transportation costs for employees to access superior treatment programs operating in other states.

"We have a long way to go to ensure that all first responders – from firefighters

and police to dispatchers and everyone in between - can access the mental health support that their incredibly challenging jobs demand," said Representative LaPointe. "This bill recognizes the unique experiences of first responders and creates a grant program to meet the gaping holes in our system, with the ultimate goal of increased wellness and public safety."

The state fiscal year 2023 budget includes appropriations to fund the First Responders Mental Health Grant program, with \$10 million allocated for police and firefighters in the City of Chicago, and possibly as much as \$7 million for programs in the collar counties and downstate. House Democratic budget staff are currently communicating with the Department of Human Services to determine which budget lines may be used to fund the program, which will take effect January 1, 2023. It is important to note that House Bill 1321 had 47 co-sponsors and passed with unanimous support in both chambers. ■

1. Ruderman Family Foundation White Paper on Mental Health and Suicide of First Responders, April 10, 2018