



HERO FORUM²⁰²³
Doing Well by Doing Good:
How Responsible Organizations are
Addressing Societal Challenges

Improving Access and Reducing Barriers to Behavioral Health for a Dispersed Workforce: Lessons from the Minnesota Firefighter Initiative

Shannon Foulkes, MA, Optum; George Esbensen, Minnesota Firefighter Initiative (MnFIRE); Steve Clausen, Aon

Firefighters, and other first responders, are more likely to die by suicide and have an elevated risk of mental health issues. Their work environment, personal stress, and the shame and stigma associated with being perceived as weak or unfit for duty if they seek counseling are all contributing factors. Additionally, 95% of the 20,000 firefighters dispersed across Minnesota are volunteer/part-time, and previously did not have access to behavioral health benefits that are traditionally reserved for full-time employees. This panel discussion will present best practice approaches to creating a comprehensive emotional well-being solution that can be tailored to fit an organization's unique needs, and the needs of their employees, thus reducing the stigma and barriers to behavioral health support. Organizations can create flexible programs and options that offer employees and their families/household members the resources for everyday life. Recommendations include curating a network of counselors with experience with the dispersed workforce concerns and challenges, promoting behavioral health services to employees and their families, improving emotional well-being through training and peer support, and delivering ongoing educating to network counselors. These types of best practices have resulted in over 1,000 counseling visits with this specialized network of 853 counselors in the last year. Of those visits, 83% were male, 53% were 50-55, 79% lived in small/rural areas, 18% were for PTSD, and 39% completed all five, free sessions. The demographics were significantly higher than Optum's employer book of business. These best practices can be expanded and tailored to other industries' dispersed employees, such as school districts, manufacturing, banking, healthcare, airlines, municipalities, and others.

Learning Objectives

After completing this session, participants will be able to:

1. Implement 5 communication methods without addresses to a dispersed workforce: onsite promotions, marketing to fire departments, social media, events, and other unique ideas (e.g. letters to community newspapers and city managers).
2. Recruit counselors with specific experience, training, qualifications, and understanding of small/rural location to join a specialized network for firefighters/first responders and provide ongoing training and support with a provider advocate.
3. Reduce barriers to and stigma around behavioral health care for dispersed workforce/first responders through peer support network development, and educational trainings to firefighters and behavioral health providers.

1 CEU (ADV)

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