



SUPPORTING *the* MENTAL
HEALTH *of* FIRST RESPONDERS:
**THE IMPORTANCE OF
VETTING THERAPISTS**

BY BILL MAZUR AND JOE COLLINS



The mental health of first responders — SWAT officers, patrol officers, firefighters, correctional officers, dispatchers and EMTs — is vital to their ability to perform their high-stress jobs. Properly vetting therapists for these professionals ensures they receive specialized support. This vetting process is crucial for addressing the unique challenges first responders face, utilizing appropriate therapeutic approaches, and fostering trust within the therapeutic relationship.

First responders encounter traumatic events daily, witnessing human suffering and often risking their own lives to protect others. These experiences can contribute to severe stress, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress injury (PTSI). To effectively support them, therapists need a deep understanding of first responder culture and its psychological impacts.

“Mental health professionals who want to work with first responders need to have the qualifications, training, and experience to do so — and they must be unabashedly

pro-police and other first responders,” says Dr. Lewis Schlosser, PhD, ABPP, who is board certified in police and public safety psychology.

Key qualifications for first responder therapists

A therapist for first responders should have specialized training in trauma and crisis intervention, including evidence-based treatments like:

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)
- Somatic Experiencing
- Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE)

Additionally, familiarity with Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) is essential, as it is often used in the first responder community. These modalities effectively treat PTSI and related trauma conditions, making them critical skills for therapists in this field.

Building cultural competence

To support first responders effectively, therapists need to understand the unique stressors and culture within emergency services. This includes awareness of:

- Shift work demands and stress
- Camaraderie and hierarchy within departments
- An unspoken expectation of stoicism under pressure

Therapists can foster trust and rapport by engaging in ride-alongs, participating in simulated training and meeting personnel outside of crises. This helps humanize the therapist and build connections with first responders.

Confidentiality and the first responder “brotherhood” and “sisterhood”

Confidentiality and cultural competence are essential in reducing the stigma of seeking mental health support. First responders often fear career repercussions from therapy, so therapists must provide a confidential, safe environment. This includes understanding the “brotherhood” and “sisterhood” within these professions and the pressures first responders face both at work and among their peers.

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Vetting process: Checking credentials, experience and recommendations

Proper vetting should involve evaluating the therapist's credentials, experience and previous work with first responders or similar populations. While recommendations and word-of-mouth are valuable, they are insufficient on their own.

"Word of mouth is not enough for vetting. It matters, for sure, but over-reliance on this has caused a lot of trouble throughout the country," says Dr. Craig Childs, a specialist in first responder therapy.

Licensure is a foundational criterion as it ensures a baseline of competence. Licensed providers are required to continue their education, unlike unlicensed providers, who cannot guarantee legal confidentiality in sessions.

Commitment to ongoing education and specialized certification

Continuing education in trauma research and advanced therapeutic techniques is crucial for therapists working with first responders. This ongoing learning demonstrates the therapist's commitment to offering the highest level of care.

"Psychologists who specialize in working with first responders should aspire to board certification in police and public safety psychology," says Schlosser.

Building a strong therapeutic alliance

A therapeutic alliance is essential for first responders, who may be hesitant to share their experiences. Therapists who understand the culture and challenges of emergency services create a more empathetic environment, enabling first responders to open up and build coping strategies.

Dr. Gina Gallivan, a board-certified police and public safety psychologist, says, "Cultural competence is essential. Police officers face constant trauma, which can lead to desensitization and, for some, self-medication with alcohol — all while having access to firearms."

Accessibility: Virtual therapy and support for rural areas

Accessibility is a critical factor in providing mental health support to first responders, especially in rural or remote areas. Virtual therapy options are invaluable for those who cannot attend in-person sessions due to geographic or work constraints.

According to Craig J. Sherven, a public safety specialist with Wisconsin League of Municipalities, "Rural agency chiefs struggle just to get basic programming started due to a lack of staff, resources and proximity to providers. Virtual services are vital to delivering wellness and support services to these areas."

Conclusion

Properly vetting therapists for first responders is essential. The right therapist will have trauma-focused training, cultural competence and a strong commitment to confidentiality. Access to well-qualified therapists helps ensure that first responders can maintain their mental well-being, ultimately benefiting both the individuals and the communities they serve.

For more information on vetting mental health providers, refer to the Wellness Provider Vetting Guide developed by the Fraternal Order of Police Division of Wellness Services and the U.S. Department of Justice COPS Office.

About the authors

Joe Collins is a 35-year law enforcement veteran who retired in 2020 from the Two Rivers (W.I.) Police Department as chief of police. He holds an associate's degree in police science, a bachelor's degree in administration of criminal justice, and a master's degree in managing organizational behavior. Collins served on two SWAT teams for more than 15 years, was president of the Wisconsin Association of SWAT Personnel (WI-ASP) and served on the board of directors for numerous years. He also has trained in the U.S. and internationally as a member of the NTOA and other training groups.

Collins is a graduate of the 236th session of the FBI National Academy and was the 2015-16 president of the Wisconsin FBI National Academy Association where he served five years on the executive board. He has previously served as co-chair of the FBI-NAA's Officer Safety & Wellness Committee for numerous years and was a member of the training committee and finance committee. He is a master instructor with the FBINAA's Comprehensive Officer Resilience Train-the-Trainer Program, and a lead facilitator for the resiliency programs for Resilient Minds on the Front Lines and the state of Georgia. He also serves as a consultant for the U.S. Department of Justice and the IACP as a subject matter expert in Officer Resilience. As a Senior Public Safety Officer with Acadia Healthcare's First Responder Division, Collins provides specialized treatment guidance for public safety personnel, first responders, and families who may find themselves in a personal crisis.

Bill Mazur is a 25-year law enforcement veteran and retired from the Atlantic City (NJ) Police Department in 2017 at the rank of deputy chief of police. He served in SWAT for more than a decade as an operator and commander. He has been a member of NTOA for multiple decades.

Mazur holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Stockton University and a master's degree in Human Resources Training and Development in the Police Graduate Studies Program from Seton Hall University. He also completed the N.J. State Association of Chiefs of Police Leadership Exchange Program at the College of Policing in the United Kingdom.

Mazur is a graduate of the FBI National Academy, Session #256, and has served as a Master Instructor with the FBI National Academy Associates in their Comprehensive Officer Resiliency Training Program. He is now a Senior Public Safety Officer with Acadia Healthcare's First Responder Division. He provides specialized treatment guidance for public safety personnel, first responders and their families who may find themselves in a personal crisis because of a mental health issue or substance use disorder.

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