



Statement of Maryland Rural Health Association (MRHA)

To the Senate Finance Committee

Chair: Senator Pamela Beidle

March 4, 2024

Senate Bill 1069: Workers' Compensation - Occupational Disease Presumptions - First Responders

POSITION: SUPPORT

Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Klausmeier, and members of the committee, the Maryland Rural Health Association (MRHA) is in SUPPORT of Senate Bill 1069: Workers' Compensation - Occupational Disease Presumptions - First Responders.

First responders are an integral part of keeping our communities safe. Serving as a first responder is highly honorable, but with such honor and courage, comes hardships. Over 80% of all responders have endured traumatic events while on duty, which takes a toll on both the body and mind. One commonly seen mental health condition in first responders is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Due to the high rates of chronic stress and traumatic experiences with little time for recovery between events, the prevalence of PTSD in first responders is considerably higher than the general population. According to the Institute of Health, 1 in 3 first responders develop PTSD, while the average American has only a 1 in 5 chance of developing the disorder (n.d.). PTSD can be debilitating and can make it difficult for first responders to do their job properly. Strained relationships, unhealthy coping mechanisms, avoidance, shame, chronic pain, and suicide are only a few of many consequences that can come with untreated PTSD. First responders with an untreated mental illness including PTSD can result in inadequate critical thinking skills, poor situational awareness, low levels of confidence and clouded judgment; all skills which every first responder must use every day in their practice. There are existing programs and educational campaigns that target this exact issue, yet utilization of behavioral health services remains low among first responders. If resources exist, then why are first responders underusing these services? According to the Journal of Psychiatric Research, leading barriers for first responders seeking behavioral health care included but were not limited to fear of judgment from peers and leadership, fear of services lacking confidentiality, difficulty getting time off of work, and not knowing where to receive services. When participants were asked if the public stigma or their personal stigma has a larger influence on their decision to seek out care, nearly all participants chose the public stigma (Haugen et al., 2017). Before one can properly care for others, they must care for themselves first. Considering the influence of the public stigma on mental health over first responders, adding PTSD as an occupational disease under the correct circumstances, it not only encourages the individual to seek out care but also provides them with the financial means and availability to do so. The enactment of SB1069 will reduce the barriers first responders too often face when seeking out behavioral health care. Because of this, the Maryland Rural Health Association is in favor of SB1069.

*On behalf of the Maryland Rural Health Association,
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Institutes of Health. (n.d.). PTSD in fire responders.

<https://institutesofhealth.org/ptsd-in-first-responders/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Substance%20Abuse,3%20first%20responders%20develop%20PTSD.>

Haugen, P. T., McCrillis, A. M., Smid, G. E., & Nijdan, M. J. (2017). Mental health stigma and barriers to mental health care for first responders: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 94. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2017.08.001>