

# Tacoma-Pierce County Peer Support Plan

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# TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY PEER SUPPORT PLAN

## PURPOSE

The Tacoma-Pierce County Peer Support Plan is home to the Peer Support Program and was developed for the purpose of providing 24/7 guidance and support at no-cost to organizations within Tacoma-Pierce County to strengthen its resiliency by protecting the mental health and wellbeing of all first and support responders—public, private, paid, and volunteer—when personal or professional issues negatively affect their work performance, family unit, or self.

The Peer Support Program is designed to:

- Provide emotional support during and after times of personal or professional crisis to other employees who express a need for assistance.
- Develop Peer Supporters who can identify personal conflicts and provide guidance or referral to professional/alternate resources as required.
- Maintain an effective Peer Supporter training and response program.
- Support those who have had family tragedies.
- Check on status of illnesses and provide support where desired and needed.

The Plan was designed and is coordinated through the Pierce County Fire Chiefs and Pierce County Police Chiefs Associations, South Sound 911, and the Tacoma-Pierce County Chaplaincy. Currently, participation in this effort constitutes multiple Fire and Police agencies, Chaplaincy, Public Service Answering Points, and Public and Emergency Healthcare and Medical Services within Pierce County. The unique feature of the Plan is that it allows for the rapid access to a large numbers of peer support resources with minimum effort of the requesting agency.

How the system works:

- Pierce County is divided into two (2) geographical zones for Fire Agencies, one (1) for Law Enforcement. A Zone Coordinator manages each zone's resources for each discipline. \*Zones can and or will be divided per discipline (Law, Health, PSAP, etc.) as the number and distribution of Peer Supporters allows.
- In the event of a disaster or a significant incident that may tax the resources of an individual agency or an entire zone, a request goes to the other zones for appropriate resources.
- These resources are preplanned within each zone and can be mobilized with a single call to the Pierce County DEM Duty Officer.

This Plan was prepared and is maintained by the members of the Tacoma-Pierce County Peer Support Oversight Board which include the Zone Coordinators, Alternates, and a representative from the Pierce County Department of Emergency Management; and is approved by the Pierce County Fire Chiefs Association, Pierce County Police Chiefs, and Tacoma-Pierce County Chaplaincy.

This Plan was originally adopted: [date]

## BACKGROUND

Study: *More firefighters [and law enforcement officers] died by suicide than in the line of duty in 2017*

A study found that 103 firefighters and 140 police officers died by suicide in 2017, compared to 93 firefighters and 129 officer line-of-duty deaths.

The study also found that little has been done to address PTSD and depression in responders, even though they are **five times** more likely than civilians to suffer from symptoms. See the Ruderman White Paper on *Mental Health and Suicide of First Responders* [https://rudermanfoundation.org/white\\_papers/police-officers-and-firefighters-are-more-likely-to-die-by-suicide-than-in-line-of-duty/](https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/police-officers-and-firefighters-are-more-likely-to-die-by-suicide-than-in-line-of-duty/)

In the first eight months of local, first responder implementation of a Peer Support Program and Policy, over 100 internal Peer Support contacts were documented. Peer Supporters have been requested for the I-5 Amtrak Derailment, Pierce County Sheriff Deputy McCartney's funeral, Orting Valley Fire Captain Art Vazquez' death, and Lacey Fire District 3 Firefighter Crystal Murphey's death—thus supporting the notion that a system is needed.

Additional Pierce County fire departments have also realized the need and followed suit programmatically, within their own organizations.

Peer relationships are built around a mutual understanding, respect and trust. Shared experiences, particularly those which have happened during emergency operations, bind individuals together. They are the foundation for peer support as they foster the initial trust and credibility necessary for developing relationships in which individuals are willing to open up and discuss their problems despite concerns about stigma. Peer-to-peer programs facilitate opportunities for individuals to talk with trained peer supporters who can offer educational and social support and provided avenues for additional help if needed.

Experts believe that various techniques and processes used in Critical Incident Peer Support can help individuals improve their coping abilities and dramatically decrease the occurrence of Post - Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), lower the tension and mitigate the group's reaction to a traumatic event.

## SCOPE

This Plan is designed to address the psychological health and wellness of multiple disciplines in the public and private sectors to include law enforcement, firefighters, public service answering points, emergency medical services, and hospitals in Tacoma-Pierce County. The peer support team will be comprised of agency members who have been specially trained in critical incident stress and crisis intervention techniques and who work in conjunction with designated mental healthcare personnel. The Vision is to bolster individual agencies capabilities to provide Peer Support, while also enabling the entire county, across disciplines, to come together during a widespread or large-scale incident to provide Peer Support and or Critical Incident Stress Management to partner agencies.

The Plan also includes methods of community stress management and resources for academia, shelter workers, city-county workers, and other community workforces who also bear witness to traumatic incidents and death who have habitually requested the consult of chaplains on-scene. The Pierce County Medical Reserve Corps - Trauma Resilience Team is the point contact for these community requests and are integrated into the callout procedures as necessary.

This document supports and does not supplant existing policies, procedures, or directives. This Plan establishes coordination and cooperative mechanisms, and a framework to facilitate the development of collaborative or agency-specific prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery actions and plans on a countywide basis as well as for individual agencies.

## **STATEMENT OF UNDERSTANDING**

Peer Support Team Members volunteer their time and efforts to participate in the countywide Peer Support Program, it is understood that they make themselves available for countywide deployment without requirement for compensation unless arranged otherwise through their home agency. This aligns with how the Pierce County Incident Management Team operates to provide service.

Peer Support Team Members shall sign a Confidentiality Agreement once their county application submission has been approved for team membership, complete PCWARN contact information spreadsheet for Everbridge callouts, and review the program's Code of Conduct.

## **ACTIVATION OF TEAMS**

### **Peer Support Coordinator**

The Chair of the Tacoma-Pierce County Peer Support Oversight Board will be the Lead Peer Support Coordinator. The Administrative Representative of the Oversight Board will maintain the Tacoma-Pierce County Peer Support call-out lists. Reference **Appendix B**.

When an Activation occurs, the DEM Duty Officer will call the appropriate Zone Coordinator identified in the **Appendices G and J** of this Plan, and then notify the Tacoma-Pierce County Peer Support Oversight Board via email for their awareness and tracking.

### **To Initiate a Call Out:**

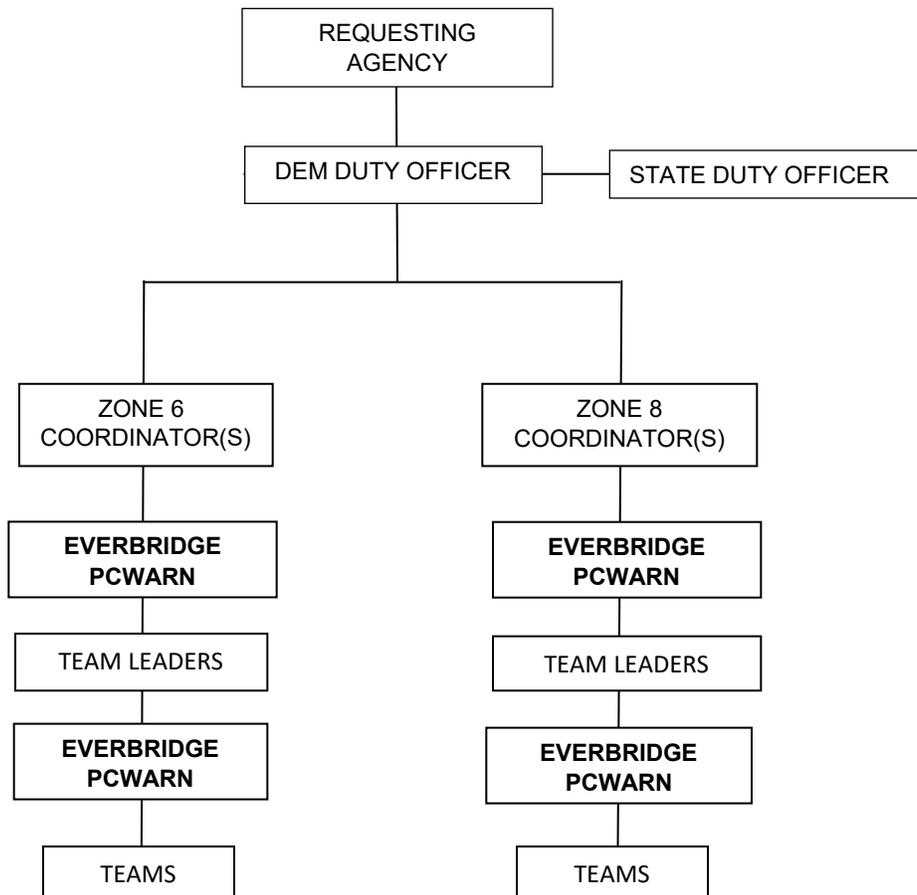
When an incident occurs, the Peer Support Zone Coordinator is the Point of Contact for all Peer Support resources in their respective zone.

- 1) The requesting agency calls the DEM Duty Officer to make a request for a Peer Support Team, providing the information in **Appendix D**.
- 2) The DEM Duty Officer will then notify the Zone Coordinator for the appropriate discipline, who will follow-up with the requesting agency if needed, before determining the most appropriate resources to callout (Group, Individual, Suicide, defusing, debriefing, etc.).
- 3) Teams and Team Leaders from Zone 6 and or 8 are requested through the Everbridge platform.
- 4) **Appendices G & J** of this Plan, the Duty Officer SOG, and Everbridge PCWARN database predetermine the contacts for response, whose credentials have been vetted by the Oversight Board and approved for deployment by their home agencies.
- 5) All Team Leaders will confirm response before the balance of the team is initiated.
- 6) Out-of-service apparatus will report via their respective dispatch centers.

## GUIDELINES AND RULES OF OPERATION

A minimum of one Team Leader will be dispatched with the team. The Team Leader will be directed by way of PCWARN to call the Zone Coordinator or designee by phone for initial instructions. The Zone Coordinator will advise the Team Leader of the nature of incident, location, agency handling the incident, base location, ops frequency, composition of teams/units that have been requested, and special travel directions. The Team leader may appoint an Assistant Team Leader.

## FLOWCHART: ACTIVATION OF TEAMS



## CALLOUT OPERATIONS

The use of on-duty or off-duty personnel, backfill, or overtime is at the discretion of the participating/responding agency. All members should be able to respond within one hour of the callout.

1. Home Agency Member- immediate deployment of off-duty and on-duty Peers. Temporary reduction of staffing is acceptable based on exigency.
2. Home Zone Partner Agency - immediate deployment of on-duty and off-duty where backfill and or overtime is available and as allowable by participating agencies.
3. Neighboring Zone – extend availability of off-duty Peers

4. Associated Agencies (Law Enforcement, non-mutual aid)- extend availability of off-duty. All participating agencies shall use the Incident Command System (ICS), in compliance with the National Incident Management System (NIMS), to manage personnel activated in accordance with this plan.

The designated peer support team will report to the peer support team leader. An assigned peer support team will report to the Agency Administrator, Incident Commander, or Staging Area as directed. Whenever possible, the personnel will be kept together and under the control of the Team Leader. The team may split under the direction of the Team Leader and the Assistant Team Leader. The Peer Support system understands that critical incident triggers are different for everyone. There will be no self-dispatch of Peer Supporters.

## **PIERCE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

### **Notification of Duty Officer**

Pierce County Department of Emergency Management Duty Officer shall be notified whenever resources are requested under this plan and will obtain a Mission Number from State Emergency Management for the duration of peer support conduct.

The Pierce County Duty Officer is designated to provide coordination and support for inter-agency needs during active operations and can obtain resources which are outside those an agency normally has available.

Examples of support would include, but not be limited to, coordination of on-scene support needs such as feeding and hydration, coordination with the media for release of public information, additional notifications, locating special resources, and requests for other external assets.

When requests are made, unless arrangements are made otherwise, it shall be the policy that the requesting agency cover costs associated with requested resources; with the exception that Peer Support personnel are provided to the requesting agency at no-charge.

## **TRAINING REQUIREMENTS**

The major emphasis of training will focus on skill development for conducting peer assistance. Minimum training requirements will be met before a Peer Supporter is put on the countywide Peer Support callout list. Initial training will consist of successful completion of courses from the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc. (ICISF) Academy of Crisis Intervention, International Association of Firefighters (IAFF), or equivalent courses as approved by the Peer Support Oversight Board:

1. *Assisting Individuals in Crisis*
2. *Assisting Groups in Crisis*
3. *Suicide, Prevention, and Intervention*

Continuing education is necessary to enhance problem-solving skills, provide a venue for group sharing, and allow for an exchange of experiences among program participants. Continuing education will be required annually. CE hours may be anything from ICISF (either in-person or online), attending a conference from 1<sup>st</sup> Responder Conferences (<https://1stresponderconferences.org/>) or any other provider of resiliency training and or courses approved by the Peer Support Agency Lead or Oversight Board. Qualifying CE can range from one (1) to unlimited hours in duration and must be submitted with proof of attendance—whether

certificate of attendance, completion, or participation by the administering agency or Agency Lead. CE Hours will be tracked and submitted to the Agency Lead, who will in turn submit to the Oversight Board Administrative Representative for recordkeeping. Each agency will also be responsible for their recordkeeping. Member records for the countywide team will be housed at DEM with Peer Support member files.

Attending regular training will help Peer Supporters maintain their skills and give opportunity to hear about what other Peers Supporters are doing.

### **Training Recommendations**

It is recommended Team Leaders for countywide deployment seek to successfully complete the following two-day courses as a function of the countywide Team Leader position:

- ✚ [Advanced Assisting Individuals in Crisis](#)
- ✚ [Advanced Group Crisis Intervention](#)
- ✚ [Line of Duty Death: Preparing the Best for the Worst](#)
- ✚ [TEAM: Team Evolution and Management](#)
- ✚ [Strategic Response to Crisis](#)

These courses will be advertised and promoted when offered both locally and or nationally, along with funding source opportunities as they become available.

There are no “trainee” assignments per se for Peer Supporters. The Team Leader will take each member’s experience level into account when making assignments and work to ensure members are successful in their positions. After no more than two years, peer support personnel are encouraged to attend the Advanced Training Courses to enhance their effectiveness.

## **SUPPORT FOR MEMBERS**

Just as it is the responsibility of the Peer Support Team to meet the needs of those they serve in the field, it is also the responsibility of the Peer Support Team itself to take care of its own members after a response.

Peer Supporters are not immune to the effects of direct contact with highly stressful events or from dealing with people who have raw human emotions. The Peer Support Team Leader must be aware of the potential impact that their roles as peer supporters and team leaders can have on them personally. Peer Support Team members should practice the same techniques that they teach with regard to handling stress.

The very factors that make someone a good Peer Supporter can also make them vulnerable. The following are ways to support the Peer Supporters:

- Peers will be contacted by another Peer Supporter after they participate in a defusing or formal group work. The team leader for each incident is responsible for ensuring each responder on their team has been contacted post incident. This must be documented and reported to the Zone Coordinator.
- Peer Supporters may voluntarily withdraw from participation at any time or ask to be placed in an "inactive" status for no longer than one year. They are, however, required to notify the Agency Lead, who will notify the Oversight Board.
- After initial training, new Peers can be partnered with an experienced Peer for group

interactions.

## Peer Support Website

The pages on Pierce County Emergency Management website [insert site] are divided by department, however there may be a Peer Support Team Member with whom you'd like to talk from a different department. There are no restrictions, so browse and contact any of the team members anonymously. Peer Support members know when to make a referral to a trusted Mental Healthcare Provider or other resources as needed. They are not therapists but are **trained peer counselors** who are covered by confidentiality and privileged communication per RCW 5.60.060. What you share with them stays with them. Peer support team members can be contacted directly and anonymously at any time.

First responders experience many challenges such as high cardiac, cancer, and stress related issues. A comprehensive Health and Wellness website can be found at <https://www.skcftc.com/health-and-wellness.html> These topics are intended to assist our members to experience injury free careers and long and enjoyable retirements. We invite you to navigate through these topics to provide direction for yourself and your brothers and sisters. There is no log-in and your visit to this site is completely confidential.

## PRIVACY, CONFIDENTIALITY, AND RECORDKEEPING

All Peer Support personnel are required to maintain the highest levels of trustworthiness and confidentiality to the Peer Support programmatic guidelines. Those impacted by a traumatic/critical incident may find it difficult to open up and express themselves to those they do not trust, respect, or find credible. All program members must work to maintain themselves worthy of trust, both on assignment and in their professional day-to-day jobs. Peers who are trustworthy and demonstrate integrity and respect in what they do are the key element to assisting individuals in crisis.

Peer Support Team members are protected under state law. A peer supporter is privileged and not subject to disclosure in a judicial or administrative proceeding if the communication occurs during a peer support session whereas both parties are aware the peer is acting as a peer, and the person is recognized by the department as a peer.

### **RCW [5.60.060](#) - Who Is Disqualified—Privileged Communications.**

The policy of Tacoma-Pierce County Peer Support Program is to maintain confidentiality within the guidelines addressed below. Washington State RCW 5.60.060 protects communication with a Peer Support Group Counselor as confidential under the law, with some exceptions. This is the same type of privilege legally afforded to other privileged communications such as attorney-client, and doctor-patient communications. The law makes the communication privileged and not subject to disclosure in a judicial or administrative proceeding **IF**:

- The communication occurs during a peer support counseling session (meaning both parties are aware that the Peer Supporter is acting in his/her capacity as a PeerSupporter), and
- The communication is with a person who has been **designated and trained** as a Peer Support Group Counselor (Oversight Board must have the Peer Support Group Counselor on the current list of designated Peer Support Group Counselors for countywide response).
- For purposes of this program, Tacoma-Pierce County Peer Support Group Counselors will be

referred to as Peer Supporters.

### EXCEPTIONS to Privileged Communications Law

The Peer Support protection of confidentiality does NOT apply to:

- Any threat of suicide or homicide made by a participant in a peer support counseling session, or any information conveyed in a peer support counseling session relating to a threat of suicide or homicide;
  - *If the Peer Supporter believes that the employee is an **immediate danger to themselves or others**, the Peer Supporter will immediately transport or arrange **reliable** transportation to the nearest emergency room for further evaluation and treatment*
- Any admission of criminal conduct that constitutes illegal activity;
- Any information relating to abuse of children (Child Protective Services) or of the elderly (Adult Protective Services), or other information that is required to be reported by law

It is the policy of the Peer Support Program to inform the person, prior to discussion, of the limitations and exceptions regarding the confidentiality of the information revealed. In those cases where a question or any question regarding confidentiality arises, the Peer Supporter must immediately contact the individual agency's established referral program for their in-house Clinical Director, who will determine what steps should be taken. In the event the agency doesn't have a Clinical Director, utilize the Code4NW resources for clinical consult, **Appendix K**.

## **INVESTIGATIONS**

### **Critical Incident or Line-Of-Duty-Death**

It is important to carefully coordinate directly with a variety of investigation teams assigned after a critical incident or line-of-duty death. The Peer Support Team reports to the Agency Administrator and is a separate entity from any investigation process. The Peer Support Team Leader and the Serious Accident Investigation Team Leader will coordinate sequencing for interviews but remain completely separate. If Peer Support services are requested for the investigation team, another Peer Support Group will be mobilized so that there is no potential for conflict of interest or confidentiality issues.

### **Disciplinary**

It may occur that a peer supporter is assisting an individual who is or becomes the subject of a disciplinary investigation. The peer supporter should be guided by the confidentiality policy of the peer support program. The role of the peer supporter is to help the member understand their feelings (rather than obtaining details) about the investigation or situation. The peer support program is an emotionally based and supportive program designed to help people cope with their feelings. The peer supporter's role is to help the member find constructive ways to deal with the stress they may face during the process. If peer supporters have any questions or concerns regarding these situations, they should consult with the Agency Lead and or Oversight Board for guidelines and assistance.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

There may be times when conflicts of interest may arise; for example, when the Peer Supporter has:

- Played a significant role in the event.
- Direct command or supervisory authority over any employee involved in the event.
- Close friends affected by the incident.
- Worked with the affected group on a regular basis.
- The potential to become involved as any part of any internal investigative body.
- A close relative of any affected employee.

When a potential conflict exists amongst the available team members, the Zone Coordinator or Team Leader should consider if the peer supporter would be effective if the preceding conditions exist and structure their response teams accordingly to avoid the potential conflict of interest. Individuals may also remove themselves should the preceding conditions exist.

### **DUAL RELATIONSHIPS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS AND OR CLINICAL DIRECTORS (WAC 246-924-357)**

The psychologist shall not undertake or continue a professional relationship with a client when the objectivity or competency of the psychologist is impaired because of the psychologist's present or previous familial, social, sexual, emotional, financial, supervisory, political, administrative, or legal relationship with the client or a person associated with or related to the client. When such relationship impairs objectivity, the psychologist shall terminate the professional relationship with adequate notice and in an appropriate manner; and shall assist the client in obtaining services from another professional.

### **RECORDKEEPING**

Peer Supporters need to maintain an accurate set of records of their activities. Logs should be maintained on everything that team members do; however, information relating to individual contact should protect the confidentiality of the individual(s). A "Peer Support Activity Log" is located in **Appendix F**.

Records that need to be maintained (without names) include: one-on-one contacts, group interventions, and anything that calls on the resources and knowledge of the Peer Supporter role. Copies of all records will be submitted to the Agency Lead and to be turned into the Oversight Board quarterly. These records will be housed with Pierce County Emergency Management.

For deployments, the Team Leader is to collect only statistical information on the intervention, its location, and or recommendations. The Team Leader shall submit a post-deployment summary report to the Zone Coordinator as soon as possible after each response. This final report shall include an overview of the response, after action review items, documentation of follow up with team members and recommendations for improvement. These reports will not contain any personal or confidential information and will be used only for the purposes of program administration, evaluation, and oversight.

## **PROGRESSIVE DISCIPLINE AND GROUNDS FOR REMOVAL FROM THE PEER SUPPORT TEAM**

- a. A Peer Support Team Member who fails to fulfill any of the responsibilities of a Peer Support Team Member or breaches the Code of Conduct pact (provided upon acceptance) may be removed from the Program upon the authorization of the Oversight Board.

- b. Failure of the Peer Support Team Member to maintain continuing education hours: one Peer Support-related course annually, providing certificate documenting attendance
- c. The integrity of the Program is essential to its effectiveness. Any breach of confidentiality or other inappropriate activity by Peer Support Team Member shall be sufficient cause for that individual to be removed from the Program. Team Leaders are responsible for their teams on deployments, completing the Activity Report and reporting such inappropriate activity to the Oversight Board and Agency Lead if necessary. If a Team Leader's behavior is in question, a Team Member may report the behavior in writing to the Zone Coordinator. There will be zero tolerance for confidentiality breaches.
- d. Withdrawal of employer endorsement for any reason—either by notice from the employer or discovery during the annual membership review period.
- e. Peer Support Team Member may resign from the Program by notifying the Agency Lead in writing, who will review and forward the resignation to the Oversight Board.