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Psychology on Fire

Psychology in the fire service isn't just about mental health.

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Professional psychology has been recognized in law enforcement since the late 1960's and 1970's during the development of formal hostage negotiation strategies. Thereafter, psychologists have been involved in police assessment, intervention, operations, and consultation. In 2013, the American Psychological Association recognized police psychology as a specialized discipline.

The professional psychological literature within the fire service is sparse and generally has been limited to intervention services. The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's Life Safety Initiative 13 states, "Firefighters and their families must have access to counseling and psychological support." Beyond the intervention, there are many other ways psychologists can assist with the performance, health, and safety of the firefighters

and departments they serve. Although not an exhaustive list, these are some of the ways psychologists can be involved in these processes.

- Assessment
 - Bifurcated Pre-employment Evaluations
 - What qualities would you prefer to see in applicants? (pre-conditional offer of employment)
 - What qualities should be ruled out in applicants? (post-conditional offer of employment)
 - Fitness for Duty Evaluations
 - In the event a firefighter is exhibiting problematic behaviors on the job, these evaluations can determine whether or not the individual is a risk to public safety.
 - These are routinely conducted with officer populations.
 - Annual Confidential Behavioral Health Assessment
 - Closer look at the normal life stress factors that contribute to illness as well as the current protective factors an individual has in place.
- Intervention
 - Post Critical Incident Services
 - Certain incidents can prompt activation of services
 - Police officers are typically provided these services individually although a group format may also be included.
 - Peer Support Services
 - Psychologists can assist with the screening of program applicants, management of the program, as well as the creation of ongoing team trainings.
 - Mental Health Treatment: EMDR, CBT, etc.
 - Treatment can be conducted by a mental health professional at the masters level (not limited to doctoral level providers.)
 - Transition Services

- During critical periods of employment (retirement, injury, etc), firefighters can be offered trainings about the psychological factors that may influence them as well a given the option to engage in support services.
- Operations
 - Formal Training Regarding the Psychological Factors of Peak Performance at the Academy and During In Service Trainings
 - After Action Review to Determine Human Factors that Contribute to Performance and/ Safety
 - Psychological Autopsies to Determine Psychological/Occupational Factors that Contribute to Suicide and or Other Types of Firefighter Death
- Consultations
 - Hiring Processes: Attracting and Maintaining a Diverse Workforce
 - Implicit Bias Training: Assessment, Trainings, Effectiveness of Program Goals
 - Working Effectively with Mental Illness in the Community
 - Test the Effectiveness of Behavioral Health Programs through Continuous Quality Improvement

Although this is not the way we have “always done it.” There is great opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration to empower firefighters, fire departments, and assist clinicians to be more effective working with this population.

Note: Most psychologists work in one of the four domains.

References

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