

PROMOTING Behavioral Health



Columbus Local 67: Setting the Standard for Mental Health Care

The stigma surrounding behavioral health in the fire service is slowly lifting as affiliates and their fire departments increasingly are recognizing and addressing the need for support and services for members struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, addiction, depression and other mental health conditions.

Columbus, OH Local 67 has been a leader in improving behavioral health care for more than 30 years. Today, these efforts have expanded into a comprehensive and effective program that includes a robust peer support system, partnerships with health care providers and access to the IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery.

When a tragic line-of-duty death rocked Columbus Local 67 more than 30 years ago, the only recourse for many members, says Local 67 President Mark Siemer, was to look at the bottom of a bottle for answers. “Sometimes, it took more than one bottle,” he says. At the time, Siemer was a young recruit at the fire academy. Two years later, after a brush with death during a house fire, Siemer recognized the need for helping members deal with the dangerous realities and traumatic challenges of the job.

Instead of allowing emotions to fester, after-incident support became an opportunity for members to address trauma and helped nurture a culture of understanding. “Having conversations and opening up about emotional and mental well-being doesn’t mean there is something wrong with you,” says Siemer.

One of the first affiliates to form a peer support group, Columbus Local 67 — which was also among the first to participate in the IAFF Peer Support Training program in 2017 (see box) through the Ohio Association of Professional Fire Fighters — now has more than 100 peer support members who help fellow fire fighters work through their behavioral health issues. When calls affect members, providing support can help open a dialogue about issues and feelings that might otherwise go unrecognized and serve as a reminder of the available resources, including treatment options, to address trauma in a preventative and proactive approach to mental health.

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— Local 67 President Mark Siemer



Columbus Assistant Chief Jeff Happ, EAP Liaison Lisa Callander and Local 67 Vice President Ryan Sweetman meet to discuss pathways to better ensure treatments for Local 67 members.

The city’s employee assistance program (EAP) is also a tremendous resource. EAP services are available to offer guidance and next steps, no matter what the concern. If a member experiences a challenging call, the EAP can quickly provide services to help work through his/her experiences. If a fire fighter has noticed emotional or behavioral changes related to on-the-job trauma, the EAP can put him/her in contact with peer support specialists or a specialty program. Sessions are private, individualized and completely confidential.

Peer Support

Research shows that peer support programs are an effective method for providing support. The IAFF Peer Support Training program, initiated in 2016, teaches members about common behavioral health problems that impact members in the fire service, how to provide one-on-one peer support and how to develop or enhance a peer support program.

The program was designed to develop a cadre of peers who can identify with the professional struggles fire fighters and paramedics face following traumatic events and to connect distressed members to appropriate services when needed.

Peer support helps fire fighters get confidential support from other IAFF members who are trained to provide assistance and build trust.

After completing the IAFF training, trained peers have the knowledge and skills to provide support to their fellow fire fighters, serve as a bridge to behavioral health services and community resources and help build or enhance other peer support programs.

The training includes a two-hour online behavioral health awareness course, which is a prerequisite for the two-day onsite training. Each training session typically accommodates 30 students. Additional courses tied to peer support are under development, including a resiliency course, a recovery mentor course, a disaster response course and a clinician course.

For more information, contact the IAFF Health and Safety Department at (202) 737-8484. ■

As an extension of its emphasis on behavioral health, the EAP partners with the IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery. Representatives from the EAP spent two days at the Center of Excellence and right away understood that this facility — exclusively for IAFF members — needed to be part of Local 67's behavioral health program. To date, four Local 67 members have received treatment at the Center for conditions including post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety that can build over the course of a career.

The EAP helps members identify need for treatment at the Center of Excellence and provides the resources to get it — whether by arranging transportation to the facility in Upper Marlboro, Maryland,

accommodating leave or confidentially arranging treatment.

“Local 67 has a strong working relationship with the fire administration and EAP,” says Local 67 Vice President Ryan Sweetman. “Without this collaborative effort, we would be behind the eight-ball when it comes to getting needed services to our members.”

Simply knowing about the resources available can help members understand that they aren't alone and encourage them to seek life-changing assistance when necessary.

By providing a comprehensive and progressive behavioral health program, Columbus Local 67 is setting a standard for mental health care that can help transform members, their families and communities. ■

About the Center of Excellence

The IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery is a one-of-a-kind treatment facility specializing in the behavioral health needs of IAFF members. More than 900 IAFF members struggling with addiction, post-traumatic stress, complicated grief and other related behavioral health challenges have already come to the Center and taken the first steps toward recovery.

The Center provides a safe haven for members to talk with other brothers and sisters who have faced or overcome similar challenges. Created through an innovative partnership with Advanced Recovery Systems (ARS), the IAFF Center of Excellence is a flagship recovery center exclusively for IAFF members.

Treatment at the IAFF Center of Excellence uses cognitive processing therapy (CPT), an evidence-based

psychotherapeutic treatment that is supported by research and is demonstrated to be effective in reducing symptoms of post-traumatic stress. The treatment team uses a multidisciplinary approach — combining the expertise of doctors, nurses and clinicians from different disciplines — so the whole person is treated, not just the addiction or co-occurring disorder.

Located just outside Washington, DC, in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, the 15-acre facility includes a pool, basketball court, gym and comfortable residential accommodations for up to 64 clients.

Learn more at www.iaffrecoverycenter.com or call (855) 900-8437. ■



IAFF Center of Excellence for
Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery

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