

IAFF Center of Excellence — taking care of members with specialized treatment, compassion and, yes, even food

For two years, the IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery has been providing quality care for IAFF members struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, addiction, depression, anxiety and other behavioral health conditions.

Developed through a partnership with Advanced Recovery Systems (ARS) — a leader in behavioral healthcare management and addiction treatment — the Center of Excellence is the first dually licensed mental health and addiction treatment center exclusively for IAFF members.

Surrounded by other fire fighters, members treated at the Center form an instant bond, forged on a mutual sacrifice and understanding of life in the fire service. But they also form relationships with doctors, clinicians and other dedicated staff who help with recovery.

We talked to the executive director, medical director and food director for their perspective on helping the fire fighters and paramedics who put their lives on the line every day helping others.

Dr. Abby Morris — Medical Director and Psychiatrist

A graduate of Georgetown University School of Medicine, Dr. Abby Morris is a board-certified psychiatrist with diverse experience in community mental health, substance abuse, inpatient and private practice settings. She is responsible for all inpatient care, developing the individualized plan of care for each member throughout their stay at the Center.

FFQ: What is unique about working with fire fighters as a population?

Morris: Fire fighters are intensely caring human beings, but they are also intensely private in a lot of ways. They are the caregivers; they don't want to have care. It makes it difficult sometimes to break down the barriers to have a really open, raw conversation.

However, I think members step up to the challenge beautifully because they are with other fire fighters. When they hear other members talking about what they have experienced, there is an immediate sense of acceptance and understanding.

FFQ: For members who have received treatment elsewhere, what are the benefits of the Center of Excellence being exclusively for IAFF members?



Morris: Most of our fire fighters have probably tried speaking with someone in their EAP, maybe had an outpatient therapist, or tried medications. Typically, they've done that for a period of time without much effectiveness. They notice they are having trouble with sleep, appetite, suicidal thoughts or even just thoughts of not wanting to *be*, even if they aren't going to do anything about it.

A lot of the time, fire fighters think they are doing okay or at least they think that they are projecting that they are doing okay. There is often a lot of social isolation that happens before fire fighters come to the Center. Changes in their marriage, their relationships and ability to function tells them it's time to get help. If somebody is in the right stage of change to be able to benefit from the residential treatment — whether they were pushed into that stage of change or decided to come here in that state of change doesn't really matter.

FFQ: What message do you have for these brothers and sisters when they first walk in the door?

Morris: We try to avoid a cookie-cutter idea of treatment, so when someone asks us, "How long will I be here?" I can give them an average. It is not a 30-day program; it's not a 28-day program. We have an average length of stay of around 34 days, but some are able to go through that program more quickly; others who have had years and years of trauma may take longer. I like to tell people, "Come here and squeeze something out of every day. And if you get one thing out of every day for 30 days, I'll be happy."

FFQ: In your experience, how is the Center of Excellence different from other facilities?

"Fire fighters want to save the world. I think that is why it is so hard for them to be so damaged by something that they love. They want to love what they do again."

— Dr. Abby Morris





“This is a place where we care for you. Body, soul, mind. It’s time to put your fears aside.”

— Zachary Pope

Morris: We offer something that is very unique. We’re all fire fighter, everything fire fighter. Our kitchen looks like a firehouse kitchen. Our residences look like a station house. For some people that’s very familiar and it makes them very comfortable.

The level of immediate understanding and acceptance is also so important. We are asking people to delve into things that they may have tried to discuss with others or a therapist, trying to explain what it’s like to be a fire fighter. They don’t feel understood — not by their family, not by their community, not by therapists.

They come here and can feel comfortable talking about what they’ve been through because they know that the others here are going to get it. To hear another member say, “I had the same thing,” when they felt like they were the only ones does so much more than I can offer with any medicine.

FFQ: What do you appreciate most about working with fire fighters?

Morris: The gratitude. I’ve been in mental health for a long time and my patients often say thank you, but the way fire fighters express gratitude when they feel better is indescribable. They come in looking so broken and when they leave they have that sparkle.

I think gratitude goes a long way in mental health recovery. Having realistic expectations for yourself, others and the world is a big part of feeling good and having hope and having faith. When someone feels good and can express gratitude, I think that is a huge sign of wellness.

One of the things I love about working with fire fighters is that when they come here for treatment for the right reasons — when they want to be here, when they want help — they work harder at getting well than most patients that I have ever worked with. Fire fighters want

to save the world. I think that is why it is so hard for them to be so damaged by something that they love. They want to love what they do again.

FFQ: How do you prepare a fire fighter to go back home?

Morris: To get people from here — in this very caring, calm, quiet environment — to going home is probably the most complicated part. Here there is no bell stress, you sleep better, it’s quiet at night. You don’t have the spouse and the kids and your bills. It’s easier to be well here. It’s easier to be sober here.

When you go home, you re-experience triggers, trauma, stress. I describe what we do as building the foundation for a new home. I tell people when they come here that we are helping them pour that foundation and then they have to go home and build the rest.

They come here so they can focus on themselves, so they can be better husbands, wives, partners, parents, sons, daughters, community members. We work to develop resilience for what they’ll be facing when they go home. They came here to take care of themselves, so they can take care of others.

This is a good beginning. Some, when they leave, want to be advocates. They want to go home and say, “I had PTSD and you do, too, and you need help.” They want to share what they’ve learned. It makes it meaningful for them.

Zachary Pope — Food Director

After attending Baltimore International Culinary College, Zachary Pope served as a chef at many of the Washington, DC, area’s finest restaurants and spent 10 years running a high-end catering company, Roundz Catering.

FFQ: Why is food important at the Center of Excellence?

Pope: Nutrition is huge. There is a cleansing that goes on when members first get here that includes removing toxins and providing good, clean food — which they may not have had for a while. They may have difficulty eating much at first, but by the end of their stay, they’re devouring everything and enjoying everything. Sitting down at a table around a good meal is therapeutic in and of itself.

FFQ: How is the food you cook at the Center different from other treatment facilities?

Pope: This is not institutional food. Fire fighters are cooks. They are not strangers to the kitchen, which means I have to be on my game because they know what good food is. Today’s lunch was Asian chicken on white rice with stir fried vegetables and sesame sauce. Dinner was roast beef, mashed potatoes and veggies. It’s all homemade.



FFQ: How do you connect with the members here?

Pope: I never know who is here for what, and that’s really none of my business. But being in recovery myself and remembering my own transformation, I try to be part of that transformation. Whether it’s just making eye contact and handing them food and saying, “enjoy” or listening when they say, “Hey, can we order more Choco Tacos?” My job is to have

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that transformation start from the inside out, and nutrition or what they eat is such a big part of that.

FFQ: Why is this job important to you, personally?

Pope: I am so grateful for this job because I, myself, am in recovery, so I identify with these fire fighters. I've been them. I've been on their side. And there was no chef like me cooking — I have never been to an inpatient place that serves the food that I do, and I think that is special and deserving of this group.

It is not just a job for me. It is service. And who better to serve than fire fighters? They have helped hundreds of thousands of people.

I have never had a reason to put on the IAFF logo, and when I was handed these jackets, it reminded me what an important job I have. I wear it with pride and I wear it with a great sense of responsibility because I care about the people who come through here.

FFQ: What would you say to someone who is on the fence about coming here?

Pope: I've never been excited to go inpatient, that's human. But this is a place where we care for you. Body, soul, mind. It's time to put your fears aside. From the meals to the clinical staff — all the components that make this place special — you are going to be well taken care of.

Dr. Christopher Mosunic — Executive Director

Dr. Chris Mosunic is an experienced leader in healthcare administration, specializing in integrated behavioral health. He completed his undergraduate studies at Bucknell University and went on to pursue a Master of Science in Nutritional Biochemistry from Tufts University, a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from Vanderbilt University and a Master's in Business Administration from Yale University.

FFQ: IAFF members show up at the Center feeling physically and spiritually broken. What do you tell these brothers and sisters when they first walk in the door?

Mosunic: You are supposed to feel uncomfortable. You are supposed to feel down.



“Fire fighters here have trauma levels that would knock most people off their feet.”

— Dr. Christopher Mosunic

That is all part of the process. And to be able to have our help, and your brothers' and sisters' help, it is going to get better. It always does.

FFQ: How is the atmosphere at the Center of Excellence different from others?

Mosunic: The fire fighter culture is not an easy culture to understand completely. It's like no other setting I've ever worked in. It's a welcoming culture.

When fire fighters come here, it's like they get a head start on treatment. They connect so quickly with their peers compared to other inpatient venues. I've never seen anything like it in my life.

Fire fighters here have trauma levels that would knock most people off their feet and yet they are comfortable talking about things that make most of us weak in the knees.

Members have an opportunity here that they can't get anywhere else — they are in treatment with fellow fire fighters and have a bond that allows that treatment to be so much more effective than anywhere else.

FFQ: How do you know someone is getting better?

Mosunic: A lot of fire fighters wear their emotions on their sleeves — high anxiety, worry on their face, depression, sadness. Then they start teasing — something that is very unique to the fire fighter culture. If they're feeling good, they start teasing each other. I know I'm an okay guy with a fire fighter if they start teasing me. If they stop, I know I did something wrong.

FFQ: What is the Renewal Ceremony and why is it important?

Mosunic: From a ceremonial standpoint, it signifies the completion of treatment at the Center and the continuation of recovery when they get home. From a practical standpoint, the Renewal Ceremony is about the other fire fighters telling the fire fighter who is graduating how much they love them. It's amazing. Being able to have that is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

It's very powerful and very emotional. A lot of the guys wear sunglasses because they don't want to be caught crying. We joke about it after when the sunglasses are off. ■



**IAFF Center of Excellence for
Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery**

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