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COMPETITIVE DIVISION - GRADUATE STUDENT

Crisis Response Dog Intervention of Firefighters with PTSD/I

Post-traumatic stress disorder/injury (PTSD/I) continues to afflict firefighters at a rate of nearly 20%, with drug/alcohol addiction and suicide being the preferred response to the disorder/injury. Veteran rates of PTSD/I are identical to those of firefighters, and data has shown positive therapeutic relationships between therapy dogs and veterans. The literature reveals no research has been completed on utilizing therapy or crisis response dogs to treat the symptoms of PTSD/I in firefighters. The project will consist of creating and implementing therapy and crisis response dog teams within Riverside County (California) Fire Department.

Presentation Theme

Firefighters will continually respond to incidents of all sizes. The response phase of emergency management is the largest part of a firefighter's job. It is what they train to do, day in and day out. Every day they respond to medical aids, traumatic injuries, motor vehicle collisions, and fires both structural and wildland. The continuous stress of the calls, sleep deprivation, and thoughts of old calls or traumatic incidents will continue to stay at the front of the brain, unable to be processed away in long-term memory. This, in turn, can create adaptive or maladaptive behaviors. Those who adapt build resiliency against those traumatic calls or call. Those who cannot adapt may adopt a maladaptive behavior such as drugs or alcohol to deal with the stress.

The first part of the implementation of therapy or crisis response dogs is in this phase of response. The dog teams will be brought to the scene of the incident, staged out of the way of those working but set up near a rehabilitation station, Incident Command Post, or base camps. The second part of the implementation of therapy or crisis response dogs is in the phase of recovery. During the recovery phase of the incident, the dog teams will continue to have a strong presence while communities are being rebuilt and allowing the firefighters to have a sense of “normalcy” at base camp while they continue to help others put their lives back together. During the mitigation and preparation phase, the dog teams will establish strong bonds and relationships with the firefighters, building trust will be put to the test during the next incident.

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