

First Responders: Forgotten Sufferers

Mental Health

The military provides mental health screening for recruits before they are deployed, while they are in the field, and when they return, because post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues are common among war veterans. Some states' workers' compensation also offers coverage for work-related mental health claims. However, first responders to a natural or man-made disaster are composed of mostly volunteers and are not guaranteed a safety net for resultant mental health problems even though studies show that first responders experience elevated rates of depression, stress disorders and PTSD long after the disaster. According to the article "Protecting the Mental Health of First Responders" published in the Journal of Law, Medicine and Ethics, while trained first responders are at slightly lower risk, most training programs do not explicitly include content regarding psychological self-aid. The article points out that first responders should have access to mental health screenings during and after emergencies made available by the law. Currently, several states have adopted the Model State Emergency Health Powers Act that allows for states to establish mental health screening programs for first responders.

9/11 First Responders

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health established the first and only long-term mental health screening program for the first responders to the September 11 attacks. The program, called the World Trade Center Medical Monitoring and Treatment Program, offers free yearly screenings and treatment for both physical and mental issues such as PTSD, depression, and substance abuse in clinics in New York and New Jersey. The program has treated over 6,000 first responders since the September 11 disaster and has been more than well received. However, mental illnesses are not the only cracks through which first responders may slip.

In early 2011, President Obama signed the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act into law after a Republican filibuster and much debate. The act includes \$1.5 billion for treatment of breathing disorders and mental health problems and \$2.8 billion in compensation to Ground Zero first responders, volunteers, morgue employees, as well as people who lived or worked near Ground Zero. Last month, the federal government evoked anger from the public by excluding cancer from the list of 9/11 related health issues covered by the James Zadroga Act. In response, the federal government said that another review looking at cancer will be released next year.

Despite the publicity aroused by this legislation, it took ten years to pass an act to treat the respiratory problems our heroes from 9/11 suffered for their contributions.

Final Concerns

Many regions across the United States suffer shortages in healthcare providers, and the Journal of Law, Medicine and Ethics article highlights an issue of whether or not first responders should receive priority over resources to reward them for their essential sacrifices and to enable them to continue to help others. While the supply of health

professionals is a separate ethical issue that needs to be addressed by other policies, the question at hand remains whether or not the federal government and states should enact permanent legal solutions to provide for first responders' mental and physical health. Doing so would only improve the country's emergency preparedness and give the first responders the care that they deserve.