
Mental Health & Wildland Firefighters

Michael Ruddock, Policy Manager, Healthy Air and Water Colorado

Melissa Lineberger, Chief of Staff, Division of Fire Prevention and Control



A
The Atlantic

HEALTH

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Wildland firefighters are risking their mental

Burning out: the silent crisis spreading among wildland firefighters

Crisis For Those Battling Them

February 26, 2021 · 5:00 AM ET



NATHAN ROTT



Tough Fire Season Takes Toll on Firefighters' Mental Health

A Disturbing Trend

- Firefighters are more likely to die from suicide than in the line of duty
 - Ruderman Family Foundation, 2018
- Wildland firefighters at higher risk of suicide than urban counterparts
 - Stanley, Hom, Gai, Joiner, 2018
- Firefighters face higher odds of experiencing depression, stress, PTSD, and suicide attempts/suicidal thoughts than the general public
 - Stanley, Boffa, Hom, Kimbrel & Joiner, 2017



Data is Scarce - Stories are Plenty

“Even your 30 year veterans, they’re being brought to their knees by the stuff we’re seeing that’s atypical in our careers”

“Climate change is completely obliterating all the parameters that they used to live within”

“I lived in denial, then fear, then self medicated”

“It was hard to find joy in general. It’s hard for that not to start to become your own internal personal identity. It’s exhausting”

Wildland AND Structural Firefighters

Fire Protection District

Initial Attack
Exceeds Capabilities
Requests County Assistance

County Sheriff

Required to Take Fire if
Local Capability
Exceeded
Exceeds County
Capabilities
Requests State Assistance

State Responsibility

Performs Analysis to
Determine if Eligible
If Eligible, State Assumes
Cost with Ongoing
Involvement from Local
and County Partners
State pays with EFF,
Resource Mob, or
Executive Order (DEF)





Unique Challenges Firefighters Face

- Traffic Incidents and Medical Calls with Injured Victims
 - Seasonal Wildland Firefighters Employment Ending (losing support network, busy to cold turkey)
 - Compounding Experiences with Little Time to Process
 - Victim Interactions (e.g. Smokey Top 2 Fire, Remnants of Burned Down Homes)
 - Time Away from Home and Family (2 Week Fire Assignments)
-



Current Efforts and Resources

- Peer Support Program
 - Six Counseling Sessions with Professional Trained in First Responder Mental Health
 - Colorado State Employee Assistance Program
 - Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Grant (for Local Fire Agencies)
 - Responder Strong, Foundation 1023 (Nonprofits dedicated to Firefighter Mental Health)
-

Efforts Elsewhere - Still a Long Way to Go

- CAL Fire
- Federal Agencies
 - Nat'l Coordinating Group Mental Health Subcommittee
 - BLM informal suicide tracking
- Oregon Dept. of Forestry
- Colorado