



# PROFESSIONAL FIRE FIGHTERS

O F N E W H A M P S H I R E

**House Executive and  
Administrative Departments Committee  
New Hampshire State House  
107 N. Main Street  
Concord, NH 03301**

**RE: Testimony in support of SB423, reestablishing the commission to study the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder in first responders.**

Chair Layon and Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Brian Ryll and I serve as the President of the Professional Fire Fighters of New Hampshire. The Professional Fire Fighters of New Hampshire is a state association representing approximately 2,000 active and retired professional fire fighters and paramedics across the Granite State. As the preeminent fire fighter organization in New Hampshire, we advocate for the health and safety of the brave men and women that protect the citizens of this great state. In the fire service, we are routinely called to scenes of catastrophic incidents involving severe injuries, tragic loss of human life and property loss. It is well documented that the cumulative effects of these exposures may result in psychological injuries, or even suicide. It is because of this, that I urge the committee for its support of SB423.

In the fire service culture, we have long been expected to portray a tough guy image. The iconic scene of firefighters doing the hard physically demanding and dramatic work easily comes to mind. Often these images of strong, unbreakable fire fighters is contrary to what they are truly feeling inside. What is not seen is the human toll this job can take on us; the nightmares, post-traumatic stress, and depression leading to marital problems, substance abuse and changed behavior and personalities. However, these tough guy images have created some expectations within our ranks and created a stigma, that we can show no weakness and be unbreakable no matter how heavy the burdens we carry. Regardless of the most horrifying incidents that can be imagined that we have responded to, we must be ready for the next call.

According to the Journal of Occupational Health, approximately 20 percent of fire fighters and paramedics have PTSD.[1] Furthermore, according to a 2015 Florida State University study, nearly half of the fire fighters surveyed (46.8 percent) have thought about suicide, 19.2 percent had suicide plans and 15.5 percent had made suicide attempts.[2] In fact, those with PTSD are six times more likely to attempt suicide compared to demographically matched controls. Most fire fighters will recall with ease at least three horrific emergency calls or tragic events that replay over and over in their minds. Doctors at the Warriors Research Institute (WRI), a research arm of Baylor, Scott & White Health in Austin, Texas, have identified a clear link between traumatic situations experienced by fire fighters and paramedics and PTSD, similar to the chronic disorder experienced by veterans.[3]

Fire fighters and paramedics may believe that PTSD will go away on its own in time and, therefore, do not need treatment, or that seeking treatment will hurt their reputation or not remain

confidential. PTSD can have devastating consequences if untreated or misdiagnosed and is often associated with other mental health disorders, such as depression, substance abuse, family dysfunction, violence and increased risk of suicide.[4] It is important to seek help when experiencing high levels of stress, but too often, the stigma associated with needing help prevents many in the fire service from admitting something is wrong

Today, our fire and EMS services are moving past that deeply rooted culture and breaking the stigma so that we can take care of our members, and ensure that they live healthy lives and continue to provide the essential services that our citizens need. PTSD is a serious and chronic condition that can ruin the careers of fire fighters and paramedics, destroy families and jeopardize public and fire fighter safety.

The recruitment and retention of public employees is crucial to long-term stability for the taxpayers. And when we consider the modern day risks our fire fighters face, including cancer exposure, heart and lung disease, a novel coronavirus and PTSD, recruitment and retention becomes increasingly difficult. Additionally, costs associated with the proper screening, training, certification and recertification of dedicated individuals only increase when these employees do not maintain optimum mental health. By reducing turnover and guaranteeing adequate treatment for work-related injuries, the public achieves a greater return on their community investments. The commission to study post traumatic stress disorder in first responders did amazing work in the last session, however there is far more work to be done to determine how we can combat this occupational illness. As such, The Professional Fire Fighters of New Hampshire urge the committee's full support of SB423.

Respectfully Submitted,



Brian Ryll  
President  
Professional Fire Fighters of New Hampshire

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[1] Cornell, W., Beaton, R., Murphy, S., (1999). *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 4, 131-141

[2] *Career prevalence and correlates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors among firefighters* Joiner TE2, Stanley IH1, Hom MA2, Hagan CR2, *J Affect Disord.* November 15, 2015

[3] *Waco research facility takes aim at PTSD in first responders.* September 11 Families Association ([www.911families.org](http://www.911families.org)) July 29, 2015

[4] *United States Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD. Co-occurring conditions.* ([www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/co-occurring/index.asp](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/co-occurring/index.asp))