

**TUMWATER PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE**

**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL MEETING**

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**CONVENE:** 8:00 a.m.

**PRESENT:** Chair Leatta Dahlhoff and Councilmembers Peter Agabi and Angela Jefferson.

Staff: City Administrator Lisa Parks, City Attorney Karen Kirkpatrick, Finance Director Troy Niemeyer, Fire Chief Brian Hurley, Water Resources & Sustainability Director Dan Smith, Police Commander Jay Mason, Communications Manager Ann Cook, Paramedic Lieutenant Rian Winter, Police Detective Jennifer Kolb, and Police Administrative Supervisor Laura Wohl.

**CHANGES TO AGENDA:** There were no changes to the agenda.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES: PUBLIC HEALTH & SAFETY COMMITTEE, JUNE 13, 2023:**

**MOTION:** **Councilmember Jefferson moved, seconded by Councilmember Agabi, to approve the minutes of June 13, 2023 as presented. A voice vote approved the motion.**

**TUMWATER FIRE DEPARTMENT PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM:**

Fire Chief Hurley reported the briefing will address questions about efforts to support employee behavioral health. During his career, the fire department has employed different ways of support such as critical incident stress debriefings, chaplains, and local psychologist support. However, over the last several years through concerted efforts in Thurston County, local fire departments began pursuing the development of a peer support program. Most fire departments/fire districts in the county are participating in the program, as well as supporting efforts to help support employees. Employee wellness is important both for the employee and for the City because post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is considered a presumptive illness under the state worker's compensation statute.

At the Tumwater Fire Department, Paramedic Lieutenant Rian Winter serves as the lead for the department's Peer Support Team (PST).

Lieutenant Winter reported he serves two positions as the Peer Support Team Lead for Tumwater and as a member of the consortium of fire departments in the county with peer support teams.

Peer support is defined as firefighters helping firefighters. A peer support system is effective because of the amount of time fire employees spend together. Employees can identify and refer colleagues in distress to

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professional help. Fire employees experience similar situations and have an understanding of shared lived experiences. Members of the Peer Support Team are required to complete 24 hours of training in peer support skills and tools. The training offers continuing education opportunities, such as lunches, seminars, and conferences. The county peer support system enables a larger pool of peers. For example, the region experienced a five-fatality fire earlier in the year. The entire county responded to the incident with peers responding from nearly every department. Coordinators ensured a peer checked on crews as they returned to their respective stations.

Another aspect of the program is prevention rather than suppressing experiences. The program is able to offer the services of culturally competent therapists. Lieutenant Winter reported he is a member of the therapy clinicians screening team. Therapists contact the Fire Department regularly and screening team ensure therapists are trained in PTSD with some focus on first responders to ensure therapists fully understand or can offer help to firefighters in need, such as encouraging healthy habits and coping mechanisms.

Several employees have had to seek treatment and another benefit of the Peer Support Team is providing a balance program to assist families of fire employees to ensure the family's basic needs are met. The balance program is coordinated by a fire employee's spouse at Lacey Fire District 3. Globally, the program is designed to reduce barriers to mental health and changes the culture by accepting mental health as important and not a taboo subject that needs to be addressed.

Lieutenant Winter reviewed policies for implementing the department's Peer Support Team. The team is able to provide support for employees, volunteers, or family members by providing a website for the consortium with information on team members. If family members notice their spouse is experiencing difficulty, they have the ability to reach out to the consortium or with other team members to seek support. The process is confidential as required by state law. Information shared with the team or the consortium cannot be shared as all information is protected.

Councilmember Jefferson asked for a description of the peer support process for employees experiencing suicidal thoughts who may be abusing drugs. Lieutenant Winter said the peer process is typically initiated through a referral or the employee reaching out to a peer member. The next step is contacting the employee. If the employee shares information on suicidal thoughts, the peer member utilizes a flow sheet of next steps to assist the employee. Following assessment of the employee and the outcome, they could be a candidate for involuntary commitment. If the employee is experiencing substance abuse problems with accompanying thoughts of suicide, the employee is referred to a treatment clinic for

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treatment of substance abuse and PTSD mental health therapy.

Councilmember Jefferson cited how military members rarely seek psychological help because of the stigma and the fear of affecting their job. She questioned how the peer support process protects employees seeking assistance from any negative repercussions for seeking help.

Fire Chief Hurley replied that fire employees are fully supported to take advantage of the program. Fire management receives information on an employee who is under the care of a doctor with no specific information or reason. Fire personnel use their vacation time to address their physical and mental well-being until they are ready to return to work. The Fire Department receives a letter from the employee's physician indicating fitness to return to work. If the employee wishes to share information, they have the ability otherwise the process is always confidential.

Lieutenant Winter added that with respect to stigma, the peer support system is trying to eliminate stigma as the program encourages individuals to seek assistance. The City of Tumwater has a positive culture by encouraging employees to seek a therapist if they are experiencing problems. The goal is reducing barriers.

The Peer Support Team has been trained to offer individual support, on-scene support, critical incident management, and suicide callouts. For on-scene emergencies, the Battalion Chief or Officer acknowledges a triggering call. Involved units are pulled out of service and the Battalion Chief or Officers activate peer support. Activated Peer Support Team members arrive at the station to conduct a debriefing.

Lieutenant Winter reviewed RCWs on confidentiality. Key points of the Peer Support Program include a goal of at least two Peer Support Team members on each shift. Employees interested in joining the program should contact the Assistant Chief of Operations or the PST Coordinator. Peer support is confidential and members must be aware of triggers. It is important for everyone involved in an incident to participate in debriefing as well as decompression. Peer Support Team members follow up on all incidents.

Councilmember Jefferson asked about services for former or retired fire employees. Lieutenant Winter advised that no specific programs are in place at this time other than through personal contact or referrals. If informed of the need, the Peer Support Team contacts retired employees if they are experiencing problems or are struggling.

Fire Chief Hurley added that the department is striving to improve those particular situations. In August, the fire department is hosting a retiree event at the fire station as a way to establish a connection with the

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department's retirees. During Tumwater's Brewfest in August, the fire department has scheduled an event for retirees.

Chair Dahlhoff asked for feedback on one aspect of the program that the committee should share with the Council. Additionally, she asked staff to identify needs, such as additional support from the City. Fire Lieutenant Winter responded that the program was activated earlier in the year and the response members have received has been positive with employees expressing appreciation. As the coordinator, financial support is important. The program is releasing an application that will incur some costs. The team needs ongoing training to ensure members are successful peer support providers. The cities of Lacey and Olympia have added clinicians who are available to the membership as well as the Peer Support Team. At some point, the consortium should also have an assigned clinician.

Fire Chief Hurley acknowledged the costs associated with the PST, which to date has been accommodated within the existing budget. During the next biennium, the department may pursue some specific budget requests for the program. The program is important as it supports employees to be healthy and well. Employees unable to work affect the entire department because shifts must be covered. The program is an investment in personnel.

Chair Dahlhoff acknowledged the voluntary and confidential aspects of the program. She inquired about any opportunity to track outcomes when an employee is unable to work versus employees receiving support who are able to continue working. Fire Chief Hurley acknowledged that the information would be important. Lacey Fire District 3 has an assigned Health and Safety Chief who is able to oversee the program. The Fire District is working on efforts to quantify outcomes and impacts to overall staffing. The Tumwater Fire Department plans to undertake a similar process.

Chair Dahlhoff asked whether the police department has a similar program. Police Commander Mason explained that the departments are aligned in many aspects. Peer support is available in the police department. The department has a strong chaplain program and conducts critical incident debriefings, as well as offering a wellness program. The department recently launched an app sponsored by the Washington Association of Sheriffs & Police Chiefs (WASPC) and the state. He described the change in the environment since he began working in law enforcement. When he first began his career, employees did not receive assistance. Today, the departments recognize the impacts because of the type of work and the trauma police officers experience. One of the differences between police and fire is the mode of operation as fire personnel respond in teams while police officers respond individually.

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Another struggle by the department is how the department responds to calls with limited resources. The program is important; however, additional programs take time and resources and managing those additional resources within existing tight margins of the department has not been optimal. The department is not at a place it would like to be in terms of offering programs. However, it is important to consider ways to implement programs that are efficient and sustainable within existing resources. Lacey Fire District 3 has a dedicated Health and Safety Officer who has the time to focus on the program. It is important to recognize that the Tumwater Police Department has advanced in terms of support services but the department is not at the level administration would like it to be. The programs are valuable, especially today, as it is important for officers to maintain operational status and a balanced life resulting in employees who are dedicated to the City, the department, and to the community.

The committee thanked staff for providing an update on the program.

**ADDITIONAL  
ITEMS:**

Chair Dahlhoff reviewed upcoming agenda topics. The committee supported the Chair's suggestion to schedule a discussion on establishing a Tumwater youth council. Chair Dahlhoff encouraged members to consider other issues that have been addressed through their respective intergovernmental assignments that the committee should consider addressing in the future.

Councilmember Jefferson mentioned the new Tumwater School District Superintendent and Tumwater HOPES and the goal of reintroducing the program to the community. She forwarded an email to the Superintendent encouraging the re-introduction of the Tumwater HOPES program.

**ADJOURNMENT: With there being no further business, Chair Dahlhoff adjourned the meeting at 8:37 a.m.**

Prepared by Valerie L. Gow, Recording Secretary/President  
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