

# Building an Accessible and Sustainable Behavioral Health Program



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# What is Your Department's History?

- How many of you have experienced a suicide within your department?
- How did your department and personnel respond to this event?
- What type(s) of programs does your department have?



# Taj Wright

June 23, 1980 – September 6, 2017





- Following the death of Taj, there was a significant outpouring of love and compassion from within the department and the city.
- Soon after his funeral, members of the DFR Executive Team (Fire Chief and five Assistant Chiefs) met to discuss the suicide.
- At that time, this was the third firefighter suicide in the department in just the past five years (2012-2017).
- What do you think we discovered?



# First Responders and Suicide

“Police Officers and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty” (Nissim, Bill, Douglas, Johnson, and Folino, 2022, p.2).

“**Paramedics have the highest rate** of PTSD among first responders” (Drewitz-Chesney, 2012).

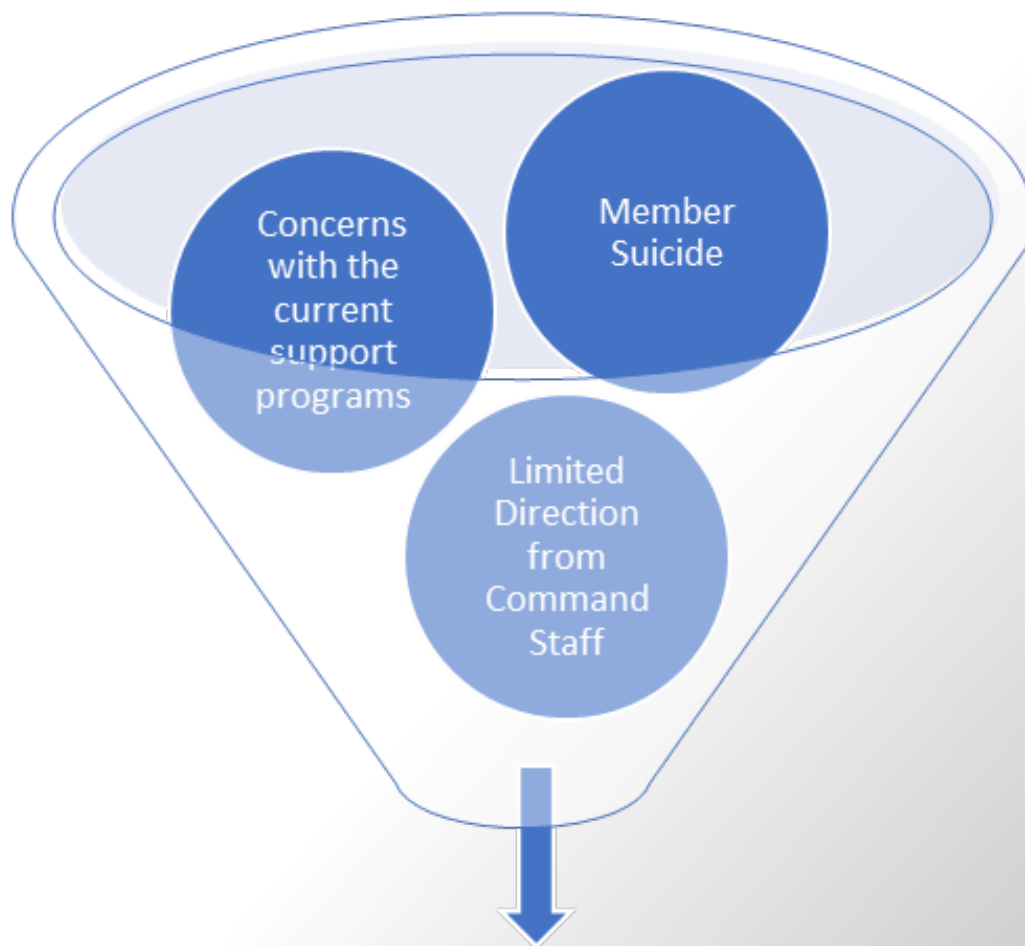
**More firefighters died by suicide** than in the line of duty in 2017 (Hayes, 2018).

Burnout Syndrome is also commonly experienced by first responders and is defined as a combination of “**overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment to the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment**” (Cigognani, 2009, p.450).



# DFR Began Holding Biweekly Meetings

- The Executive Team
- Representatives of the three firefighters' associations (IAFF Local 58, the Black Firefighters Association, and the Dallas Hispanic Firefighters Association)
- Department Chaplains
- Department Medical Director
- Peer Support and Critical Incident Stress Team Representatives
- Budget Director
- Friends of the Dallas Fire-Rescue Department

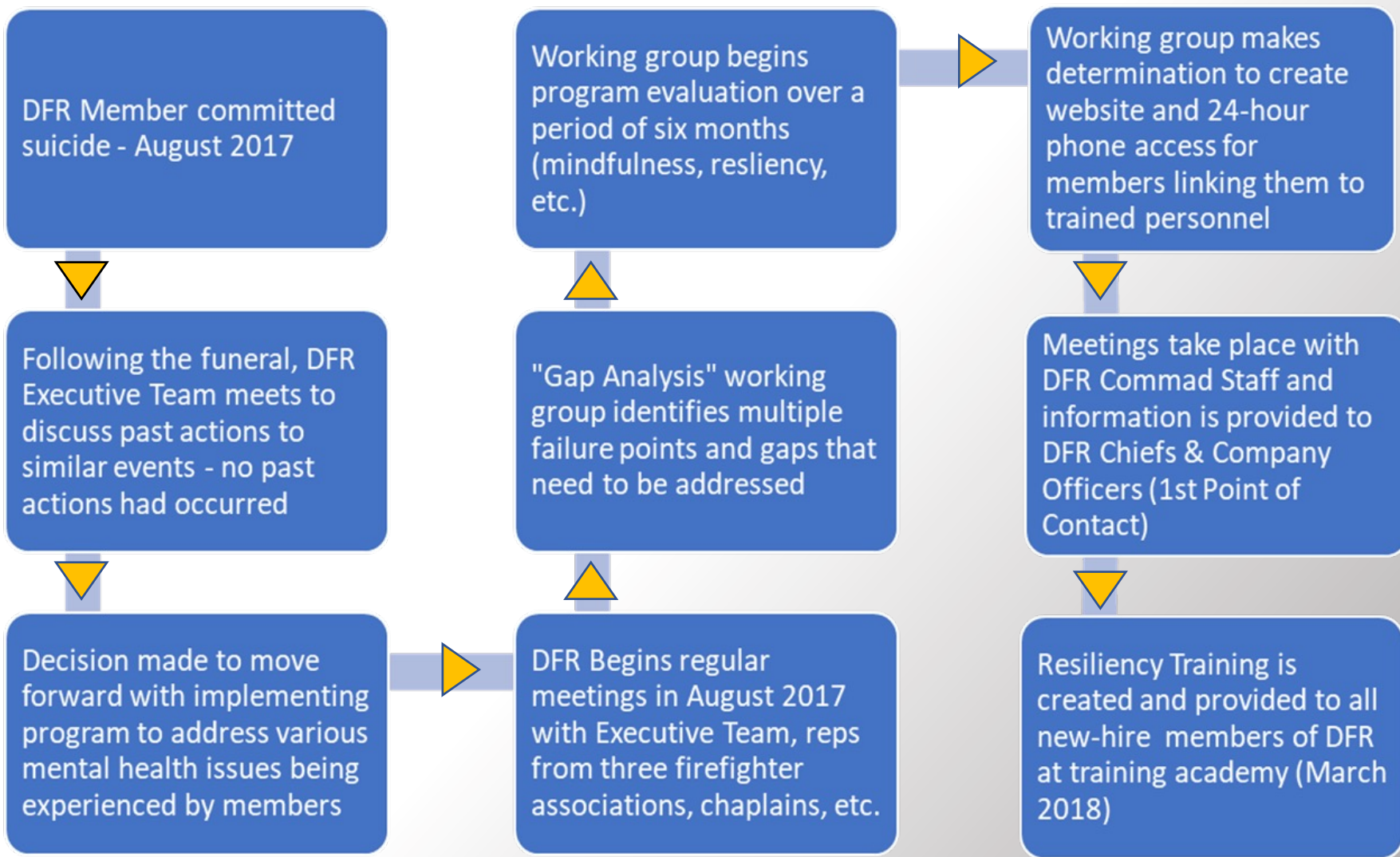


DFR Executive Team begins working with Labor Organizations, Chaplains, Medical Director, Peer Counselors, and others

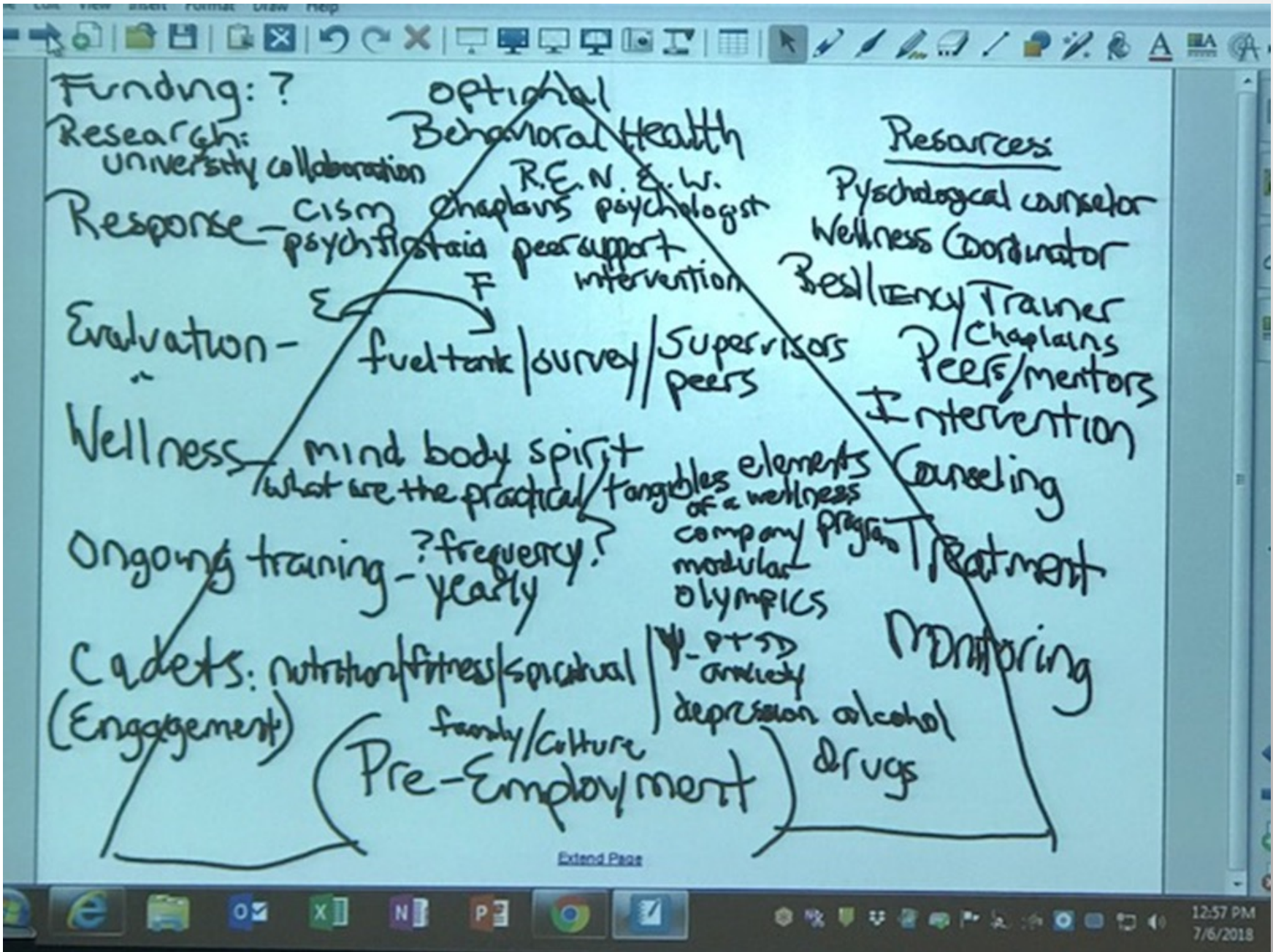


# Our Focus – to identify “gaps” in the policies and practices regarding behavioral health in the department

- Discipline
- Administrative duty
- Relief from duty
- Tracking of personnel
- Employee Assistance Plan (EAP)
- Holistic Approach









# FIRST RESPONDER WELLNESS PYRAMID

Resources
Chaplains
Counselors (psychological)
Behavioral Health Personnel (non-psychological)
Peers / Mentor
Wellness Coordinator
Resiliency trainer
Intervention
Treatment
Monitoring

Challenges / Opportunity
Academic Involvement
Research Opportunities
Funding
Member Agency Involvement
Member Scalability
Urban
Suburban
Rural
Resiliency Olympics
Physical Resiliency Resources
Physical Therapy
Athletic Trainer/Strength Coach
Performance Nutritionist

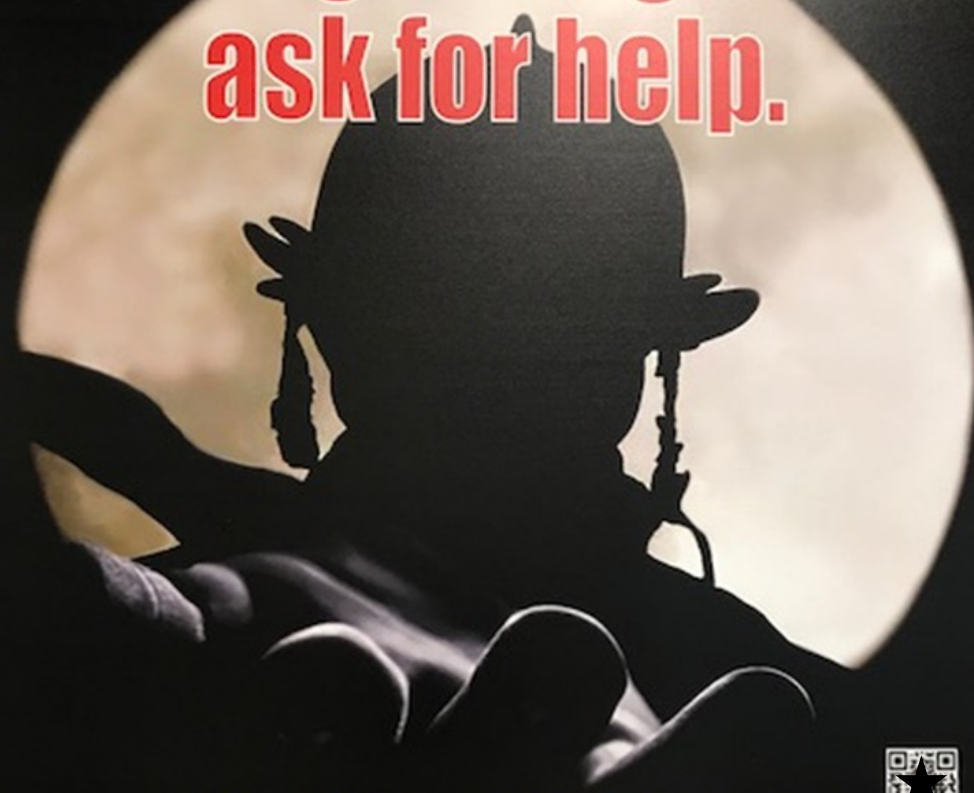


Pre-Employment

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# Strong firefighters ask for help.



**Depression, Anxiety, Finances,  
Family/Marriage, Difficult Calls,  
Alcohol and Substance Abuse, PTSD, Grief, etc.**

The Hotline is answered by DFR firefighters who have been trained to help. It is also supported 24/7 and employees can remain anonymous. The QR Code links to Firestrong.org, where members can search for local support resources and assistance on their own smart devices.

**Call 833-DFR- or 833-337-**

**Help is available now.**



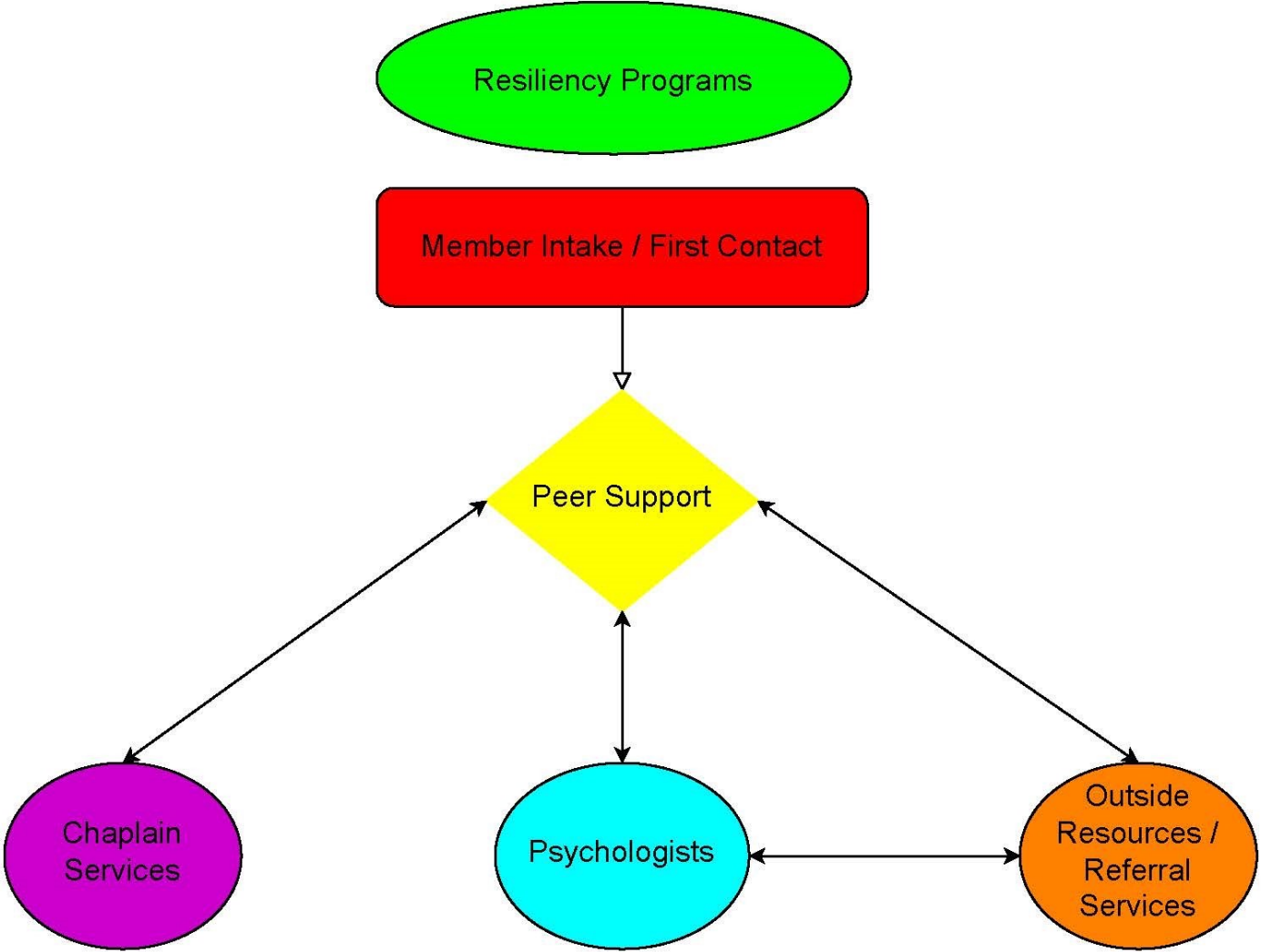
TEXAS A&M ENGINEERING



EXTENSION SERVICE



**DFR CARE NETWORK**





# Never One and Done

- These programs require regular attention and modification
- Your community may not have the same resources Dallas or the Metroplex have
- Engagement of different stakeholder groups is essential to success



# Recent Behavior Health Program Enhancements

- Added first of 3 full-time staff Clinical Psychologists in 2022
  - Clinical oversight of Network
  - Pre-employment evaluation and screening
  - Regular Mental Health Check-ins for all Members
  - Counseling / Therapy Services at dedicated office site away from city and departmental facilities, named “The Fire Escape”
- Office of Chaplain Services
- Outside resources / referral services

# Stress and Violence in fire-based EMS Responders (SAVER)





# Recommendations from Robert Douglas, founder of the National Police Suicide Foundation

(Nissim, Bill, Douglas, Johnson, and Folino, 2022, pp. 16-17).

- Adopt mental health policies that recognize suicide as a significant health problem.
- Acknowledge the connection between on-the-job stress and suicide; identify and keep accurate statistical data on suicide deaths.
- Adopt a comprehensive crisis response model as a practical framework for understanding and addressing the entire range of suicide-related issues.
- Include basic intervention skills for handling mental health/suicide situations in training programs for recruits.



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(Nissim, Bill, Douglas, Johnson, and Folino, 2022, pp. 16-17).

- Develop peer support/critical incident stress management (CISM) protocols that include debriefing opportunities.
- Provide bereavement support services to family members and peers.
- Develop a spouse/partner/significant other awareness program that should
  - Include a step-down CISM awareness element
  - Implement suicide awareness training.

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## Questions?



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