

Mental health, bereavement supports for first responders announced in Aurora



More than \$3 million will be invested by the Ontario government to support families of first responders and public safety personnel who are killed in the line of duty or have died by suicide, said Deputy Premier Sylvia Jones at an Aurora announcement on Friday morning.

Minister Jones outlined funding for the Ontario Immediate Family Wellness Program at Central York Fire Services' Station 4-5 on Earl Stewart Drive on April 5.

Before members of the local fire department, York Regional Police, and other first responders, Jones, who also serves as Minister of Health and MPP For Dufferin Caledon, said Ontario's first responders go "above and beyond every day, sometimes putting their lives on the line to provide safety, care and support" across the Province.

"Through our government's investment in this new program, we are ensuring that loved ones of fallen paramedics, and all first responders, have access to the compassionate supports they need to begin their journey towards healing."

The new program will allow family members to access mental health services like crisis support, counselling, and therapy online or over the phone. Services will be offered through a three-step care model which will include, "professionals who provide crisis and care planning 24-hours a day, seven days a week; comprehensive mental health services, including rapid access to counselling; and proactive care that supports families regardless of location or services required."

"Families of our first responders and public safety personnel face unique mental health and addictions challenges when coping with the death of a loved one in the line of duty," said Michael Tibollo, Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, in a statement. "The new Ontario Immediate Family Wellness Program will provide reliable services to families of our frontline heroes who lost their lives while on duty or by suicide. This program aligns with our Roadmap to Wellness plan which is treating mental health with the seriousness it deserves and building a world-class mental health and addictions system."

On behalf of police officers, John Cerasuolo, President of the OPP Police Association said the trauma and grief from a death in the line of duty or a member suicide is far reaching within and beyond the traditional family.

"In dealing with the loved ones left behind, we often learn of people deeply impacted who are not immediate family, many who are not covered under traditional benefit plans for professional services," he said. "We welcome the creation of a program to help the people closest to our members and thank the Ontario government for the additional support to help all loved ones of our members to grieve and heal from unspeakable tragedies."

Added Greg Horton, President of the Ontario Professional Fire Fighters Association: "First responders are routinely exposed to

disasters and emergencies that often leave an imprint. Firefighters struggle with mental illness and suicide rates at levels that are much higher than what is found in the general population. It is estimated that suicide is three times more likely to happen in a fire department than a line of duty death. In the wake of a line of duty death or suicide, the family and friends of the victim often experience great loss and grief, with little support or counselling. We applaud this government for not only investing in firefighter health and safety, but for taking the necessary steps to care for the ones left behind when tragedy strikes."

Locally, the news was welcomed by Acting CYFS Fire Chief Rocco Volpe, who said he was "moved" by support from Queen's Park in "addressing the mental health challenges that affect the families of our fallen public safety heroes."

"This funding represents a pledge to the journey of healing and well-being of the families that have already sacrificed so much," he said. "This support acknowledges the unique burdens our families bear and underscores our collective commitment to their well-being as they navigate this difficult journey. Together, we're providing unwavering support and commitment that will echo through our organizations for future generations of first responders."

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