# Developing a Peer Support Policy & Program

## PART 1

This resource is designed to support public safety organizations build a peer support policy and program. A policy template is provided in Part 2 in this guide.

Peer SUpport | Policy

20-25 min read

### Purpose of this Resource

This resource is designed to support public safety organizations (e.g., police, fire, paramedic services, corrections, communications/dispatch, and related public safety roles) in developing or strengthening a peer support policy as it pertains to use of a formalized internal peer support program or use of an external peer support provider (e.g. Boots on the Ground). It builds on established peer support principles for first responders while adapting them for broader public safety contexts, including varied operational roles, shift work, exposure to critical incidents, and cumulative occupational stress.

### Who It's For

Police, fire, paramedic services, corrections, communications/dispatch, and related public safety roles.

### How to Use It

A separate Peer Support Policy Template for Public Safety Organizations is available to support implementation. Organizations may use and customize the template to align with their governance structures, legislative requirements, and workplace context.

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**See PART 2 for Peer Support Policy Template**


### Disclaimer

Thisis a policy-focused companion resource. It does not replace operational procedures, training manuals, or clinical protocols


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This resource was informed and adapted from BC First Responders' Mental Health. (2017). Developing a peer support policy.

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# Why a Peer Support Policy Is Important in Public Safety Organizations

Public Safety work involves unique and ongoing psychological demands, including exposure to trauma, moral injury, high-risk decision-making, and unpredictable operational stressors. A clear peer support policy helps organizations:

- **Establish consistency and credibility:** A formal policy clarifies the purpose, scope, and boundaries of peer support, reducing confusion and informal or uneven practices.
- **Protect confidentiality and trust:** Clear expectations about privacy, limits of confidentiality, and escalation pathways help build trust among workers while meeting legal and ethical obligations.
- **Support psychological health and safety:** Peer support is a key protective factor within a broader psychological health and safety system, complementing leadership practices, workload management, and access to professional supports.
- **Reduce stigma and barriers to help-seeking:** Peer-based support offers a low-barrier, culturally relevant option that aligns with public safety values and lived experience.
- **Safeguard peer supporters:** A policy ensures peer supporters receive training, supervision, and organizational support to reduce burnout and secondary exposure.



## Shared Responsibility

A peer support policy signals that the organization recognizes psychological health as a core component of operational readiness and worker safety, not an individual responsibility.



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# What Is Peer Support

Peer support within an organization may be delivered through an internal peer support program, an external peer support provider, or a combination of both.

Regardless of delivery model, peer support operates according to the principles outlined in this policy, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, clear role boundaries, and independence from performance management, discipline, or fitness-for-duty decision-making.

Peer support is a supportive, non-clinical relationship between workers who share similar occupational experiences. In public safety organizations, peer supporters are trained workers who:

- Listen with empathy and understanding
- Provide practical and emotional support
- Share information about available resources
- Encourage help-seeking when additional support is needed

Peer support may occur after critical incidents, during periods of cumulative stress, or in response to personal or work-related challenges.

## Role Boundaries

Peer supporters do not diagnose, treat, or provide counselling, and they are not a substitute for professional mental health services.



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# Scope and Application of the Policy

The peer support policy should clearly state:

- Whether the peer support program is supported by an internal peer support program or external provider e.g. Boots on the Ground.
- Who the policy applies to (e.g., all employees, volunteers, auxiliary members, contractors
- where applicable)
- Where peer support may be provided (e.g., workplace, community settings, virtual or
- phone-based support)
- When peer support may be accessed (e.g., self-referral, peer outreach, post-incident,
- family-initiated concerns)



Peer support should be voluntary, accessible, and separate from performance management, discipline, or fitness-for-duty processes.

# Core Principles to Include in a Peer Support Policy

A strong peer support policy typically reflects the following principles:

## 1. Confidentiality and Its Limits

Peer support interactions are confidential
Clear, limited exceptions are defined (e.g., imminent risk of harm to self or others, legal obligations)

Information from peer support is not used for discipline or performance management

## 2. Autonomy With Organizational Support

The program operates independently from management decision-making

Leadership provides visible support, resources, and protection from role conflict

## 3. Voluntary Participation

Workers may choose whether or not to engage in peer support

Peer supporters may decline requests that exceed their role or capacity

## 4. Clear Role Boundaries

Peer supporters provide support and referral, not therapy

Escalation pathways to professional or emergency supports are clearly outlined



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# Roles and Responsibilities

### Organizational Leadership

- Endorse and resource the peer support program Respect program autonomy and confidentiality
- Integrate peer support into broader health, safety, and wellness systems

### Peer Support Coordinator (or Lead)

- Oversees recruitment, training, and ongoing support of peer supporters
- Acts as a point of coordination and quality assurance
- Monitors workload and well-being of peer supporters

### Peer Supporters

- Participate in required training and ongoing development
- Provide support within defined boundaries Seek consultation or referral when concerns exceed their role

# Who Should Develop the Peer Support Policy

Policy development is most effective when it is collaborative. Organizations are encouraged to involve:

- Peer supporters and frontline workers
- Health and safety representatives or joint health and safety committee members Human resources and labour relations
- Mental health or clinical advisors
- Union or association representatives, where applicable

**This approach helps ensure the policy is credible, practical, and trusted by workers.**



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# Review, Approval, and Ongoing Evaluation

## Policy Review and Approval

- The policy should be reviewed by legal, privacy, and occupational health and safety functions
- Final approval should align with existing organizational governance processes

## Ongoing Review

- The peer support policy and program should be reviewed at least annually
- Feedback should be gathered from peer supporters, participants (where appropriate), and leadership
- Updates should reflect changes in legislation, best practice, or organizational context

# Awareness and Communication

To be effective, the policy should be:

- Communicated to all workers in plain language
- Easily accessible (e.g., intranet, onboarding materials)
- Reinforced through training, briefings, and leadership messaging



## Plain Language, Easy Access

Apolicyisonly asstrongas workers'awareness of it. Keep the language plain, keep the document easy to find, and revisit it in training and briefings so peer support stays visible year-round.



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# How This Policy Fits Within a Broader System

A peer support policy is one component of a comprehensive approach to psychological health and safety. It should align with:

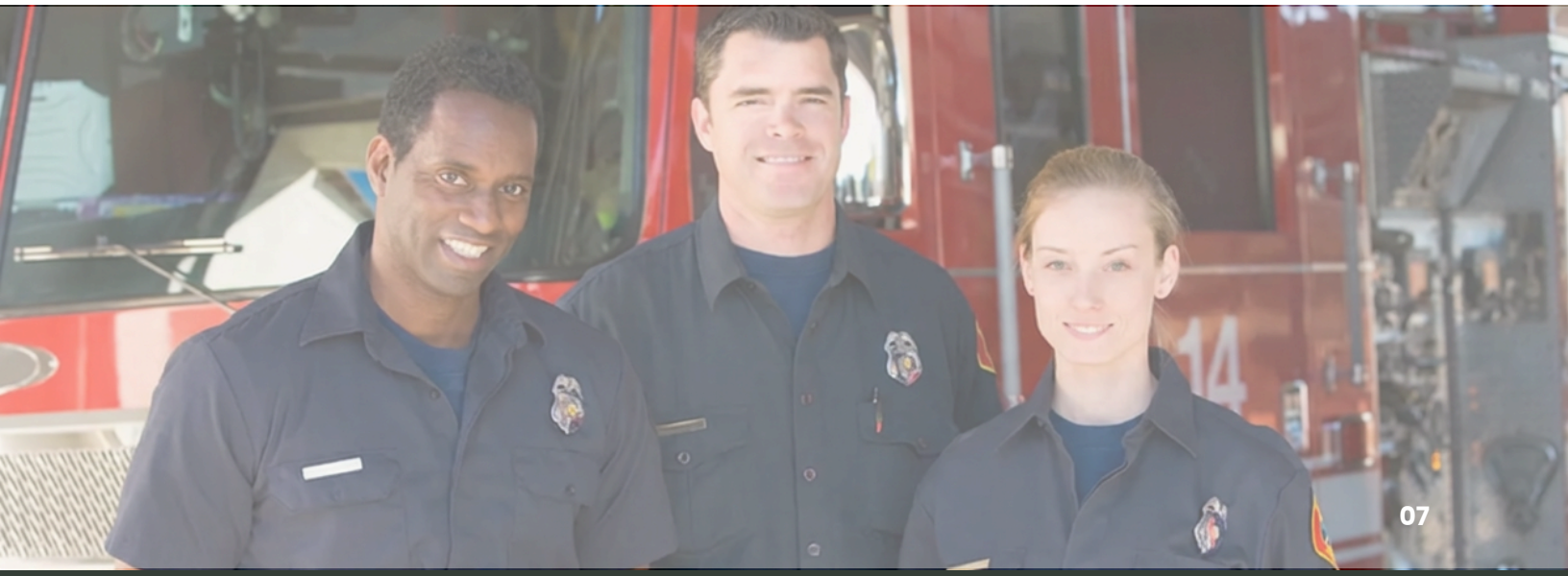
- Occupational health and safety policies
- Psychological health and safety programing
- Critical incident response protocols
- Disability management and accommodation processes

**Peer support works best when it is integrated, resourced, and respected, rather than treated as a standalone or informal initiative.**

# Source Acknowledgement

This resource was informed and adapted from:

BC First Responders' Mental Health. (2017). *Developing a peer support policy.* https://bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Developing-a-Peer- Support-Policy-170619.pdf





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