



## Invest EAP Launches EAPFirst Program for VT First Responders



Invest EAP, the State of Vermont's employee assistance program, located within the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, serves over 150,000 employees in businesses and organizations in Vermont. We provide front-end confidential mental health and resource counseling to all covered employees; in addition, the EAP has developed programs to enhance Vermont's existing safety net for high-risk occupations, developing Farm First for VT farmers in 2009 and now EAPFirst for Vermont's first responders. EAPFirst is a specialty EAP being developed with the assistance of Vermont League of Cities and Towns and police, fire and rescue departments throughout the state to deepen the support of these workers who are chronically exposed to critical incident stress and trauma. Late last month, 67 counselors and first responders from throughout the state convened at a two-day training event on first responder culture, trauma, peer support and critical incident debriefing. Counselors gained an appreciation for the day-to-day work stress experienced by first responders. First responders learned techniques for enhancing peer support services.

Speakers included a number of police chiefs, officers, fire and rescue personnel, state troopers, a number of psychologists and key representatives of the Green Mountain Critical Incident Stress Management team. The training included many interactive components and all participants contributed to the discussion. Much time was spent discussing how to build trust and familiarity between first responders and EAPFirst counselors. The training was replete with stories of emotional trauma suffered by police and other first responders and the critical importance of providing support when individuals are exposed to such trauma. Many said they were greatly moved by the training. Several described it as a life changing event.

In the words of first responders:

I thought the class was truly amazing. Mental health of our employees has been over looked for too long. I believe EAPFirst will become an outlet for our brothers and sisters to finally get the support they need easily, comfortability, and in a manner that works!

For the first time I saw clinicians and first responders speaking passionately about getting help to our first responders. I think the collaborative efforts between the clinicians and first responders, mixed with the vested interest between both parties should show a very powerful message to emergency workers in the state that they are not alone.

I learned a tremendous amount this past weekend and look forward to getting to work with you folks. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to keep this ball rolling in a forward direction.

In the words of counselors:

Thank you so much for putting this training together. It far surpassed my hopes. I was especially impressed by the First Responders who attended and participated so genuinely in discussions.

Thank you, Invest EAP! It was truly a magical and transforming two days.

Thanks for the opportunity. I appreciate it. What an exciting time to be on the ground floor as this program is developed. I look forward to seeing what the future holds.

Thank you again for the wonderful training this past weekend. I'm thrilled to be a part of the team.

As a next step in the program, Invest EAP will coordinate ongoing relationship-building between regional counselors and first responders. EAPFirst counselors have committed to making regular site visits to departments, doing ride-alongs or engaging in other meaningful contact, brief trainings and participating in debriefings as part of their agreement to be members of this program.

Currently, the Vermont League of Cities and Towns is contributing some financial support for this effort, but the program is in need of additional revenue sources to fully implement its objectives. If you have ideas for such funding or would like more information about EAPFirst, contact Steve Dickens at 802-863-7509 or at [steved@investeap.org](mailto:steved@investeap.org).