

2025



TRAUMA-INFORMED FIRST RESPONDER ORGANIZATION

A Guide for Becoming a Trauma-Informed
First Responder Organization

ResilientGEORGIA

Definition: What Does it Mean to be a Trauma-Informed First Responder Organization?

First responders regularly work with individuals experiencing trauma, which is defined as any experience that is extremely frightening, harmful, or threatening.¹ People's reactions to trauma can include emotional and physical distress. People who have experienced trauma can also be incredibly resilient, meaning they have developed skills to cope with life's challenges.

Being trauma-informed means recognizing and understanding the impact that trauma can have on individuals, including civilians and first responders. Trauma-informed practices that prioritize compassion, empathy, and connection can help stop the cycle of trauma and move into post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth is defined as the positive psychological change that some experience after a challenging life event.² First responders are in a unique position to effectively support communities that are highly impacted by trauma.³

Why it Matters: Becoming Trauma-Informed

High exposure to trauma puts first responders at risk for developing symptoms of secondary trauma,⁴ a response people may feel after witnessing others' trauma.⁵ Secondary trauma is linked with professional burnout, mental health challenges, or even suicidal thoughts or behavior. These symptoms can interfere with first responders' ability to function in their personal and professional relationships and life.

First responders not only face significant mental health challenges, but they are also at heightened risk for serious physical issues like heart failure and stroke. The demanding nature of their work, exposure to hazardous materials, and high stress situations contribute to serious health risks. The leading cause of death in firefighters is sudden cardiac death. Similarly, police officers face a 30 to 70 times greater risk of cardiac death.⁶ These combined mental and physical challenges highlight the need for first responders to prioritize their overall well-being in their demanding roles.

Organizations that work with a trauma-informed lens offer ways that first responders can successfully support themselves and their communities. It is crucial that first responders feel supported in their effort to **address secondary trauma**. Trauma-informed professional development helps leaders implement new and effective ways to address individual, organizational and community concerns. Working with frameworks that promote awareness, peer support, and trust-based teamwork can increase wellbeing and healthy outcomes for first responders and the people they serve. We believe that engaging with the following resources will significantly support first responders in their personal and professional worlds.

Examples of Trauma-Informed Initiatives

The Co-responder Program implements a team model as a collaborative approach to behavioral crisis response. This Georgia-based program pairs mental health professionals from **Community Service Boards (CSB)** with first responders to assist with de-escalation and jail diversion through mental health referrals. **Implementation of this program** was made possible by HB 1013, which provided funding for at least five new applications of the program, and **SB 403** which mandated that each CSB establish a co-responder program. **View Point Health**, the CSB serving Gwinnett, Newton, and Rockdale Counties, has partnered with police departments in cities of Conyers, Lawrenceville, Norcross, and Suwanee, and **Gwinnett County** to establish their co-responder programs.

Savannah Police Department's Behavioral Health Unit is one example of how police departments can move towards trauma-informed service on an organizational level. Their program includes an "Enhanced Crisis Intervention Team, a Behavioral Health Response Team, and Service Coordination" designed to divert individuals from the criminal justice system towards services for behavioral health.

Handle with Care (HWC), involves a **trauma-informed collaboration** between local first responders and schools. The program aims to provide in-school support for children who have witnessed a traumatic experience by notifying the child's school about the event. Trained school staff respond to the student's needs within the classroom, and additional on-site mental healthcare is available if needed. HWC is an effective, low-cost way to address the role of trauma in children's development and school performance. Visit **Salud America's site** to learn more about how to implement HWC in your community.

DeKalb County's Fire Captain Chuck Bray is leading a trauma-informed initiative through a 190-mile walk to raise awareness about mental health support for first responders. As the Peer Support Coordinator, Bray focuses on creating a safe space for first responders to share their experiences and access resources addressing the trauma they encounter. His leadership in the peer support program and co-hosting of the "**Burnt Out**" podcast emphasize the importance of acknowledging and addressing the emotional impact of their work. Commissioner Ted Terry highlighted Bray's efforts as key to fostering resilience and ensuring public safety officials receive the trauma-informed care they need.

Training Resources for Educators



TRAUMA-AWARE

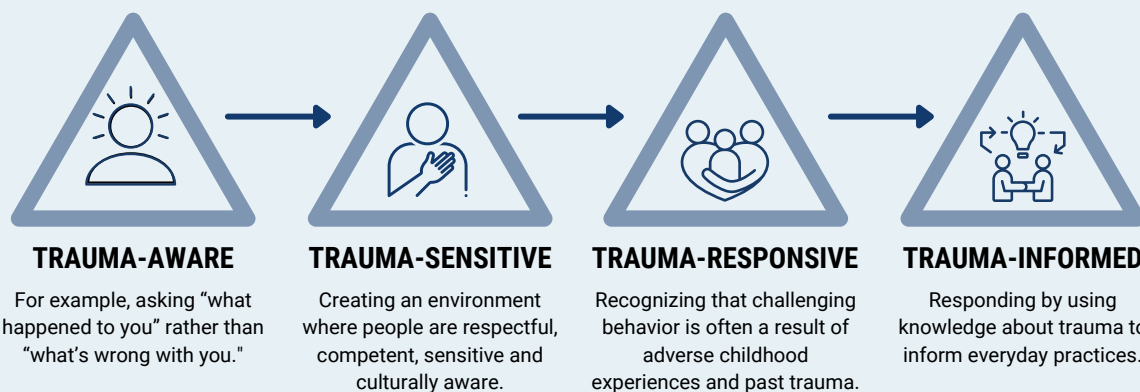
- **Connections Matter Georgia** provides training focused on community resilience, building social support systems, and interacting with traumatized populations. Connections Matter Georgia can help first responders develop preventative practices in their work that consider behavioral responses to stress and trauma.



TRAUMA-SENSITIVE

- **The Community Resiliency Model (CRM)** offers tangible skills that first responders can use to promote wellbeing and address the impact of secondary for themselves and others. CRM promotes emotional intelligence, a key factor in both first responders' job performance and personal wellbeing.
- **The Resilience Enhancement and Leadership Model (REALM)** training focuses on skills building in the three realms of resilience: personal, interpersonal, and organizational. **The REALM training** can help first responders build skills of stress-management creating safety in interactions and moving towards a trauma-informed system of care. For more information, contact Tara Jones at tara@coastalgaindicator.org.
- **Hybrid Academy Suicide Prevention Training for First Responders** is approved by the Georgia Peace Officer Standards and Training Council (P.O.S.T) and includes training for 911 dispatchers and families of first responders. It is designed to prevent suicide and enhance resilience through offering cognitive and behavioral tools to maintain mental health. For **more information** on how to provide this to your law enforcement and first responder communities, contact Margret Younis at margret@hybridwbe.com.

The trauma-informed approach is a continuum that progresses through stages. The stages of becoming trauma-informed are:





TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE

- **Compassionate Integrity Training** focuses on “the ability to live one’s life in accordance with one’s values with a recognition of common humanity, our basic orientation to kindness and reciprocity”. It identifies individual and community values to teach skills of awareness and compassion that can be useful for first responders.
- **Crisis Intervention Training** offers guidelines for how first responders can best respond to situations involving challenging behavior that feels threatening or even violent.
- **Self-Compassion for First Responders** builds personal skills to combat the impact of stress and challenges that first responders may face. To attend this training, please contact Vira Salzburn at vsalzburn@mediationsavannah.com.



TRAUMA-INFORMED

- **The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)** offers no cost training as well as an **online toolkit** for best practice strategies for working with children exposed to trauma. This training can help first responders find effective solutions for supporting this population.
- **Trauma Training for Criminal Justice Professionals** through **SAMHSA** teaches first responders about how to develop responses to improve rehabilitation and recovery for individuals involved with the criminal justice system. It also equips participants to deliver effective training to others in their community.

To learn more about sector-specific training resources, please visit the **Resilient Georgia Trauma-Informed Training Roadmap**.



Additional Support for First Responders

- Calling **988** connects individuals in crisis with trained counselors for immediate mental health and suicide prevention support, available 24/7. In Georgia, all calls, texts, and chats are managed by the Georgia Crisis and Access Line (GCAL). Healthcare workers can use this service to seek immediate support for themselves or to refer patients in need. For active crisis, visit **988 Lifeline**. For more information, visit **988 GA**.
- **Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs)** in Georgia offer many types of behavioral health services, with a focus on providing 24-hour crisis care, evidence-based practices, care coordination with local primary care and hospital partners, and integration with physical health care.
- **Community Service Boards (CSB)** also provide a large range of behavioral health services – from crisis stabilization and substance detoxification to counseling and peer support services.
- **Chaplain's 10-33** provides first responders with individual and community mental health support through training, counseling, and events.
- The **Office of Public Safety Support** provides resources of peer support and professional counseling to first responders. They also offer training for peer support counseling to public safety organizations such as law enforcement departments.
- The **Vicarious Trauma Toolkit** provides resources for victim services, emergency responders, and allied professionals to help organizations address the impact of vicarious trauma.



What can I do now? Next Steps

- Take a **training** to better understand the different ways trauma can manifest in behavior - such as tuning out, being easily startled, not complying with orders, or acting aggressively. In addition, first responders can encourage family and others on how to stay in their **“Resiliency Zone” or “OK Zone”** in their community. The Community Resiliency Model (CRM) training that can help first responders expand their own wellbeing while giving them the tools to guide others in developing resiliency skills.
- Explore collaborative programs like **Handle with Care** and the **Co-responder Program!**
- Promote the implementation of an organization-wide policy that prioritizes a trauma-informed approach to training. As a first step, the **Trauma-Informed Organizational Assessment** by the **National Child Traumatic Stress Network** can help your organization identify areas for improvement.
- **Consider** asking someone their story of what happened to them and respond with **empathy** to the difficulties they have encountered.
- To learn more, access our references **here**.





FOR MORE TRAUMA-INFORMED RESOURCES, VISIT [RESILIENTGA.ORG](https://resilientga.org)

Questions or feedback?
Contact info@resilientga.org.

