



OUTREACH NEWSLETTER

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GOING BEYOND THE CALL

WYFS' Counselors Join Forces with Local Firefighters

Warrenville Youth & Family Services' (WYFS) Counseling Center is gaining more than 60 new team members, as the site joins forces with the Warrenville Fire Protection District. The two organizations began discussing the partnership in the fall of 2017, in reaction to recent community needs.

The Warrenville Fire Protection District first approached Angela Mains, WYFS director, seeking a way to help those in the community affected by recent spikes in opioid overdoses. As a leader in the community, WYFS leapt at the opportunity to help their vulnerable neighbors in need. "They approached us to see if we would be available to go on site when there's a crisis of some sort, where we can be there to intervene and support victims or victims' families," said Sandy Oyler, WYFS Counseling Center Program director.

The collaboration was put into place by

Outreach team members: Angela Mains, Sandy Oyler, Gail Hoffman, Wheaton Youth Outreach director, Warrenville Fire Protection District Assistant Fire Chief David Kruzi and Chief Dennis Rogers.

After discussing the needs of the community, the team quickly realized there was a need to support the local firefighters as well. "[The conversation] expanded to also working with the firefighters themselves who may be exposed to trauma and may be experiencing effects of that," remarked Oyler. "We began discussing how can we support them, either on site or through debriefings."

"We've had this great relationship with [WYFS] through the Hot Shots Program," said Kruzi. "Since [WYFS] provides all different services for the community, it only made sense that when our guys are rolling up on another opioid overdose crisis

(which have been dramatic this year) and our guys who live in the community know these people and they go, 'we need help,' we thought—let's see what we can do with [WYFS]."

Through conversations with the fire department, the Outreach team decided to implement a three-part system. "The first part is training the firefighters on trauma," said Oyler. "This involves describing what it looks like and how to prevent it. The second step is going on-site to support victims and victims' families. And the third piece is debriefing with the firefighters after a traumatic event, to help them get through what they experienced."

While conducting research for this plan, the counseling team also found new data, which shows that helping first responders (Story continues on page 2)



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From left to right: Chief Dennis Rogers, WYFS Director Angela Mains and Assistant Fire Chief David Kruzil

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ahead of a trauma is more valuable with the effects of the trauma being less detrimental in the long run. “We did a little research on best practices, and what we found was that the traditional model of critical incident stress debriefing (that are used a lot in today’s situations after a disaster or a trauma),” said Oyler. “We found we could help build up firefighters so that they’re not as effected by the experience. That led us to do a lot of research on resiliency and the idea of developing grit, which is a measurable thing, and focusing more on how to help firefighters ahead of the trauma rather than just coming in after something bad has happened.”

The WYFS counseling team also recognized that the resiliency training would need to go beyond the fire department’s walls—that spouses of firefighters need to be properly equipped as well. “When we went out to present to the firefighters, we also mentioned that we recognize it can also be hard to be a spouse of a fire fighter because of the demands of the job, and I would imagine that first responders can go home and probably find it difficult to talk about their day because, how do you explain what you’ve seen? That really resonated with them,” said Oyler. “So we have decided to reach out to the spouses of the firefighters as well.”

“The firefighters’ resiliency, which is what is going to be done with [WYFS], is really an inoculation,” said Kruzil. “It’s preventative care, and how to avoid getting yourself in that slippery slope or to get to the point

where you feel like you cannot communicate at work, at home, or that you can’t communicate with anybody because you feel that no one understands.”

Assistant Chief Kruzil has been fundamental in changing the way preventative health care is perceived among first responders in Warrenville. “We’re called to fix other people’s problems. We weren’t willing to admit that we needed to be fixed at times, we just couldn’t do it, and everybody pays a price for that,” said Kruzil.

In 2016 the Illinois Fire Services Institute began incorporating First Responder Resiliency Awareness curriculum in all IFSI courses. Kruzil believes this was crucial in changing the fire departments for the better. “It had to start at the top down to make it ok to talk about within the organization,” said Kruzil.

The WYFS Counseling Center is going beyond program development and implementation, and are becoming an integral part of the Warrenville Fire Protection District team. The new collaborative not only builds relationships between the two organizations, but helps each better serve the Warrenville community.

“The firefighters have been really open to us getting to know them,” said Oyler. “They’ve invited us to events at the firehouse so that we really get to know them and their culture— so that when we do get to appear on the scene of a crisis they already know us

and feel comfortable with us being with them.”

“With our new collaboration, our goal is to have Sandy and the principle players at Warrenville Youth & Family Services become part of our family,” remarks Kruzil.

The WYFS team that will be on-call to assist victims’ families will consist of five team members including: Sandy Oyler, WYFS Counseling Center director, Leslee Cremer, Youth Services director, Pat Falen, WYFS Counseling Center intern, Nancy Merlo, WYFS Counseling Center bilingual therapist, and Diane Tabilo, WYFS Counseling Center bilingual therapist.

This partnership is not only unique among the Outreach Community Ministries’ sites, but it also unique to DuPage County, “I do think this is a little bit cutting edge. I believe we’re definitely the first within DuPage County that has an arrangement like this,” remarked Oyler.

Both organizations are deeply rooted in the Warrenville area and are deepening this partnership to help the community grow and flourish.

“It’s another great way to show the community that we’re wanting to be part of them,” said Oyler. “That we want to support them, that we know them, and it’s just a great way to meet more needs that we might not otherwise have a chance to meet in our work.”