

The mental health impact facing Oregon's wildland firefighters

October 28, 2024



Oregon's wildfire season is expected to continue through this month, but the mental scares and impact of the season on the firefighters who battle blazes near Cottage Grove and across the state, and their families, may last a lifetime, according to Jeff Dill, the founder of Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA).

Dill established the FBHA in 2010 following Hurricane Katrina. He was then a Battalion Chief for a fire department in northwest Chicago.

"I saw our brothers and sisters struggle from the devastation that they saw, so I went back and got my degree and became a licensed counselor," he said. "We started tracking EMS and firefighter suicides across America."

Behavioral Impact

According to Dill, firefighters often don't recognize the behavioral impact of their work.

“We become cultural brainwashed,” Dill said. “Whether it’s structural or wildland fires. So, we are meant to believe we are supposed to act strong, brave, be help, don’t ask for help, and we don’t want to look weak and not ask for help.”

Dill added that while firefighters are on the front lines battling the wildfires, one of the biggest challenges they face is the unknown.

“It’s how rapidly these fires can move, and the unknown is where is it going to end? Where will this fire go to and how long will it last? And that is a struggle,” he said. “So, when you are fighting that fire, you’re trying to do your best to stop it, and yet the wind kicks up at 60 miles an hour and it drags it further and further behind them. That aspect of the unknown is very difficult in wildland fires. The firefighters have that stress and anxiety, and that struggle to protect is a very difficult challenge for the wildland firefighters.”

It is often very difficult for family members of the firefighters to understand what emotions there are, and that many firefighters don’t express their emotions, according to Dill.

“We ask the family members to try to understand the cultural,” he said. “Be direct. Challenge with compassion when something doesn’t look right or doesn’t sound right, and do an internal size up, which we ask the firefighters to do as well,” he said.” Internal size up means asking why am I acting this way, and why am I feeling this way? The best thing we can do is to listen to others. Firefighters need to learn how to listen.”

Dill said it is important for firefighters to listen to their bodies.

“When we are stressed. When we are anxious. When we are lacking in sleep. When anger increases within our relationships,” he said. “So doing that internal size up is a way to help the firefighter recognize the behavioral impact of their work, so it doesn’t escalate.”

As the stress of the firefighters’ jobs escalates, “reality goes out the window,” Dill said.

“They may lash out and hit someone or say bad things about their loved ones. They might turn to addictions. Alcohol is the prevalent addiction,” he said. “They might start feeling guilty. They might start feeling depressed, to the point they might consider taking their own lives.”

Through a partnership with the Weyerhaeuser Company, which owns nearly 12,400,000 acres of timberlands in the U.S. and operates facilities in Oregon, including Coos Bay, Cottage Grove, Eugene, Lebanon, Albany, and Turner, Dill said more resources are now available for the firefighters.

“Our wildland firefighters are now dealing with destruction of homes, deaths of people, as well as fighting the environment,” he said.

The fire service culture has begun to recognize the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but an emerging issue firefighters face, Dill said, is Moral Injury, which occurs just as often in the men and women serving their communities. Moral Injury is a relatively new term in EMS circles, with signs and symptoms

that can mirror those of the more widely recognized PTSD – even though they are distinctly different ailments.

Dill added that beyond the behavioral issues, it's also difficult for many of the wildland firefighters to find employment after the fire season.

“It’s imperative that we take care of our wildland firefighters, as well as their families,” he said.

According to the FBHA website, the goal is to provide behavioral health workshops to fire departments and EMS organizations across the globe, focusing on behavioral health awareness with a strong drive towards suicide prevention and promoting resources available to firefighters/EMS and their families.

FBHA’s initiative is also designed to develop funding to assist surviving family members of firefighter/EMS suicides, host retreats for the families of firefighter suicides, and offer an educational scholarship program for children, spouses, partners of firefighter suicide victims, as well as support firefighters and their families suffering from behavioral health issues.

RESOURCES

For more information about Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance visit <https://www.ffbha.org/> or call 847-209-8208.

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available 24/7. Call or text 988 or chat online at 988Lifeline.org.

Specialized support is also available through the Veterans Crisis Line (press 1 or text 838255), in Spanish (press 2 or text “AYUDA” to 988) and for LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adults (press 3 or text “PRIDE” to 988).

988 is also available for individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing through American Sign Language videophone services.

- 57.6% of firefighters report having experienced a major Morally Injurious Event, like injured children or evidence of abuse.
- 49.8% admitted to feeling emotionally detached and isolated, long recognized as a mental-health stressor.
- From 2014-2020, more firefighters died by suicide than in the line of duty.

Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance