

City of Irving (TX) Police and Fire Departments 2023 Comprehensive Wellness Summary

Dallas County was formed in 1846. It is the second-most populous county in the State of Texas. The county had a total of 909 square miles in 2020 and a population of 2,613,539. Dallas County is included in the Dallas-Arlington-Fort Worth metropolitan statistical area, colloquially referred to as the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. The City of Irving is the second largest city in Dallas County with a population of 256,684, Irving is one of just seven DFW cities with more than 200,000 people and one of the inner ring Dallas suburbs. Additionally, Irving is one of the most diverse cities in the country, also known for being the home of ten Fortune 500 headquarters.

In 2023, the IPD has 636 employees (403 sworn officers and 233 non-sworn employees). The Irving Fire Department (IFD) was formed in 1925 as a volunteer Fire Department after a fire started in the only schoolhouse. They started with twenty men. Currently, the IFD has 408 employees (396 employees and 12 fire stations). The establishment of the Public Safety Wellness Unit (PSWU) is to help our first responders develop and maintain healthy habits throughout their career and foster resiliency. City of Irving first responders include police officers, firefighters, detention officers, dispatchers, retirees, and their families. The City of Irving First Peer Support Program has been active since 2016, initially known as the Irving Police Peer Support Program after one of their officers died by suicide. In 2019, the PD incorporated the Irving Fire Department. In 2021, the city of Irving formalized the program by establishing the Public Safety Wellness Unit (PSWU). The Wellness Unit is a separate division under the City Manager's Office. It operates separately from public safety departments to safeguard the reality and perception of privacy and confidentiality for first responders.

The PSWU's full time wellness unit consists of three staff members: a senior manager, who is a licensed psychologist, and two clinicians. The psychologist, Dr. Mildred Betancourt, is a nationally known speaker and subject matter expert in mental health among first responders. The senior manager functions as the program coordinator, oversees clinicians, coordinates Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) interventions, develops trainings, acts as liaison between police and fire peer support groups, and coordinates assistance to other police and fire department through the DFW CISM Network.

The PSWU ensures mental health services are readily available for Irving's first responders 24/7. The goal is to provide early intervention and stabilization shortly after a critical incident occurs to reduce stress-related symptoms. Additionally, the unit's primary purpose is to ensure the safety and quality of life for first responders both on the job and in their personal lives.

In recent years, great interest has emerged from different fields regarding first responders' mental health. Yoga for first responders is an example of these innovative programs focused on improving not just their mental health, but also their physical health, as well.

In addition to providing services after a critical incident, the unit provides primary prevention which encompasses strategies to intervene before the issues or effects occur. The main goal is to target individuals who may be at risk of developing mental health conditions and intervene to prevent or decrease the onset of that condition. The wellness unit provides continuous education and training which begin at the academy level for both fire and police. This training is mandatory for new supervisors. The goal is to provide new supervisors with information to increase their awareness about signs and symptoms of distress, depression, posttraumatic stress, suicidal thoughts and/or behaviors among their subordinates and to equip them with the understanding and resources to help their first responders.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) protocols after a critical incident as part of our CISM debriefings. EMDR therapy facilitates the accessing and processing of traumatic memories and other adverse life experiences to bring these to an adaptive resolution. When an individual undergoes EMDR, memories of a traumatic event is accessed in a very specific way. It combines eye movements (there are other forms of bilateral stimulation such as left and right tapping) and guided instructions to help the person reprocess what they remember from the negative experience. In the reprocessing phase, the brain can "repair" the mental injury from that memory. The person will be able to remember the event and no longer feel like they are reliving it (e.g., PTSD), hence the related feelings become much more manageable.

The unit has also implemented a Suicide Prevention Campaign called "Let's Talk About It." It is an internal suicide awareness and prevention campaign to inform and educate the public safety departments, administrators, spouses/family on prevention, signs and symptoms, resources, and what they can do to help someone expressing or at risk of suicide. Prior to the establishment of peer support, in a period of 10 years the IPD lost four officers to suicide. Since the start of the peer support program in 2016, IPD has successfully intervened with 26 individuals (i.e., first responders and family members) that expressed active suicidal ideations. Each of the 26 individuals received the help they needed and were able to return to work.

The unit has also implemented Biofeedback as a technique used to learn to control some bodily functions, such as heart rate. During biofeedback, the individual is connected to electrical sensors that help them receive information about their body. Neurofeedback is a training method that helps the brain to self-regulate. Additionally, neurofeedback addresses the trauma resiliency directly at its source, the brain.

Ongoing training for the employees and for their families includes emotional survival, self-care, suicide prevention, financial management, alcohol, and drug addiction, among others. Last year the PSWU began Wellness Check Ins with dispatchers where the clinicians provided psychoeducational training on site and during the different shifts to cover all dispatchers. In 2022 the PSWU also began to offer training to the spouses related to trauma and vicarious trauma within the first responder family.

In addition to the clinical services provided, the wellness unit clinicians oversee both fire and police peer support teams. Currently the police peer support team is comprised of 34 members (there's representation from every department, retirees, and spouses). The fire peer support team is comprised of 19 members. The policy for both teams delineates the function of the peer support services. In the City of Irving, all CISM interventions after a critical incident are mandatory. Consequently, everyone directly involved in a critical incident is expected to attend a debriefing, defusing, or an individual intervention. Although attendance is mandatory, participation is not. However, everyone is a recipient of the information shared. The City of Irving has also partnered with the new Law Enforcement Peer Support Program of NAMI North Texas. This organization developed an inter-department peer support network to cover the North Texas region.

The City of Irving has made significant strides in the support it has shown for all first responders and their immediate families. One of those advances was a partnership with Responder Health to provide an additional venue for our first responders to seek help. Responder Health provides a variety of services such as vetted clinicians in and out of state, vetted inpatient facilities for mental health and substance abuse issues, as well as 24/7 confidential telephone access to other peers for consultation and/or crisis intervention. Additionally, the City of Irving granted first responders a 30 day leave for mental health or substance abuse issues, with no out of pocket expense, and without having to use their sick leave.

Collaborative efforts have been made with hospitals in the area such as Parkland Hospital who was the first to implement a "first responder" intake protocol to increase safety and privacy for first responders during a mental health crisis.

In 1988 the City of Irving opened a 22,772 square-foot training facility for fire and police personnel. The training academy provides both internal training and hosts other training opportunities on a wide range of topics for personnel from other departments. The facility includes a full-size gymnasium with free weights and a separate, enclosed area containing various types of workout equipment. The physical fitness program is part of the City of Irving's iWin program offered to all employees. Officers and firefighters can work out while on duty but are required to have their radios on in the event of a callout. The IPD has two stations (North and South), and both have gyms available 24/7. Some of the fire stations have a designated exercise area.

The city's iWIN program is designed to motivate employees to live healthier lifestyles. This is the city's employee health incentive program. General government employees who earn 400 wellness points from Oct. 1, 2022, through Sept. 8, 2023, will earn a monthly financial incentive of \$130 starting October 2023.

With this program, employees can earn a significant number of points simply by taking part in annual preventative healthcare. The remaining points can be earned by participating in activities that promote wellness, such as providing proof of regular gym visits, getting an annual flu shot, donating blood, or attending Wellness Speaker Forums.

The “Blocker Program” was needed because their first responders were exposed to life threatening situations daily and the cost and risk to life and equipment was beyond measure. Knowing this, the city repurposed five retired fire apparatus into Blocker units at a cost of \$15,200 (\$3,040 each). These trucks are parked in the roadway to block oncoming traffic to protect first responders. This cost was already neutralized when Blocker 12 was struck in August 2018, saving a \$1.2 million aerial tiller-truck and when Blocker 8 was struck in March 2019 saving the lives of 10 Irving police officers who were investigating a prior accident.

In July 2018, the Irving City Council approved an agreement between the city and CareATC to open an employee health clinic. The clinic is available to employees and retirees, as well as their spouses and dependents, enrolled in one of the city’s health insurance plans.

The Wellness Speaker Forum are classes that feature topics related to wellness and health issues. Different individuals, agencies, or services are promoted throughout the year which employees can attend in person or access these classes on demand. These classes are part of the iWIN incentive program.

The submission contains stats and charts that should be reviewed to understand the effectiveness of their programs.

This summary is only a brief overview of many of the agency’s programs. In the actual submission you will see that the agency has other programs and incentives to benefit its members. Please review their entire submission and its associated documents to gain a complete understanding of their program.