Background

It is well known that firefighting is a dangerous occupation and that fire fighters suffer high rates of workplace injury and illness while protecting the lives and property of Canadians. Less known are the mental demands of the occupation, including the effects of being regularly exposed to scenes and images that anyone would find disturbing and difficult to see. This makes Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) a very real danger to fire fighters.

Fire fighters are not alone in their exposure to distressing circumstances. An alarming number of other first responders and military personnel including veterans with PTSD have been reported in Canada. Sadly, among those affected, many have taken their own lives. According to Tema Conter Memorial Trust, 68 first responders died by suicide in 2016. This year, to date, three fire fighters, three paramedics and four military personnel have died by suicide.

Consider the opioid crisis that continues to spread across our country. Fire fighters, who are often first on scene to provide medical care to those who have overdosed, are vulnerable to the mental strain of watching a population repeatedly harm itself and ultimately witnessing death and deceased persons who have succumbed to this human tragedy.

To address mental health and PTSD in the first responder community, the IAFF called on the federal government to establish a National Action Plan for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder for first responders, military personnel, RCMP and veterans. The Plan should include the development and coordination of five components: best practices, research, education, awareness, and treatment.

In Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s November, 2015 mandate letter to Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale, there was clear intent to address this issue, including a commitment to work with provinces and territories and the Minister of Health to develop a coordinated national action plan.

We commend Minister Goodale for his quick action to address this issue by organizing a national roundtable on PTSD for first responders in Regina, Saskatchewan in January 2016. The roundtable provided the opportunity for first responders, government officials, and field experts to flush out the priorities and gaps in addressing integral components of a broad plan. In March 2016, the federal budget reaffirmed the government’s support and treatment for public safety officers facing PTSD.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security began a study of Operational Stress Injuries (OSIs) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Public Safety Officers and First Responders in March 2016. The IAFF testified before the Committee in May, 2016, addressing fire fighter’s susceptibility to PTSD and how consideration should be given to five key elements in a national action plan; best practices, research, education, awareness and treatment, and that the plan becomes a framework for an effective and all-encompassing PTSD toolkit that can be used as a resource by any first responder agency or individual who needs it.

In October 2016, the Committee tabled a report on its study of Operational Stress Injuries and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Public Safety Officers and First Responders. The report outlined the need for federal leadership on this issue and provided recommendations emphasizing evidence-based research, data collection and the sharing of best practices among departments, agencies and organizations. The IAFF was pleased that the recommendations were in line with our recommendations, and therefore is supportive of all recommendations outlined in the report.

Also in October 2016, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health conducted a Study on the Opioid Crisis in Canada. Vancouver fire fighters from IAFF Local 18 testified on the challenges they are facing with the staggering increase in call volumes related to opioids and the mental and physical toll it is taking on the front line workers.
The Committee tabled a report in December 2016, with recommendations including a federal partnership with the provinces and territories to develop a national strategy to provide better training and mental health services for front-line workers and first responders. The IAFF fully supports this report and its recommendations.

A national framework for PTSD for first responders is also addressed through Private Member’s Bill C-211, introduced by Todd Doherty, M.P. for Cariboo - Prince George, B.C. Doherty’s bill agrees with the need for a national PTSD strategy, but places responsibility solely within the ministries of Health, National Defence and Veterans Affairs. The IAFF agrees with those who feel it is important to include the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. Bill C-211 passed Second Reading unanimously on March 8, 2017 and has been referred to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health.

These are positive and timely first steps in a coordinated strategy. The government needs to build on the priorities discussed at the National Roundtable on PTSD and continue to consult with key experts and stakeholders, including the IAFF, to identify current gaps, flush out existing resources, and build on creating a sustainable, national framework.

The IAFF is currently collaborating with other key stakeholders, including the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs, the University of Regina’s Collaborative Centre for Justice and Safety and the Mental Health Commission of Canada to ensure that the mental wellness needs of fire fighters are identified.

IAFF Position

The IAFF calls on the federal government to continue to work toward the timely development of a coordinated National Action Plan for PTSD for first responders, military personnel, RCMP and veterans and other groups that the federal government defines as public safety officers. The IAFF should continue to be a key stakeholder in developing the Plan. The government should ensure adequate funding is available to the further development of the Plan, including support for existing resources that contribute to its strategic priorities. The Plan should include the development and coordination of five components:

- Best Practices
- Research
- Education
- Awareness
- Treatment

Key Points

- Fire fighters, other first responders and military personnel experience mental strain and are at risk of PTSD as a result of graphic and difficult scenes they are required to witness in the course of their duties
- Sixty-eight first responders and military personnel were reported to have died by suicide in 2016, and 10 so far in 2017
- There is a clear role for the federal government to play on this issue to ensure all first responders and military personnel across Canada have resources available to address mental health issues
- Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Minister Ralph Goodale was mandated to establish a National Action Plan for PTSD and sought stakeholder input in a National Roundtable in January, 2016
- Two House of Commons Committees have heard testimony on this issue and agreed there is a need for action on the part of the federal government
- The federal government should continue working toward a National Action Plan on PTSD and ensure the IAFF remains a key stakeholder

Funding:

As the plan is centralized, it can be scalable and can build on existing resources. Implementing a broad-based comprehensive plan to include direct, national access to PTSD support would reduce the burden on our health care system.

For more information about this issue or any other issue affecting Canada’s professional fire fighters, visit www.iaff.org/canada or contact the IAFF Canadian Office at (613) 567-8988. The International Association of Fire Fighters represents 302,000 professional fire fighters in North America, including over 23,000 in Canada. The IAFF is affiliated with the AFL-CIO and the Canadian Labour Congress.