

Share it. Don't wear it.

B.C. committee launches awareness campaign to promote positive mental health amongst first responders

By Gord Ditchburn

If the image on the right seems familiar, you may already know about the awareness campaign aimed at first responders in British Columbia called “Share it. Don't wear it.” These particular images and words were chosen to represent the mental health challenges firefighters face in their day-to-day work.

What you may not know is who's behind the campaign – which includes a website full of tools and resources for those who are looking for help and those who are looking to help – or how it came to be. This article describes the process so that other jurisdictions that see a need for something similar can benefit from our experiences.

In December 2015, the multi-agency B.C. First Responders' Mental Health committee was formed. Chaired by Work-SafeBC, its mission was quickly defined. The mission was to actively promote positive mental health and provide the leadership and recommended practices that first responders, their communities, and their leaders need.

To ensure a co-ordinated, cohesive approach, committee members were recruited from fire, law enforcement, ambulance services, and dispatch – representing workers and employers from paid, volunteer, rural, urban, and First Nations emergency services. Once formed, the committee identified its main goals, one of which was to develop and pilot an anti-stigma campaign, incorporating champions from various first-responder groups.

The campaign came out of a four-month research initiative in which the committee surveyed first responders to better understand their attitudes toward mental health issues and the behaviours that encourage people to seek or offer help – or that deter them. Through in-depth interviews and an online discussion board, participants identified existing resources and those they felt were lacking. First responders from diverse backgrounds and levels of experience completed the study.

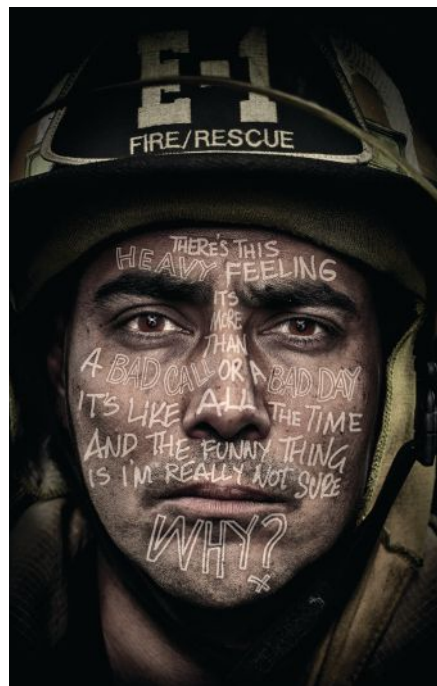
Equipped with those results, the committee held intensive focus groups to explore the forms stigma takes, what it looks like from leaders and colleagues, and how it can be personal, social or organizational in nature.

Posters which can be downloaded from the website were designed with a blank space at the bottom to highlight resources, meetings, events and workshops, so that the emphasis is on action. The aim is to associate the poster with a specific, time-limited event, after which it is taken down, so the image doesn't become background noise.

The quotes that appear over the faces of firefighters on the posters were collected during in-depth interviews with our colleagues, who told us, “I'm tired all the time. I snap at my wife, the kids, even the guys at work. It's like I'm under a cloud and I just can't seem to get out from under it. You know?”

They also told us, “There's this heavy feeling. It's more than a bad call or a bad day. It's like all the time and the funny thing is I'm really not sure why.”

Respondents spoke powerfully about the need for a cultural change – a shift that must happen at the leadership level. They asked for a single source of information and resources to support colleagues and to seek information for themselves. A website was created for this purpose, but that is not its only purpose. We hope the site, which houses self-assessment and self-care tools, an event calendar and re-



Posters have been developed as part of an anti-stigma campaign to spark conversations about mental health.

sources for those in crisis, will spark larger conversations about mental health.

Over the past year, the B.C. Professional Fire Fighters, in co-ordination with Matt Johnston of Centered Lifestyle Services, have worked very hard to build a province-wide network of occupationally-aware mental health professionals. Training has been offered across the province and is now being offered nationally for therapists interested in gaining a better understanding of occupational stress injuries, the stoic first-responder subculture and the unique ways that mental-health challenges may present.

I invite you to send us your thoughts and suggestions on how we can best meet the mental-health needs of firefighters.

Please note that the committee will be holding the first-ever B.C. First Responders' Mental Health Conference on Jan. 31 and Feb. 1, 2019. For more details please see the website at bcfirstresponders-mentalhealth.com. 🔥