

# ‘This is their 9 / 11’: Mental health professionals fear uptick in stress issues and suicides following coronavirus pandemic

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An FDNY Paramedic and EMTs outside Elmhurst Hospital in Queens, on March 26, 2020. (Gardiner Anderson/for New York Daily News)

First it was the coronavirus pandemic, then the violent protests over the death of George Floyd. For the city’s first responders, it’s all become too much.

In the coming weeks, they will begin to come to terms with the tragedies and tumult they have witnessed the last three months.

Fearing cops and first responders will begin suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as the city slowly returns to normal, mental health professionals are taking proactive steps to get them the help they need.

“There are concerns that there is going to be an onset of post-traumatic stress,” said Dr. Peter Killeen a former Port Authority cop who has co-authored four books on how law enforcement can better handle stress on the job.

“For the younger cops, this is their 9/11,” Killeen said about the coronavirus pandemic. “Although it is radically different, it is going to impact them psychologically and physically, especially when it’s all over and they start asking like we did after 9/11 – ‘What the hell was that?’”

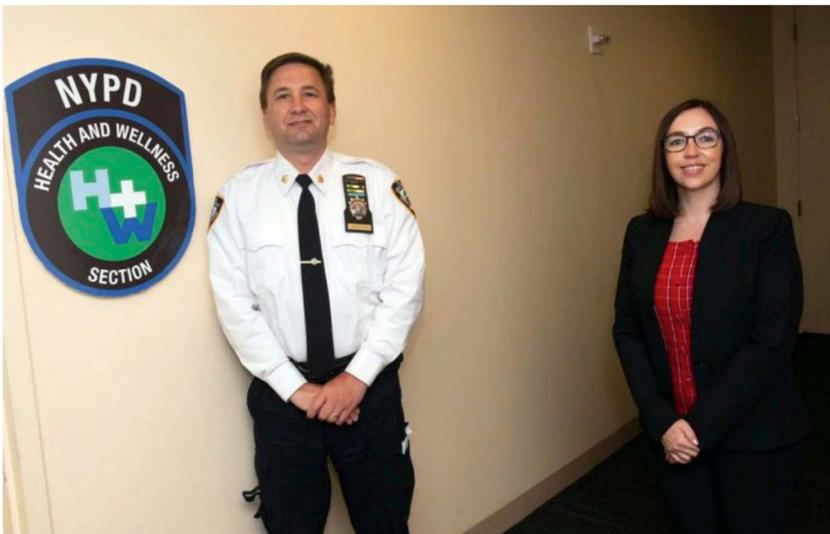


A memorial to those who died from coronavirus, outside Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

“This is also going on and on,” said Killeen who consults on mental health issues for the PAPD union. “These officers are constantly adapting to the changes, so the necessary transition back to normal won’t happen smoothly.”

The NYPD’s Health and Wellness Section is already ramping up access to mental health resources and peer support programs that were put in place after an uptick in suicides last year.

Rank-and-file cops are reaching out for help, according to Deputy Inspector Mark Wachter, the commander of the NYPD’s Health and Wellness section.



Commander of the NYPD Employee Assistance Unit Health and Wellness Section, Deputy Inspector Mark Wachter, and Dr. Adria Adams. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

On an average week before coronavirus, up to 500 NYPD employees took advantage of the mental health resources available through their department-issued cellphones, Wachter said. When the pandemic started in the city, that number jumped to about 2,500.

With the spread of COVID-19 diminishing, about 800 NYPD members are still using those resources on a regular basis. Last week about 140 new employees were reviewing the content, which includes ways to cope with grief and reduce stress, Wachter said.

“When COVID happened here, we had a lot of our resources already in place,” said Wachter. “With about 140 new people joining the site each week, that’s how we know we are making a difference.”

“Just last week we released an 11-part training series to all of our members about mental health warning signs and stress on the job,” he said. “Within in one week, we had 17,000 members view the entire 11-part series.”

Yet, despite the increased awareness, suicides are still occurring.

On Sunday, off duty NYPD Police Officer Amy Fantauzzi killed herself in her Bronx apartment. She was the third active member to commit suicide this year. Last year, 10 NYPD cops killed themselves, about twice the number in a typical year. FDNY firefighters, EMTs and paramedics are being constantly told about the department’s Counseling Services Unit.



The NYPD Employee Assistance Resource Center has information that can be accessed by cops across the city. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

Word is even being spread through the department’s dispatch system, so the CSU’s contact information will routinely appear on all computers in FDNY ambulances, a spokesman said.

“Our members have been through such a difficult stretch the last two plus months, which have been the busiest ever for emergency medical calls in New York City history,” FDNY spokesman Frank Dwyer said. “The goal now is to reach every single FDNY member who has been responding throughout this pandemic to offer and educate them to the counseling available from the department.”

Between March 19 and May 29, FDNY members took part in 3,077 counseling sessions with a licensed therapist, about a 25% jump from the same time last year, officials said.

In order to combat any future issues of PTSD and post pandemic stress-related issues, unit peer counselors will be visiting each firehouse and EMS station to offer services in the next coming weeks. Special attention will be focused on the 400 probationary firefighters and EMS workers who graduated as the pandemic ravaged the city, a department spokesman said.

In April, rookie FDNY EMT John Mondello, 23, fatally shot himself in Queens, authorities said. While he began his career during the pandemic, it was not clear if his suicide was linked to his work.



A sticker posted in NYPD lockers lists health resources. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

The NYPD has also begun a massive advertising campaign showcasing its mental health resources. In the next few weeks, a cop won’t be able to close his locker or turn the ignition on his NYPD cruiser without being reminded of the Mental Health and Wellness Unit.

Stickers advertising the unit’s resources will be put on each locker throughout the department. Key fobs for all department vehicles already have the NYPD Health and Wellness numbers on it.

When the pandemic hit, the NYPD’s peer support and group support programs were still in place, but quickly moved to cyberspace, said Dr. Adria Adams, director of the department’s health and wellness section.

“We have 50 people, both civilian and uniformed members in these online groups on certain weeks and sometimes we’ve had up to 100 people at a time,” she said. “It’s something we want to offer to give people the social support they need at a time like this.”

Adams agreed that the pandemic and civil unrest could create an “evolving mental crisis” for cops and other first responders.

“We are flattening that curve in our department by providing the mental health resources and support they will need to take care of themselves,” she said. “If the symptoms continue into a more serious condition, we can handle that too.”



A key fob that each NYPD vehicle will have attached lists the phone number the Employee Assistance Unit as pictured Thursday, May 5, 2020 in Manhattan. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

Killeen created Operation Longevity, a program designed to reduce stress in law enforcement that is being field tested in the PAPD academy.

Exercise, like yoga and doing something as simple as one good deed a day can easily help reduce stress and prevent suicide or conflicts with the public, Killeen said.

“We can’t blame administration, the media or our community for the way we feel, we have to look into ourselves and change the way we perceive the world,” Killeen explained. “If someone does a random act of kindness a day than the chances of that person taking their own life diminishes exponentially.”