



March 23, 2023

Representative Dacia Grayber, Chair  
House Committee on Emergency Management, General Government, and Veterans  
Oregon State Legislature  
900 Court Street  
Salem, Or 97301

RE: HB 3426

Chair Grayber, Vice Chairs, Lewis and Tran, and members of the committee:

For the record, my name is Brian Stewart. I serve on the Board of Directors for the Oregon Fire Chiefs Association and am an Assistant Chief for Clackamas Fire District 1. I am chair of the Governor's Fire Service Policy Council's subcommittee on Firefighter Behavioral Health and was a director with the Oregon Safety and Health Section for seven years. I am testifying today on behalf of OFCA with our support for HB 3426.

Within four months of becoming a firefighter/paramedic, I was having nightmares and struggling emotionally due to a traumatic call. I was not in a supportive environment and did not have ready access to resources to help me through it. I almost left the career. While I managed, I can still recall the incident and the despair and depression that I experienced in the months afterward. I've sat in critical incident stress debriefings facilitated by individual's that were not connected in a meaningful way to the fire service and others they were not trained in critical stress debriefing. I left one debriefing doing worse than when I walked in. I have sat with and heard from others with similar experiences.

While strides have been made in improving firefighter and first responder behavioral health in the last twenty years, we remain unable to assure that those who care for the public will likewise be cared for. I have been fortunate to work alongside others, chaplains, peer supporters, clinicians, firefighters, fire chiefs, and allied organizations, to identify and make available reliable, easily accessible behavioral health resources for our firefighters and first responders. There is no one-size-fits-all for mental health – but the consistent finding is that we must provide trusted and culturally competent options from which an individual can find help that works for them.

Firefighters die by suicide at a rate higher than the general population. For those in crisis, we must provide a gateway to help - one that removes barriers to accessing it. 9-8-8 is easy to remember, to train on, and to share with others. It will become part of the nation's lexicon as has 9-1-1. From childhood through adulthood, individuals will know 9-8-8. In the years to come, recognition and familiarity will make 9-8-8 a likely option for those in crisis. But that alone will not remove the barrier to accessing it for firefighters and first responders if they don't trust in the resource. It is a tremendous effort for individuals considering suicide to call for help – what may be there only call they can force themselves to make must be receptive, supportive, and trusted.

Last year, I called the National Suicide Prevention Hotline to help someone going through crisis that wasn't in a place to make the call themselves. The call left me frustrated and less than optimistic that the resources I was referred to would be of much help. My experience there was similar to that with the reports I've heard from others looking for assistance – that resources for specialized populations are not adequate.

Firefighters and first responders are a specialized population. We experience life differently than the general population. These experiences - including repeated traumatic exposures and the highs of serving others - build bonds within our communities and allows us to trust others that have shared our experiences or have been trained in our cultures, work environments, and struggles.

House Bill 3426 recognizes firefighters and first responders as a high-risk and specialized population for suicide prevention and behavioral health crises intervention. This bill will provide individuals staffing 9-8-8 services with training on providing culturally competent care and follow-up services to firefighters and first responders accessing the 9-8-8 system and on transferring calls to appropriate specialized centers. Within Oregon, HB 3426 will provide individuals with easily accessed and trusted support - critical factors for those firefighters and first responders in crisis.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Brian Stewart

Director, Oregon Fire Chiefs Association  
Assistant Chief, Clackamas Fire District 1