

Behavioral Health and Care Policy

Appendix A -

Behavioral Health Procedures

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1. What Is a Critical Incident?

A critical incident is any event that has the potential to overwhelm a person's normal coping mechanisms. For career firefighters, this may include — but is not limited to:

- Line-of-duty death or serious injury of a fellow firefighter
- Mass casualty or multi-fatality incident
- Death or serious injury involving a child
- Incidents involving extraordinary graphic, disturbing, or violent content
- Extended rescue or recovery operations with traumatic outcomes
- Exposure to suicide — particularly of a colleague or fellow first responder
- Repeated exposure to traumatic calls that accumulate over a shift or career
- Any incident the member, company officer, or union representative identifies as potentially distressing

Officers should err on the side of activating support resources when uncertain. Early intervention reduces the long-term impact of cumulative occupational trauma.

Cumulative Trauma — A Career-Specific Risk

Career firefighters face trauma not just from single incidents, but from years of repeated exposures. Washington State law (RCW 51.32.185, SB 6214 2018) specifically recognizes cumulative trauma PTSD as an occupational disease for career first responders — a protection NOT extended to most workers. Department culture must recognize that a member's breaking point may come years after their worst call.

2. Continuum of Care — Levels of Intervention

This policy establishes five progressive levels of care following a critical incident. Escalation is based on individual needs and professional assessment — it is not strictly linear. Members may enter at any level depending on their situation and history.

Level	Intervention	Timing	Who Leads	Outcome
1	Defusing	Within 8 hours	Company Officer/Peer	Immediate stabilization
2	CISD/CISM	24-72 hours	Both: CISM Team Career: + MHP	Structured processing
3	Peer Support & Follow-up	Days-weeks	Chaplain/Trained Peer	Ongoing monitoring
4	Career: L&I Workers' Comp Claim Vol: BVFF Mental Health Claim	Career: Within 1 year* Vol: Within 90 days	Career: L&I/ Union Rep/ Atty Vol: BVFF/ Local Board	Formal benefits coverage

5	Both: Professional Counseling Career: IAFF COE	As clinically needed	Career: Licensed Therapist/ IAFF COE Vol: Licensed Therapist	Clinical treatment and recovery
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****For single-event PTSD injury claims. Occupational disease (cumulative PTSD) claims have different timelines. See Level 4: Filing L&I Claim******

3. Level 1 — Defusing (Immediate, Within 8 Hours Post-Incident)

A defusing is an informal, brief group conversation conducted immediately after a critical incident — typically at the station after demobilization. It is not a debriefing and is not facilitated by a mental health professional.

Purpose:

- Allow crew members to briefly express reactions in a safe, low-pressure setting
- Normalize stress responses as expected human reactions — not weakness
- Identify individuals who may need additional support
- Begin the transition from operational mindset to rest and recovery

Guidelines:

- Participation is voluntary and never coerced
- Led by the company officer, a WSCFF-trained peer supporter, or union peer support team lead
- Duration: 20–45 minutes
- No written records: content is confidential
- Officer or peer should follow up individually with any member who appeared withdrawn or did not speak

4. Level 2 — Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) / CISM Activation (24–72 Hours)

Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) is a comprehensive crisis intervention system. The Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) is a structured, seven-phase group process led by a trained CISM team that includes both peer supporters and a licensed mental health professional.

When to Activate CISM:

- Any incident meeting the definition in Section 1 of this guideline
- When three or more crew members show signs of acute distress after a defusing
- At the request of the company officer, fire chief, union local president, or any member
- Following any line-of-duty death, serious injury, or pediatric fatality

CISM Team Composition:

- ICISF-certified peer supporters — active or retired career firefighters

- Licensed mental health professional (MHP) specializing in trauma and first responder culture
- WSCFF District Behavioral Health Coordinator (available per district — see wscff.org for your district contact)
- Optional: department or IAFF-affiliated chaplain

CISD Seven-Phase Structure:

- Introduction — Team introductions, ground rules, voluntary/confidential nature explained
- Fact Phase — What happened? Each member describes their role
- Thought Phase — What were your first thoughts during the incident?
- Reaction Phase — What was the worst part for you personally?
- Symptom Phase — What physical, cognitive, or behavioral changes have you noticed?
- Teaching Phase — Normalizing reactions; psychoeducation on stress and cumulative trauma
- Re-entry Phase — Summary, individual follow-up plan, resource distribution

IMPORTANT: CISD Participation Is Always Voluntary

Per ICISF standards, attendance at a CISD must be voluntary. Departments may make it standard practice (i.e., automatically offered after qualifying events), but it cannot be compelled. Members who decline must be offered individual peer support and resource referrals.

How to Request a CISM Response:

- Contact Grant County CISM Team through GCFD3 Chaplain
- Contact your WSCFF District Behavioral Health Coordinator — wscff.org/health/behavioral-health/behavioral-health-district-map
- Code 4 Northwest — Free, confidential, first-responder-run crisis response: 425-243-5092 (24/7)
- Safe Call Now — Confidential first responder peer support line: 206-459-3020 (24/7)
- IAFF Foundation — Peer support deployment for major incidents: iafffoundation.org
- For DNR or wildland fire incidents, coordinate through agency chain of command per DNR CISM protocols

5. Level 3 — Peer Support & Follow-Up (Ongoing, Days to Weeks)

After the CISD, ongoing individual support from trained peers and chaplains is essential.

*The WSCFF has invested substantially in a statewide peer support infrastructure specifically for career firefighters.

WSCFF Peer Support Infrastructure:

- The WSCFF Behavioral Health Committee (established Convention Resolution 23-04) coordinates statewide peer support team development, clinician response teams, and mentorship partnerships

- Each WSCFF district has a designated District Behavioral Health Coordinator — a career firefighter trained in peer support and resource navigation
- Local IAFF peer support teams are active across Washington — check with your local union for your team's contact

Peer Supporter Responsibilities:

- Check in individually with affected crew members within 72 hours of the CISD
- Provide a non-judgmental, confidential listening presence — not therapy
- Recognize warning signs and escalate to Level 4 or Level 5 as appropriate
- Help members navigate L&I claim filing, IAFF COE referrals, or local EAP resources (Career)
- Assist members in accessing Level 5 or Level 4 resources
- Maintain confidentiality unless an imminent safety risk is present

Chaplain Support:

- Available for spiritual care, grief support, and informal pastoral counseling
- Can support both crew members and their families
- Not a substitute for clinical mental health care, but a valued complement

PIIERS — Documenting Exposures:

Career firefighters can use the Personal Injury Illness Exposure Reporting System (PIIERS), available through WSCFF at wscff.org, to anonymously document traumatic exposures throughout their career. This creates a confidential record that may support future L&I claims.

Family Support:

- Stronger Families — Relationship skills program for first responder families (Pentagon-endorsed): strongerfamilies.org
- IAFF Center of Excellence Family Resources — iaffrecoverycenter.com/family
- Firefighter/Family Crisis & Support Line: 1-844-525-FIRE (3473) — 24/7 for members and family
- IAFF Online Behavioral Health Awareness Course — free, self-paced, available to all at lms.iaff.org

6. Level 4 — Career Firefighters: Filing an L&I Workers' Compensation Claim

When professional counseling or treatment is needed as a result of a traumatic event or occupational disease arising from career fire service, the costs — and disability compensation — may be covered through a workers' compensation claim with the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries (L&I) under RCW 51.32.

6.1 Washington State PTSD Presumption Law — Know Your Rights

Washington State has some of the strongest firefighter PTSD protections in the nation. Career firefighters benefit from two distinct legal pathways:

Two PTSD Claim Pathways for Career Firefighters

INJURY CLAIM (RCW 51.08.100): Single traumatic event causing PTSD. Always available. File within 1 year.

OCCUPATIONAL DISEASE CLAIM (RCW 51.32.185 / SB 6214, 2018):

Cumulative trauma PTSD as an occupational disease. Available to career firefighters with 10+ years of service. Rebuttable presumption applies — PTSD is presumed to be work-related; the employer must prove otherwise. Both pathways require DSM-5 diagnosis. Consult your union rep or an L&I attorney for guidance.

Who Qualifies for the Presumption:

- Full-time, fully compensated firefighters who passed a civil service examination (RCW 41.26.030)
- Fire investigators and certain supervisory personnel
- Private sector firefighters in departments with 50 or more firefighters
- Full-time, fully compensated city or county EMTs (RCW 18.73.030)
- Must have served a minimum of 10 years before PTSD develops or manifests
- A pre-employment exam ruling out PTSD is required for the presumption to apply to new hires — if no exam was given by the employer, no corresponding requirement exists for the member

Important Exclusions:

- PTSD directly attributed to disciplinary action, work evaluation, job transfer, layoff, demotion, or termination — even if traumatic — does not qualify under the presumption
- Members with fewer than 10 years of service may still file injury claims for single traumatic events

6.2 What Is Covered

Under RCW 51.32, L&I workers' compensation for career firefighters may cover:

- All medically necessary mental health treatment — individual therapy, group therapy, medication management
- Intensive Outpatient Programs (IOP) and inpatient psychiatric treatment when clinically indicated
- Residential treatment at the IAFF Center of Excellence (treatment costs may be covered; contact IAFF COE for details)
- Time-loss compensation — wage replacement if mental health condition results in inability to work
- Vocational rehabilitation if PTSD permanently limits return to fire service duties
- Mileage and travel costs for treatment

6.3 Critical Deadlines — DO NOT MISS

- INJURY CLAIM: File within 1 year of the traumatic event (RCW 51.16.040). Do not delay.
- OCCUPATIONAL DISEASE: File within 2 years of the date you knew or should have known the condition was work-related (RCW 51.28.055).
- IMPORTANT: File a claim even if you are unsure — delay can extinguish your rights. Your union rep or an L&I attorney can help you determine the correct claim type.

6.4 Step-by-Step: How to File a Mental Health / PTSD L&I Claim

Step 1 — Seek Medical Evaluation and Document Your Condition

- See a licensed mental health professional or physician — ask them to document the diagnosis and its connection to your work
- Use language carefully: describe whether your PTSD is from a single traumatic event (injury) or accumulated over time (occupational disease) — this affects which legal pathway applies
- Use PIIERS (wscff.org) to document your exposure history if you have not already done so

Step 2 — Report the Claim

- File online at ini.wa.gov, at your doctor's office, or by calling L&I at 1-800-547-8367
- If your employer is state-funded (most departments): file a Report of Industrial Injury or Occupational Disease (Form F242-130-000) — your doctor's office can initiate this
- If your employer is self-insured: contact your employer for a Self-Insurer Accident Report (SIF-2)
 - Most major city and county fire departments in WA are state-funded; check with your union rep if unsure

Step 3 — Notify Your Union

- Contact your IAFF local union representative immediately after filing
- Your local may have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), peer support team, and union-referred legal resources
- Contact your WSCFF District Behavioral Health Coordinator for additional navigation support

Step 4 — Attend All Medical Appointments and Follow Through on Treatment

- L&I may require an independent medical examination (IME) — attend all scheduled appointments
- Keep records of all treatment, mileage, and time lost from work
- Report any changes in your condition to your provider and L&I

Step 5 — Appeal if Denied

- If your claim is denied, you have the right to appeal to the Board of Industrial Insurance Appeals (BIIA)
- Washington State reimburses attorney fees if a firefighter wins their appeal — you can hire an L&I attorney at no upfront cost
- Contact your IAFF local or the WSCFF for referrals to attorneys experienced in first responder L&I claims

L&I Contact Information
Washington State L&I: ini.wa.gov 1-800-547-8367
File a Claim Online: ini.wa.gov/claims/file-a-claim
WSCFF Behavioral Health: wascff.org/health/behavioral-health
WSCFF District Behavioral Health Coordinator Map: wascff.org/health/behavioral-health/behavioral-health-district-map
Governing Laws: RCW 51.32 (Industrial Insurance) RCW 51.32.185 (Presumption) SB 6214 (2018)

7. Level 4 — Volunteer Firefighters: Filing a BVFF Mental Health Claim

When professional counseling or treatment is needed as a result of a qualifying incident occurring in the performance of duty, the costs may be covered through a mental health claim filed with the Washington State Board for Volunteer Firefighters (BVFF) under RCW 41.24.

7.1 Who Is Eligible

- Active volunteers registered and covered under RCW 41.24
- The injury or mental health condition must arise from volunteer fire, EMS, or reserve law enforcement service
- Mental health claims are treated identically to physical injury claims under the relief provisions

7.2 What Is Covered

Under RCW 41.24, BVFF relief provisions cover medical services — including mental health counseling and treatment — that are necessary as a direct result of an injury or condition sustained in the performance of duty. Covered services may include:

- Performance of duty includes: responding to or returning from an alarm, emergency call, or law enforcement duty; work at or about company quarters or fire station; training and drills; or emergency work under direction of the chief
- Individual outpatient counseling / therapy
- Psychiatric evaluation and medication management
- Intensive outpatient programs (IOP) when clinically indicated
- Disability compensation if the mental health condition renders the member unable to work at their regular job or occupation (not to exceed six months, with different rates applicable after six months)
- Mileage reimbursement for treatment outside the member's home area

7.3 Critical Deadlines — DO NOT MISS

- 90 DAYS: An accident/incident report postcard must reach the State Board within 90 days of the incident.
- 1 YEAR: The first claim for any accident must be received within one year — claims are legally closed after this.
- Report every incident — even if it seems minor. Early reporting preserves the member's rights.

7.4 Step-by-Step: How to File a Mental Health Claim

Step 1 — Report the Incident (Within 90 Days)

- Complete a BVFF Accident Report Postcard (provided by the State Board to all departments)
- Mail it to the State Board immediately — do not wait to determine severity
- The company officer or local board secretary typically assists with this step

Step 2 — Seek Treatment and Document Everything

- Seek care from a licensed mental health professional (see Level 5 resources below)
- Ask the provider to document the connection between your symptoms and the qualifying incident
- Retain all bills, receipts, and provider documentation

Step 3 — Submit the Formal Claim

- Contact the BVFF office to receive claim forms and guidance
- Submit bills for services rendered, along with medical documentation
- For disability compensation claims, a State of Washington Invoice Voucher must be prepared by the local board
- Attach documentation of regular wages to the first disability claim
- Secure approval of the local board of trustees before submitting disability vouchers

Step 4 — Follow Up and Appeal if Needed

- The BVFF staff will review and adjudicate the claim
- If denied, the member may appeal per WAC 491-04 — the local board cannot appeal on their behalf
- Mileage for treatment outside the home area can be reimbursed via an Invoice Voucher with travel dates and miles

Website: bvff.wa.gov

Mental Health & Claims Contact: Hailey — haileyb@bvff.wa.gov

Mailing Address: 605 - 11th Ave. SE #207, Olympia, WA

Governing Law: RCW 41.24 (Volunteer Firefighters' and Reserve Officers' Relief and Pension Act)

8. Level 5 — Career Firefighters: Professional Counseling & IAFF Clinical Resources

Members who require behavioral health care beyond peer support and Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) should be referred to appropriate clinical mental health resources. This includes individuals experiencing persistent or worsening symptoms such as acute stress disorder (ASD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, or significant impairment in daily functioning. Both career and volunteer personnel have access to professional treatment resources, including clinicians experienced in working with first responders and, when appropriate, specialized treatment programs.

8.1 IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery

The IAFF Center of Excellence (COE) is a one-of-a-kind residential treatment facility for IAFF members — not available to the general public. It is designed from the ground up by firefighters, for firefighters.

- Specializes in PTSD, substance use disorder, depression, anxiety, and co-occurring conditions exclusive to fire service culture
- Staffed by clinicians and peer mentors with deep fire service knowledge and experience
- Located on a 15-acre campus in Upper Marlboro, Maryland (outside Washington, D.C.) — including state-of-the-art gym and fitness facilities to support recovery
- Complete confidentiality: treatment cannot be disclosed to your department, family, or anyone without your explicit permission
- IAFF members are twice as likely as the general population to develop PTSD — the COE is built specifically to address this

IAFF Center of Excellence — Contact & Access

24/7 Admissions Line: 1-855-900-8437

Clinical Outreach (for local therapist referrals): Mojones@advancedrecoveryystems.com

Website: iaffrecoverycenter.com

Available to all active IAFF members and their family members

8.2 Washington Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC) — First Responder Wellness Program

The Washington State CJTC provides FREE peer support training and maintains a directory of culturally competent mental health providers for first responders — available statewide.

- Free Basic Peer Support Training (40 hours, offered six times per year)
- Advanced and Executive Peer Support Training Available
- Directory of vetted mental health and substance use disorder professionals with first responder cultural competency
- Model Policy for First Responder Peer Support Programs — free download
- Contact: cjtc.wa.gov/first-responder-wellness-program

8.3 Finding a First Responder-Competent Outpatient Therapist

When residential treatment is not needed but outpatient counseling is, refer members to providers who understand fire service culture:

- FBHA (Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance) Provider Directory — vetted providers with firsthand fire service experience or FBHA training: ffbha.org
- NVFC Behavioral Health Provider Directory — nvfc.org/health
- WSCFF District Behavioral Health Coordinator — can provide local provider referrals by district
- IAFF COE Clinical Outreach — for local referrals when residential treatment is not appropriate: MoJones@advancedrecovery.com

Referral Indicators — When to Escalate to Level 5:

- Persistent nightmares, flashbacks, or intrusive memories lasting more than one to two weeks
- Significant sleep disturbance, appetite changes, or physical complaints without medical cause
- Social withdrawal, increased irritability, substance use as a coping mechanism
- Inability to return to normal duties, activities, or relationships
- Any expression of suicidal ideation or hopelessness — escalate immediately (see Section 6)

Culture Note — The Barrier of 'Toughness'

The fire service culture of self-sufficiency is one of the most significant barriers to care. WSCFF leadership has noted: 'Firefighters are resilient until they are not. Leaders who model help-seeking behavior are the most powerful tool a department has. Mental health is no different than rolling an ankle on the fireground — get it treated.'

9. Level 5 — Volunteer Firefighters: Professional Counseling (Licensed Mental Health Provider)

Finding a First Responder-Competent Therapist:

- NVFC Behavioral Health Provider Directory — vetted providers familiar with fire service culture (nvfc.org)
- Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA) — provider directory and screening resources
- IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health — 24/7 line: 1-855-900-8437
- Code 4 Northwest — confidential referral network: 425-243-5092

Culture Note

One of the most common barriers to seeking help is the fear of working with a provider who 'doesn't get it. Always direct volunteers to providers with documented first responder experience or FBHA-verified training. Leadership modeling help-seeking behavior is one of the most powerful tools available.

10. Warning Signs Requiring Immediate Action

The following symptoms require immediate escalation — regardless of where the member is in the care continuum — to a mental health professional and/or crisis resources:

- Any expression of suicidal ideation, thoughts of self-harm, or hopelessness
- Psychotic symptoms — hallucinations, paranoia, severe disorientation
- Inability to perform basic self-care — eating, sleeping, personal hygiene
- Significant aggression, violence, or threats directed at self or others
- Blackouts, severe dissociation, or inability to distinguish reality
- Complete emotional shutdown or isolation from all colleagues and family

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988
Code 4 Northwest (WA Career First Responders): 425-243-5092
Safe Call Now (Public Safety Personnel & Families): 206-459-3020
IAFF Center of Excellence: 1-855-900-8437
Firefighter/Family Crisis & Support Line: 1-844-525-FIRE (3473)
Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
Share the Load Program (NVFC): 888-731-3473

11. Confidentiality

All peer support interactions, CISM proceedings, and treatment records are confidential. The following principles apply:

- CISD and defusing proceedings are not recorded and are not shared with department administration
- Peer supporters are bound by confidentiality — they do not report to management
- IAFF COE treatment is completely confidential — your department cannot be informed without your written consent
- L&I claim records are governed by state privacy law; your employer will have access to functional limitation information required for return-to-duty determination, but not full treatment records
- RCW 5.60.060 provides peer support communication privilege for first responders in Washington State — peer support conversations may be protected from disclosure in legal proceedings
- The only exception to any confidentiality is an imminent threat to the life of the member or others — the appropriate response is to connect the member with emergency crisis resources immediately

12. Quick Reference Resources

Resource	Contact	Available
WSCFF Behavioral Health	wscff.org/health/behavioral-health	Online / Business hours
WSCFF District BH Coordinator	wscff.org (district map)	Contact your district
IAFF Center of Excellence	1-855-900-8437 iaffrecoverycenter.com	24/7
IAFF COE Clinical Outreach	Mojones@advancedrecoveryystems.com	Business hours
Firefighter/Family Crisis Line	1-844-525-FIRE (3473)	24/7
Code 4 Northwest (WA)	425-243-5092	24/7
Safe Call Now	206-459-3020	24/7
988 Crisis Lifeline	Call or text 988	24/7
Crisis Text Line	Text HOME to 741741	24/7
Washington State L&I	lni.wa.gov 1-800-547-8367	Business hours
CJTC First Responder Wellness	cjtc.wa.gov/first-responder-wellness	Online / Business hours
FBHA Provider Directory	ffbha.org	Online
PIIERS Exposure Tracking	wscff.org/health	Online / Anonymous
IAFF Behavioral Health Training	iaff.org/behavioral-health lms.iaff.org	Online
Share the Load (NVFC)	888-731-3473	24/7
WSFFA Health Resources	wsffa.org/health	Online
BVFF (Claims & Benefits)	haileyb@bvff.wa.gov bvff.wa.gov	Business hours