

# TWO MORE CHAINS



Spring 2017 ▲ Vol. 7 Issue 1 ▲ Produced and distributed quarterly by the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

## Suicide in the Wildland Fire Service

*Information and Insights from the Wildland Fire Agency Subject Matter Experts*

We reached out to the following agency SMEs for their input: **Kim Lightley**, Critical Incident Response Program Management Specialist for the U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management program; **Ted Mason**, National Fire Safety Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (who also reached out to **Karen Miranda Gleason**, Public Affairs Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service); **Vicki Minor**, Executive Director of the Wildland Firefighter Foundation; **Nelda St. Clair**, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager for the Bureau of Land Management; and **Miranda Stuart**, Fire Operations Specialist for the National Park Service.

By Paul Keller

**A** District Assistant Fire Management Officer recently contacted us at the Lessons Learned Center. “Two years ago after a fellow employee took their life by suicide, it occurred to me that I now know more wildland firefighters—those of whom I have directly worked with—who have died by suicide, than who have been killed on the job,” he informed.

“I got to wonder,” this AFMO continued, “what is going on here? Is this the wildland firefighting community’s dirty little secret? Is the wildland fire community ready to address this?” He added how structure fire departments “are actively working on educating their ranks on the suicide awareness and prevention topic, yet it seems that in the wildland fire arena we are still tip-toeing around it.”

Is that true?

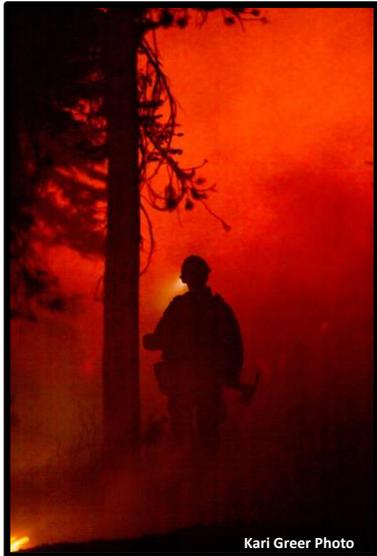
To get the latest updates on the subject of suicide, we asked the wildland fire agencies’ subject matter experts about this AFMO’s concerns, along with several other supporting questions that we posed to these folks.

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This is a special companion, supporting document to the [Spring 2017 Issue of Two More Chains](#).

### **The Questions We Asked the Wildland Fire Agency Subject Matter Experts**

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Kari Greer Photo

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“Suicide isn’t necessarily a ‘dirty little secret’,” answers Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager for the Bureau of Land Management. “It’s more a lack of knowledge on suicide and behavioral health.” Nelda, along with a host of various agency experts knowledgeable on the subject of suicide, report that suicide rates within the wildland fire community are on the rise.

“I personally don’t like the term ‘dirty little secret’,” says Kim Lightley, Critical Incident Response Program Management Specialist for the U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management program. “I think we are very much aware of the issue of suicide in the fire service. It is not a secret. Be it in the fire houses of the structural world, to the district fire offices of the natural resource world, death by suicide has touched the lives of many.”

***“We work hard to keep our bodies fit for our jobs, but our minds and emotional health do not get the same attention in our culture-training.”***

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist  
National Park Service**

“We need to educate our workforce on the risks and prevalence of suicide among wildland firefighters,” confirms Ted Mason, National Fire Safety Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “We need to open the can and talk about the real impacts this form of death has on our workforce.” Mason informs that his agency has acknowledged suicide as an emphasis topic for 2017. “We are planning a three-pronged approach to address it: Awareness, Prevention, and Response.” (For more information, see sidebar on page 6.)

“Our society as a whole does not talk openly about suicide,” points out Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service. “We need to look at the symptoms and treat this as a mental health issue. We work hard to keep our bodies fit for our jobs, but our minds and emotional health do not get the same attention in our culture-training,” explains Miranda, who serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit’s representative on the newly formed National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency.

Miranda reports that this lack of attention on employee mental health is changing. She points out that last September “Six Minutes for Safety” did a piece on suicide and mental wellness for National Suicide Awareness Day. She says the U.S. Forest Service has developed programs to address the topic and that the National Park Service is currently working to develop awareness, prevention, intervention and post-suicide programs. (See sidebar below.)

“We need to work hard in our fire culture to promote mental-emotional wellness and to talk openly about suicide,” Miranda continues. “We need to teach our folks to recognize the symptoms and help their fellow firefighters get help. We need to be better at this for sure, but I am pleased that at least steps have begun and the ball is slowly rolling.”

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## Taskforce Assigned to Address Suicide

“Our goal is to lose no more of our National Park Service sisters and brothers to suicide. It will take the efforts of our entire organization to realize this goal,” Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service, said in a recent email that went out to hundreds of NPS employees.

Miranda serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit’s representative on the newly formed National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency. She [attached a flyer](#) focused on the “Emotional Wellness in Combating Suicide” to her email that included a screening test for assessing your mental health (see flyer on right).

“I am asking that you forward this to everyone in your fire community and to your fellow coworkers, requesting that they forward it along to their respective communities and so on,” Miranda said.

“The aim is for these flyers [a second flyer](#) was distributed later that month] to reach all employees across the NPS and that supervisors and employees engage in a conversation about suicide. This conversation is critical if we want to eliminate the negative stigma surrounding suicide and help those in need to realize they are supported, and where they can go for help.”

### Emotional Wellness in Combating Suicide

Emotional Wellness is part of the journey towards eliminating suicides. It involves maintaining your mental and physical health. Taking care of yourself benefits you and your ability to help or care for others.

#### Elements of Individual Emotional Wellness

Being mindful of our own emotional wellness – both physical and emotional – is the first step towards suicide prevention.

Key physical elements that keep our bodies functioning smoothly and well include:

- Good nutrition
- Hydration
- Regular exercise

Key emotional elements that keep our mind and emotions focused and prepared include:

- Awareness of our selves
  - How am I feeling today? How does this compare with last week/other days?
- Awareness of others and our environment
  - How are the people around me feeling? Has there been a significant change in anyone's behavior, mood, or temperament?
- Management of external stressors that we interact with daily,
  - How do I manage daily stressors? Am I managing them or do I feel like they are taking over?

Assess your mental health with a short, anonymous test by the Screening for Mental Health: <http://screening.mentalhealthscreening.org/nvho>

#### How do you take care of yourself?

Whether it's taking a bath, going for a bike ride, or sitting on the porch with a book, take the time you need to support your own emotional wellness. We all have time challenges, and making time for yourself can often seem impossible. Try squeezing something in. Make it a priority. You and your emotional health deserve it!



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**1. Is there a stigma in our wildland fire service culture linked to employee suicide? If so, why is it so difficult to talk about it? How can we start to break down the stigma and create an environment where we can talk about it?**

**Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager, Bureau of Land Management: (After Nelda was contacted by *Two More Chains* for her input, she contacted Asad Rahman, Battalion Chief, Carson City District Office, Bureau of Land Management, to assist with her answer.)**

“Every day, 20-plus military veterans and one active duty soldier takes their own life. Burdened with the stigma associated with mental health issues and the military ‘shame’ surrounding PTS (Post Traumatic Stress), they instead turn to suicide as their only option to relieve their suffering. Suicide rates within the wildland fire community are also on the rise. Many of the reasons for this are the



Original photo by Kari Greer (before artistic effects)

same as what confronts the military. Because we are hiring more and more veterans, we must be aware of how serious this issue is because some of our veterans bring post-traumatic stress-related illnesses and the military’s associated stigmas to our community.

In addition, suicide is happening more and more in wildland fire, not just with our military veterans. We are also seeing PTS in fire personnel who are struggling with issues and incidents that occurred during their careers.

No one, no institution or part of our society, is free from the stigma associated with suicide and mental illness.

Because of this stigma that exists concerning mental illness, many people who need help do not seek it. We refer to this as one of the ‘seconds’ of wildland firefighting. The primary danger of wildland firefighting is inherent to the job itself. One of the secondary dangers is to not admit weakness or to seek help—no matter how bad it gets. Even though there is clear scientific data that indicates irrefutably that a physical connection exists with most mental disorders, many people still stigmatize others because they hold on to the misguided beliefs that people with mental disorders are weak or just lack will power.

Suicide is difficult to talk about for a number of reasons. Many still believe religious views regarding suicide and consider it a sin. Others believe it’s a coward’s way out or a sign of weakness. Others may be suicide survivors with unresolved issues over their loved one who died by suicide. Even when one attempts to discuss suicide—in the hopes that it can be prevented—many people are hesitant to talk about it, or they have a negative reaction. In some cases in the wildland fire service, managers and supervisors will not allow the cause of death to be disclosed or discussed—even though the family has openly disclosed that their loved one died by suicide.

Silence and refusal to discuss mental health issues that are common, such as depression and anxiety, compound the problem of addressing suicide among firefighters. Increasing the stigma associated with having suicidal feelings will increase the suicide rate. Interventions among families, mental health professionals, fire personnel, organizational managers and church activists aimed at decreasing the stigma associated with mental illness and suicide may contribute to the reduction of deaths by suicide.

Ordering crisis intervention after an employee has died by suicide—regardless if they work in fire or not—is an important step in providing pre-incident education, which is part of the suicide intervention process, as well as assisting with individual and organizational healing. Such intervention activities may also reduce the risk of ‘contagion’ or copycat behavior which is common after suicide, especially after someone who is highly respected takes their own life.

Changing this stigma will be an enormous endeavor. What will it require? Raising our voices individually and collectively, examining our own misconceptions, and striving for greater sensitivity. It will also require working with our mental health providers and places of worship, to quell fears of lawsuits and unfavorable public opinion. (A recent article in *The Atlantic* informs: ‘*The stigma of suicide is so strong that it’s often an issue left unspoken, even by doctors. Many psychiatrists refuse to treat chronically suicidal patients, not only because of the stigma that surrounds it even in their profession, but because suicide is the number-one cause of lawsuits brought against mental-health treatment providers.*’) And that’s just a short list.

We must press on, in honor of those we’ve lost, for our suicide attempt survivors, for grieving families, and for our friends and family of the future, who one day will face mental illness issues and suicidal thoughts.”

**Ted Mason, National Fire Safety Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:**

“I don’t know if there’s a ‘stigma,’ but there is certainly a reluctance to talk about death by suicide. I believe part of that stems from some people secretly harboring anger toward the person who took their own life, or in some cases we suffer from survivor’s remorse where we blame ourselves for not seeing the signs and intervening soon enough to stop it. It may also be partly because we are not sure if the survivors are embarrassed by their loved one’s decision to end their life by suicide. It seems more personal than other forms of death and it’s an awkward subject to talk about because everyone reacts so differently to a suicide.”

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***“Part of this stigma in wildland firefighting is the perception that we are tough. We hike up mountains, take on raging fires, run chainsaws, and must be in top physical shape. Weakness is not tolerated in our society very well. I see this all the time.”***

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service**

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service who serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit’s representative on the National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency:**

“There is a stigma linked to suicide and I think even more so to wildland firefighter suicide. We don’t understand it. We don’t have answers. And, for many, there is a religious background that makes it a sin which can run deep in families and lead them to not share when their loved one takes their life by suicide.

Part of this stigma in wildland firefighting is the perception that we are tough. We hike up mountains, take on raging fires, run chainsaws, and must be in top physical shape. Weakness is not tolerated in our society very well. I see this all the time. This attitude lends itself to the stigma and makes it hard to overcome and to create a culture where people feel comfortable talking about suicide, asking for help, and telling someone when they think they might need help. We focus so hard on our own physical wellness but not as closely to our mental and emotional wellness—although, thankfully, that culture is starting to shift.”

**Karen Miranda Gleason, Public Affairs Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: [On her own time, Karen also works as a trained community volunteer who answers the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.]**

“I’ve observed some stigma regarding firefighter suicide. Not so much among people who are open to acknowledging emotions, but among those who are uncomfortable addressing the topic of mental health, especially when it comes to a workforce uncomfortable addressing the topic of mental health, especially when it comes to a workforce known for its toughness and strength.

We can take a lesson from structural fire departments—and our own agency Law Enforcement programs—who view mental stress as a job-related risk that can affect *anyone*. Mental illness can be treated like any other health or safety issue. It can be addressed, mitigated, and hopefully resolved to avoid a deadly outcome.

To help break down the stigma and create an environment where we can talk about suicide:

- Mental health and resilience needs to be routinely monitored and strengthened just like physical health and fitness. Safety messages need to include practical resources and best practices for managing mental health issues like depression, anxiety, PTSD, and susceptibility to other mental health issues when under ongoing stress.
- It’s time to include mental health as part of the annual Refresher training. There are good, ready-made resources available for emergency responders.”

***“It’s time to include mental health as part of the annual Refresher training. There are good, ready-made resources available for emergency responders.”***

**Karen Miranda Gleason, Public Affairs Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

**Kim Lightley, Critical Incident Response Program Management Specialist for the U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Program:**

“Not only is there a stigma in our fire culture, but in our communities and our social environments. In other words, death by suicide is hard to talk about in any circle.

Prevention of suicide needs to start with the dissolution of the stigma associated with seeking mental health help. There is an increasing awareness of the need for open discussions about stress, traumatic stress, and long-term effects of stress injuries caused by life threat, loss, inner conflict or accumulative stress. The provision of safe environments to talk about these issues is critical in fostering long-term mental health.”

### **Recent Wildland Firefighter Deaths by Suicide**

According to Vicki Minor, Executive Director of the Wildland Firefighter Foundation, last year 13 wildland firefighters died by suicide. (During that same year, 13 wildland firefighters also died by line-of-duty deaths.) So far this year, Vicki reports that three wildland firefighters have taken their lives by suicide.

### ***2. What are the suicide statistics for wildland firefighters? Why are suicide statistics so difficult to obtain? Is there any progress being made on this front?***

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service who serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit’s representative on the National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency:**

“They are almost impossible to obtain. The NPS has no tracking method and unless the suicide occurs at work (we recently had three of those situations among our NPS Law Enforcement folks), then we cannot force the family to tell us that is what happened.”

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**Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager, Bureau of Land Management: (After Nelda was contacted by *Two More Chains* for her input, she contacted Asad Rahman, Battalion Chief, Carson City District Office, Bureau of Land Management, to assist with her answer.)**

“At this point in time we have no official data on wildland fire suicide rates. The BLM’s Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) program collects and stores crisis intervention response data which includes suicide. Not all CISM programs coordinate and share reports or data. And while a data reporting system needs to be established, many times CISM is not ordered for a suicide, regardless of if it occurred on or off duty. Furthermore, many suicides are not reported or the family does not list a cause of death. Other suicides occur with personnel who have been laid off for the winter and, as agencies, we therefore don’t know about it. One option is to query life insurance claims, death certificates, and ‘cause of death’. However, life insurance claims won’t capture the seasonal workforce.

The reasons for suicide are commonly reported as the result of depression or PTSD, marriage and relationship problems, or frustration with OWCP claims that are not processed correctly or in a timely manner. In sharing this information with the suicide experts who we work with, the rates of suicides in wildland fire—based on those cases that we know about—are exponentially higher than within the structure fire community.

The Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA) (<http://www.ffbha.org/>) is the most recognized source of suicide data. [This nonprofit group’s mission is to collaborate, develop and implement behavioral health awareness, prevention, intervention, and post-crisis strategies to provide (mostly structure) firefighters with an easily accessible and confidential source of information. Jeff Dill, FBHA founder, explains that ‘the more information we can gather on the firefighter, suicide method, and catalysts that triggered the event, the better prepared we are for proactive training and prevention. With this information, we can provide a profile that helps identify at-risk firefighters and EMS personnel before the tragedy strikes.’]

Until we have a program, we should request that anyone having information on a firefighter suicide should please contact FBHA by using its Confidential Suicide Reporting Form. They are mindful that some agencies prohibit the release of information by their departments and that some family members may not be aware that there is a way to make notifications via this ‘blind form’ that provides anonymity for the submitting party. We have reached out to them. Jeffery Dill, their founder, is willing to partner with us as we take this on.”

**Ted Mason, National Fire Safety Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:**

“The stats are very hard to find because suicide is not counted as a line-of-duty death. Any suicide reporting is done voluntarily by the surviving family. The Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA) [see the information on this group in Nelda St. Clair’s previous response] collects suicide statistics.

And although we can safely assume that death by suicide is grossly under-reported on this group’s website, the reported number is staggering. Suicide is, by far, the number one cause of death for structure firefighters. In 2016, the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) reported 90 firefighter fatalities. Not included in this number are 97 suicides by firefighters/first responders reported to the FBHA. So far in 2017, the USFA has reported 15 structure firefighter suicides (3 are pending confirmation) plus 7 more first responder suicides.”

**Karen Miranda Gleason, Public Affairs Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: [On her own time, Karen also works as a trained community volunteer who answers the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.]**

“There are no wildland-specific statistics, although [one source confirms](#) that suicides (voluntarily reported) are outpacing other causes of death for all firefighters. Because they usually occur off the job or away from the jobsite, suicides are not included by the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) as official deaths. To better address the issue, we could start tracking suicides among our wildland workforce.”

### ***3. Please discuss and describe what your agency/organization is doing regarding suicide awareness, peer support, critical stress counseling, etc. for your employees and the wildland fire service.***

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service who serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit’s representative on the National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency:**

“The National Park Service isn’t doing something specifically for our fire organization, but we are for the agency as a whole—with recognition that our firefighters may need more support. (NPS Law Enforcement is doing their own thing.)

I have gone forward to our leadership, the Fire Management Leadership Board (FMLB), and encouraged them to please consider taking actions now. I have suggested that they start with using the ‘[Carson J Spencer Foundation’s Working Minds’ group](#)—known as a leading innovator in suicide prevention—to do a corporate assessment of our organization.

I actually encouraged that we do this as an interagency effort. We could then use that data to develop an appropriate and successful program. Carson J Spencer has a strong program with a deep background in this issue with success in developing programs related to suicide for organizations. I found them through my research and, during the past few months, have continued conversations with them about the possibilities for how they might be available to help us.”

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## Suicide Safety Initiative

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) plans to launch a three-phased “Suicide Safety Initiative” for its workforce:

### Awareness

The goal is to raise and maintain awareness among USFWS audiences—both fire and non-fire staffs—of the facts to answer these questions: “*What is the #1 Killer of Firefighters?*” and “*How Can Firefighter Suicides be Prevented?*” This will be accomplished through an ongoing education campaign with engaging, thought-provoking content to increase situational awareness and enlist coworkers to practice suicide prevention tactics.

This initiative will involve an initial factsheet, followed-up by periodic content suitable for posting on social media as well as a three-fold brochure with wall holder distributed to all USFWS offices with fire staff. This information will be based on the most appropriate and current science in the field of suicidology [the scientific study of suicidal behavior and suicide prevention], and will be coordinated with other professionals who address firefighter audiences.

### Prevention

The goals are to enlist USFWS audiences in learning and watching for signs of potential suicide in themselves and their peers. This includes taking appropriate prevention steps in response to potential suicide, based on the most appropriate and current science in the field of suicidology. This may be accomplished through publishing a “QuickSeries” guide with the most useful suicide prevention information that will be distributed to every member of USFWS management. It will also include a continuing education campaign via social media regarding suicide prevention education and tips.

### Response

A two-fold goal will be to: 1) Educate managers on appropriate response to employee suicide deaths; and 2) Mitigate the elevated risk of suicide of coworkers/survivors. This will be accomplished by developing management guidelines for immediate response to families and coworkers after an employee suicide. It will be based on research of existing policy and guidance, and provide “best practices” to prepare and enable managers to answer common questions and encourage open discussion and learning among employees.

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#### Ted Mason, National Fire Safety Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:

“The USFWS has acknowledged suicide as an emphasis topic for 2017. We are planning a three-pronged approach to address it: ‘Awareness, Prevention, and Response.’” (See sidebar above.)

#### Kim Lightley, Critical Incident Response Program Management Specialist for the U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Program:

“When focusing on preventative measures of death by suicide, one can uncover an extensive list of available resources. There are many universities, foundations, and countless community-based and national mental health agencies that offer prevention, intervention, and postvention assistance when addressing death by suicide in the fire service. (‘Postvention’ is an intervention conducted after a suicide, largely taking the form of support for the bereaved family, friends, and peers.)

Foundations such as the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) and the National Fallen Firefighter Foundation (NFFF) have educational programs in place. Universities, such as the Medical University of South Carolina and St. Petersburg College Center for Public Safety Innovation in Florida, have offered comprehensive Suicide Awareness programs, in which we as an agency have tapped into for assistance.

In addition, there are web-based educational resources, suicide awareness apps for smartphones and tablets, and classroom instruction such as *The Fire That Burns Within* offered by St. Petersburg College.

Interagency efforts include offering ICISF courses on Suicide Prevention, Intervention, and Postvention. We also offer our employees many ICISF Peer Support-based courses in response to critical incidents and to help mitigate the effects of trauma, stress injuries, and long-term behavioral health needs.

Our recent efforts have included the adaptation of the *Combat Operational Stress First Aid*, a peer-driven, stress continuum model developed by the U.S. Marines and Navy, into a comprehensive model for wildland firefighters.

This model offers a flexible set of tools for addressing stress reactions in firefighters and first responders. It is intended to help employees prevent the progression of stress reactions and bridge affected individuals to higher levels of care when needed. [Continued on Page 7]



Original photo by Kari Greer  
(before artistic effects)

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***“Our recent efforts have included the adaptation of the ‘Combat Operational Stress First Aid’, a peer-driven, stress continuum model developed by the U.S. Marines and Navy, into a comprehensive model for wildland firefighters.”***

**Kim Lightley, Critical Incident Response Program Management Specialist  
for the U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Program**

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The following are among the entities that we currently have on our radar for potential assistance and resources:

- ❖ The Department of Defense – This agency has an extensive suicide data collection and educational system in place (who I have found to be more than willing to offer insight and guidance).
- ❖ The National Institute of Mental Health – Their National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
- ❖ The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention offers a comprehensive Suicide Management Guide.
- ❖ SAMHSA – The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services offers suicide prevention information and other helpful resources.
- ❖ The National Fallen Firefighter Foundation offers the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives. Initiative 13, Psychological Support, means that firefighters and their families must have access to counseling and psychological support. Resources, such as the *Suicide Guide for Chiefs*, contains critical information for the near-term and long-term effects of suicide.
- ❖ Recognizing the role of Occupational Medicine, the primary care physician in the suicide intervention and early detection stage.
- ❖ The Wildland Firefighter Foundation who offers compassionate continuous support and community resources for our wildland firefighters and family members in response to serious injuries, on and off duty deaths, including death by suicide.”



Original photo by Kari Greer (before artistic effects)

**Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager, Bureau of Land Management:**

“The BLM National Office demonstrated their long-term commitment to Critical Incident Stress Management—which includes suicide awareness, peer support, and counseling—by establishing a formal CISM program, policy and oversight along with a dedicated permanent full-time National CISM Program Manager position. The BLM Fire Director felt that covering these duties under a ‘detail’ or ‘temporary appointment’ would not be effective and that the scope of the program was important and deserving enough to warrant a full-time position and support staff.

One primary focus of this position is successional planning so that the program can continue to evolve as I and others move on. I have also been supported by detailers in the winter to assist me with training and program development. The program is national in scope, progressive, and highly

recognized by the wildland fire community.

Most of our Critical Incident Peer Support Group Leaders are former or current hotshot superintendents (from all agencies) and are generally of the longtime, hard core, and cynical variety. They therefore bring trust and credibility to firefighters so they will openly talk with mental health professionals.

Most people we provide CISM services for are seen in our CISM classes within a year or so and are interested in joining the program. We believe that this is huge validation that we are doing something right.

***Suicide Awareness***

Only until recently did I get enough traction to move forward into the unknown territory of suicide and the many daunting issues that surround it. After the recent suicide of a veteran while at refresher training last month, the BLM recognizes that we need to do something. We will be presenting a three-day resilience and wellness course May 31-June 2 for the Vegas Valley Veteran Type 2 IA Crew

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in Las Vegas. We've asked the vendor to focus on these areas:

- ❖ Reduce injuries
- ❖ Stop fatalities (recognizing it's not a zero tolerance work environment)
- ❖ Brain function, collective wisdom, learning and executive function so that a person is able to function in the 'sweet spot'
- ❖ Mental and physical health and resilience
- ❖ Work life balance
- ❖ PTS and PTSD
- ❖ Recognizing signs of distress in oneself and in others
- ❖ Suicide
- ❖ Shift culture (stigma, structure, support)

We will evaluate this three-day course afterwards and determine what sections are relevant and what we might be missing. We have invited several SMEs to observe and provide feedback. These people will include Anne Black from the Rocky Mountain Research Station Human Performance Research and Development group. Anne has established a baseline for how we can continue to monitor and determine quality and effectiveness.

Based on the outcome, the BLM is prepared to incorporate this training into a formalized program not only for veterans but for wildland fire. All of this certainly is not an answer or a 'fix'—but at least it's a start."



Original photo by Kari Greer (before artistic effects)

#### ***4. What can we learn from other groups or organizations dealing with employee suicide?***

**Kim Lightley, Critical Incident Response Program Management Specialist for the U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Program:**

"Because we are a learning organization, tapping into other first responder entities is critical. For example, The New York City Fire Department (FDNY) is a very large department, representing a diverse group of firefighters, and many anniversaries of tragic events, both historical and recent.

Question: How do you take care of the firefighters of FDNY following traumatic events? FDNY has a Counseling Services Unit that routinely visits the fire houses throughout the city. They check on firefighters regularly, demonstrating that the department recognizes their need for support and are responsive to that need. Firefighters are provided contacts and resources for help as needed. These Counseling Services Units are familiar faces, trusted individuals

who create an openness toward help seeking. They provide station visits, informal interaction, and anticipatory guidance.

Following a critical incident or line-of-duty-death, the Counseling Services Unit may respond with a paired peer/clinician multiple times to the affected station. This may be designed as 'waves' following an incident. The 'first wave' of peer support is immediately following an event. The 'second wave' occurs after funerals—helping facilitate transition from crisis to recovery through further anticipatory guidance and/or referral to a higher level of care. A 'third wave' of peer support occurs three to four weeks post critical incident, providing 'follow-up' contacts and transition to local resources.

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***"Our Peer Support Teams are ready to assist and respond to a critical incident if called upon. Firefighters talking to firefighters, peer to peer."***

**Kim Lightley, Critical Incident Response Program Management Specialist  
for the U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Program**

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This FDNY model fits nicely with our current efforts in 'Peer Support.' The Critical Incident Stress Management Interagency efforts are constantly establishing training and building peer support capacity throughout our nation. Our Peer Support Teams are ready to assist and respond to a critical incident if called upon. Firefighters talking to firefighters, peer to peer. [Continued on Page 9]

[Continued from Page 8] I encourage the incorporation of a *support continuum*, a ‘follow-up’ stage of peer support, as exemplified by FDNY. For example, at approximately 30 days post incident, it would be highly beneficial to send in a small group of peers to check-in with the affected Forest, District, crewmembers. Thus, bridging the gap to higher levels of care if needed and helping to facilitate the transition from crisis to recovery through additional guidance.

The Modoc National Forest supported this concept of a ‘follow-up’ peer support visit one month following a line-of-duty-death on the Frog Fire in 2015. A small group of peers, consisting of a clinician, a district ranger, a retired fire staff, and a critical incident response specialist returned to the Modoc National Forest one month after the line-of-duty death. These folks spent quality time with the FLT and conducted one-on-one visits with employees. The coping mechanisms and guidance, offered by the CISM Peer Support Team in the initial days following the event, were re-visited and re-emphasized. The FLT were also briefed on stress reactions/injuries to ‘watch-out’ for in their own employees—and in themselves.”

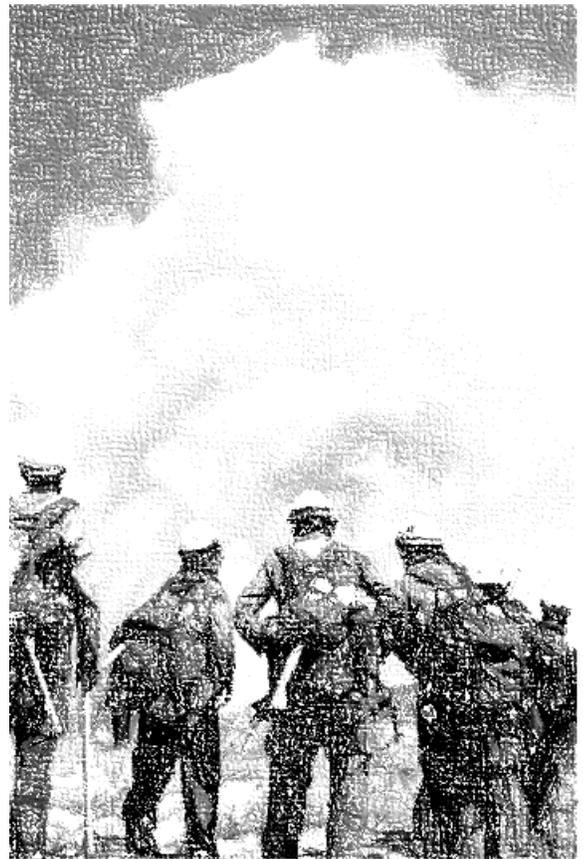
**Ted Mason, National Fire Safety Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:**

“Every agency has some lessons learned when dealing with suicide in the workplace. This coverage in *Two More Chains* may be the first step in collecting these lessons and sharing them across agency boundaries. There are lots and lots of good resources out there. The most important step is to start talking about it and building awareness and mitigation into our organizations.”

**Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager, Bureau of Land Management: (After Nelda was contacted by *Two More Chains* for her input, she contacted Asad Rahman, Battalion Chief, Carson City District Office, Bureau of Land Management, to assist with her answer.)**

“The Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA) (<http://www.ffbha.org/>) is a great place to start. This organization was established to directly educate structure firefighters/Emergency Medical Services personnel and their families about behavioral health issues. This includes issues such as depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety and addictions, as well as suicides. As previously mentioned, we reached out to Jeffery Dill, this group’s founder, and asked him if he would assist us in doing something similar. While primarily aimed at structure firefighters and EMS, their goal is to collaborate, develop, and implement behavioral health awareness, prevention, intervention, and post-crisis strategies to provide firefighters with an easily accessible and confidential source of information.

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) is the nation’s only federally supported resource center devoted to advancing the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention. SPRC provides technical assistance, training, and materials to increase the knowledge and expertise of suicide prevention practitioners and other professionals serving people at risk for suicide. SPRC also provides support for [Zero Suicide](#), an initiative based on the foundational belief that suicide deaths for individuals under care within health and behavioral health systems are preventable. This initiative provides information, resources, and tools for safer suicide care.”



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***“Every bit of increased awareness and openness about mental health, and every extra minute of willingness to listen non-judgmentally to someone who is suffering, will ultimately help save lives.”***

**Karen Miranda Gleason, Public Affairs Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

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**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service who serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit’s representative on the National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency:**

“The U.S. Department of Veteran’s Affairs (VA) is making great strides in reducing this stigma and helping the folks they support to recognize symptoms and at-risk individuals—to seek help if they need it—and to talk openly about suicide. In terms of what they have accomplished and the programs they have implemented, there is a lot to learn from that success. They have focused on new employees during their orientation and have a specific section on suicide. In addition, the VA has developed programs for leadership and managers to teach them to identify the suicide signs and to ensure that they have ‘postvention’ support. [‘Postvention’ is an intervention conducted after a suicide, largely taking the form of support for the bereaved (family, friends, and peers). Family and friends of the suicide victim may become at increased risk of suicide themselves.]

[Continued on Page 10]



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[Continued from Page 9] Similar to the wildland fire service, the military has some difficult walls to break down in terms of the image of being tough doesn't really go well with discussing suicide. But they have continued to implement programs and send out clear messaging to help reduce the stigma and teach soldiers how to recognize the signs and how to get help.

Personally, I admire the work that ['Carson J Spencer Foundation's Working Minds' group](#) has accomplished. While they are a private organization, the work they can do for a corporation (or agency) to help address the issue of suicide is well designed, thoughtful, and provides an approach that is tailored to the actual needs of the organization—thus increasing the chances of success."

### **5. How can we identify which of our crewmates might need counseling/psychological support?**

#### **What's the next step for helping them get that support?**

**Karen Miranda Gleason, Public Affairs Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:** [On her own time, Karen also works as a trained community volunteer who answers the National

#### **Suicide Prevention Lifeline.]**

"There are many resources that [identify warning signs](#), known risk factors, and [ways to talk to someone who is suicidal](#). You may notice extreme changes in someone's mood or how they talk or act. Think of this as mental health first aid: If you see warning signs, ask: ***If they have a plan for when or how they will do it.*** If they do, don't leave them alone and get help immediately. Also, for your own sake, be aware that knowing someone who has completed suicide actually increases your own risk of suicidal thoughts and actions.

Fire leaders need to model good mental health management because their example deeply affects attitudes and actions of a dedicated workforce. The fire community seems ready for a paradigm shift that incorporates mental wellness into our safety culture.

Every bit of increased awareness and openness about mental health, and every extra minute of willingness to listen non-judgmentally to someone who is suffering, will ultimately help save lives."

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***"Fire leaders need to model good mental health management, because their example deeply affects attitudes and actions of a dedicated workforce. The fire community seems ready for a paradigm shift that incorporates mental wellness into our safety culture."***

**Karen Miranda Gleason, Public Affairs Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

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#### **Kim Lightley, Critical Incident Response Program Management Specialist for the U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Program:**

"It begins with awareness that an individual has been exposed to a stressor event—perhaps an incident involving life threat to themselves or a serious injury to a co-worker. It could also be difficulties on the home-front, financial, or an accumulation of challenges that has made an impact on one's abilities to cope.

The affected individual may be showing significant changes in behavior, mood, or habits. An individual may become uncharacteristically more isolated from others, not participating in activities that they used to enjoy. They may also exhibit signs of inner turmoil, not feeling in control of one's emotions or thinking, the presence of nightmares, or experiencing attacks of anxiety or anger.

It is usually not possible to keep these types of functional changes hidden from family members, co-workers, and friends. This is where the 'stigma' piece comes into play—break the silence. It is so important to check in on folks at these early stages of signs and symptoms, in order to mitigate further harm. Social connectedness is one of the strongest protective factors against stress injury, linked to emotional well-being and recovery following traumatic stress and loss.

You may also be able to identify changes within yourself; times when you may need to reach out to another for help. These stress indicators may simply be being short on the (emotional) fuse, not doing the things you enjoy anymore, watching more television and 'checking out' rather than engaging with family or friends. You may find yourself having a hard time focusing, feeling fatigued or not exercising.

These are simply 'watch-outs' for you to pay attention to. They indicate a need to take a tactical pause in order to self-regulate or seek help."

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**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service who serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit's representative on the National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency:**

"First and foremost listen to them. They need someone to listen. If they are indicating they will cause themselves harm, it is your obligation to call 9-1-1 and get immediate help for the person. That is what a true friend and colleague would do. While that is tough to do, it could save this person's life.

If they are not an immediate threat to themselves, guide them through their options and make sure they choose and implement one of these choices. If they are a federal employee, they can use the 'Employee Assistance Program' (EAP) services. [The EAP provides assessment, counseling, referral, management consultation, and coaching services to federal employees and their agencies throughout the United States.] Even a seasonal worker can use this option—as long as they reach out to the EAP before their employment ends. The EAP will pay for six sessions of therapy and will provide other services necessary to help the person work through the issues causing them to feel suicidal.

If a person is not a federal employee, they can reach out to a number of organizations that will support them, including:

- ❖ The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – Phone 1-800-273-TALK (8255) <http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
- ❖ Active Minds – [www.activeminds.com](http://www.activeminds.com)
- ❖ National Alliance on Mental Illness – [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)"

**Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager, Bureau of Land Management: (After Nelda was contacted by *Two More Chains* for her input, she contacted Asad Rahman, Battalion Chief, Carson City District Office, Bureau of Land Management, to assist with her answer.)**

"By taking our Critical Incident Stress Management Programs to the next level through formalizing 'pre-incident education' is one option.

Nationally, the U.S. Forest Service and the BLM have provided the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation's (ICISF) Assisting Individuals and Groups in Crisis (Basic CISM training) for more than 600 'Peer Supporters' from various wildland fire agencies across the country—and yet only a fraction of these people are active in CISM response. This leaves a number of individuals who have received this specialized training and could participate in various CISM programs' pre-incident education activities if we establish a process.

Recognizing that peers might be the first point of contact because of their close proximity to the individual is another step. Those with similar experiences may be better able to relate to a coworker or crewmate seeking help, which may compel the individual to listen and trust the peer supporter's guidance at a particularly critical time.

Many of the larger structure fire and police departments throughout the country utilize 'Peer Support' to address combat and operational stress. Peer Supporters are trained in active listening, an ability to recognize signs for the need to refer to outside help, and to provide additional referral conduits to increase access to behavioral health services. Peer Supporters can be trained to address suicide prevention, such as occurs in the military community. By further integrating and highlighting the benefits of peer support in suicide prevention programs we can bolster prevention efforts throughout the wildland fire community, including with our veterans.

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***"Periodic check-in calls throughout the off-season may help identify employees at risk. Then getting them the professional help they need is the next step."***

**Ted Mason, National Fire Safety Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

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In addition to increasing behavioral health awareness through pre-incident education such as speaking events, funding, and training resources, the BLM has also coordinated with the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation and the Wildland Firefighter Foundation to identify licensed counselors across the United States who specialize in trauma to provide professional counseling at discounted rates—or even on a complimentary basis. This has served us well as an alternative to the Employee Assistance Program and the fear of seeking services from mental health professionals 'who don't understand' for those in need who cannot afford counseling for themselves or their family. When symptoms occur, our wildland firefighters need a support system in place that is readily accessible from someone who is qualified and truly understands his or her circumstances.

The incorporation of a resilience program into the wildland fire service is another important step. The BLM, along with active CISM program participants from the U.S. Forest Service, have attended the U.S. Air Force's Comprehensive Airman Fitness (CAF) and Resilience



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Training along with other sources who offer resiliency-aimed courses. But, until just recently, we have been unable to find anything appropriate for our culture and population.

Now, through a BLM partnership with the Program Manager for the Rocky Mountain Research Station's Human Performance and Innovation and Organization Learning Research, Development and Applications Program we are beginning to utilize and evaluate resources that provide innovative onsite safety and leadership training to business, government, and communities. Much of this group's training is focused on learning team and self-awareness as well as situational awareness skills. This includes recognizing signs of distress within yourself and in others, as well as maintaining a healthy balance between work and personal lives.

These skills should be woven into the fabric of our lives and become as fundamental as the 10 and 18."

**Ted Mason, National Fire Safety Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:**

"Periodic check-in calls throughout the off-season may help identify employees at risk. Then getting them the professional help they need is the next step. This could be challenging if they don't have health insurance in the off-season."

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***"We now know that this is affecting far more of our employees than we realized—and for a wider range of reasons than we had previously considered."***

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service**

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**6. Could you share an anecdote(s) that might help tell/illustrate the story of how your agency/organization is helping these "at risk" folks in need.**

**Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager, Bureau of Land Management: (After Nelda was contacted by *Two More Chains* for her input, she contacted Asad Rahman, Battalion Chief, Carson City District Office, Bureau of Land Management, to assist with her answer.)**

"Beginning this spring, resilience training is being integrated into the BLM's Veteran's Crew Program. The intent is to incorporate this training into the agency's overall wildland fire program over the next year if the training is effective and well received. Discussions are also taking place with the Forest Service Veteran's Program Manager. The Program Manager/Social Advisor for the Rocky Mountain Research Station's Human Performance and Innovation and Organization Learning Research, Development and Applications Program has already begun examining data and feedback after providing resilience training to several Forest Service crews last summer. This research and validation will continue as we move forward with the initiative.

The BLM also established an interagency Wildland Fire Critical Incident Peer Support Facebook and Twitter page that we use to push information. With more than 3,000 followers, we are now sharing a wealth of information about suicide—ranging from recognition of the signs, where to find help, as well as training and education opportunities.

We have also asked Facebook to monitor our page and screen any posts from our followers who mention suicide or ask for help through this social media site."

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service who serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit's representative on the National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency:**

"The National Park Service recently experienced two Law Enforcement suicides within a six-month window. As a result of these tragedies, the agency decided to look at the issue in order to try to develop a better understanding of it and, in turn, develop programs to help our organization. They created a Taskforce to explore the issue and to provide options for creating solutions.

In the meantime, the Taskforce decided to implement some immediate actions. The Taskforce wrote some pieces about suicide for our online *InsideNPS* newsletter—which is distributed to all NPS employees—and received an overwhelming, positive response. We, the NPS, also distributed flyers over the course of last September, which is National Suicide Awareness month.



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[Continued on Page 13]

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The response from NPS employees has provided us key insights into how much help is truly needed in this area. We now know that this is affecting far more of our employees than we realized—and for a wider range of reasons than we had previously considered. From here, the NPS Washington Support Office (WASO) will determine what to do with our recommendations and what programs are the best fit for the agency. Phase two of this project will be development and implementation.”

### **7. What’s the biggest hurdle facing you in the “suicide in the wildland fire arena” front?**

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service who serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit’s representative on the National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency:**

“Stigma. The lack of understanding. The embarrassment to discuss the topic of suicide that sadly comes off as leadership choosing to ignore how important this topic is to address . . . All of these?”

Our world is getting more stressful: threats of reduction in force, longer fire seasons, uncertainty for the future, etc. And these issues are compounding, which significantly raises the concern for suicide. Leadership is already overtaxed with doing way more with way less. Thus, having time to devote to this issue falls off the plate.

In addition, the stigma surrounding suicide makes it hard for us to know how to help prevent it if we don’t know the issues behind the attempted suicides or actual suicides.

Knowing where to start to fix the problem is overwhelming. Agencies not working together as one organization to address the issue of suicide in wildland firefighting is part of the hurdle. We need to stop looking at this topic as individual organizations, but treat the symptom as a whole for the entire fire workforce.”

**Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager, Bureau of Land Management:**

“The lack of willingness to accept that suicide is a harsh reality within our organization and the stigma that prevents talking about it. Although not everyone shares this unfortunate reluctance. Thankfully, there are managers and leaders who are willing to take this issue on.

It all comes down to priorities. To solve the real problems of mental health and suicide prevention, what is needed is the allocation of governmental resources, taking real action, and admitting that this is a problem.”

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***“Agencies not working together as one organization to address the issue of suicide in wildland firefighting is part of the hurdle. We need to stop looking at this topic as individual organizations, but treat the symptom as a whole for the entire fire workforce.”***

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service**

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### **8. What’s the most frustrating part of your job?**

**Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager, Bureau of Land Management:**

“We shouldn’t be in the fire business if taking care of our firefighters isn’t a priority.”

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service who serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit’s representative on the National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency:**

“The lack of funding to do what needs to be done coupled with the lack of support to find that funding and implement something in the fire community. Our agency as a whole is doing something which is good, but fire needs to meet some more specific needs for our workforce than the National Park Service, alone, is capable of addressing.”

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[Continued from Page 13] **9. What brings you the most satisfaction in this job?**

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service who serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit's representative on the National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency:**

"That these conversations are happening. That there is change taking place and that we do have a unique cohesion in our workforce that hopefully will help us all overcome this challenge and help us to help each other to help ensure that suicide does not become someone's only option."

**Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager, Bureau of Land Management:**

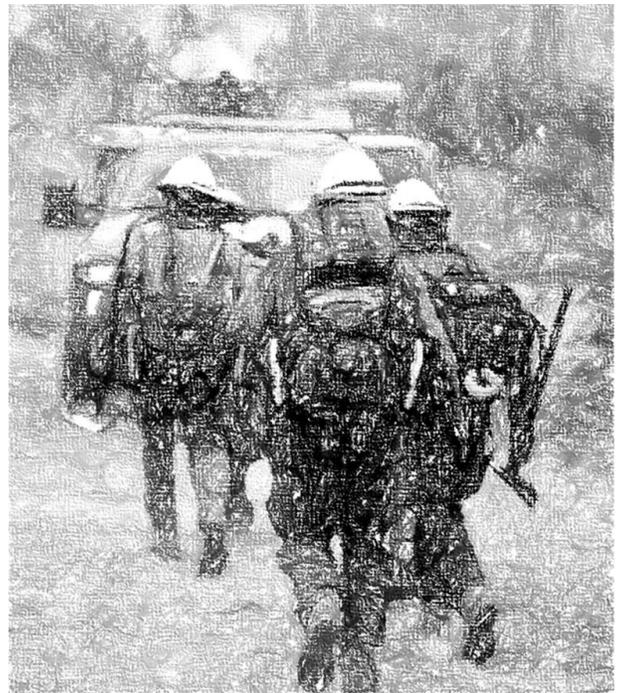
"The opportunity to make change."

**10. If there is anything else that we haven't asked that you feel is important to include in this Two More Chains Spring Issue that is focusing on "Suicide in the Wildland Fire Service" please feel free to elaborate.**

**Miranda Stuart, Fire Operations Specialist with the National Park Service who serves as the NPS Fire and Aviation unit's representative on the National Park Service Taskforce assigned to address suicide in that agency:**

"Suicide affects almost all of us, more than some may realize in fact. Maybe someone you know had a family member take their life by suicide, a neighbor's daughter takes her own life, the kid you grew up with just couldn't handle being bullied any more . . . This subject touches way more lives than people realize or acknowledge.

It is not a problem of one person but a symptom of mental health issues in a society. Suicide and suicidal thoughts need to be treated as a mental wellness issue. Care needs to be provided for the person suffering from the emotions that are driving them to that brink. Maybe they suffer from anxiety, depression, fear of failure, or loneliness. These symptoms are important to acknowledge and respect. Offering help to someone finding themselves at the edge of despair and seeking suicide as a solution needs to be provided. We need to reduce the stigma, create understanding, and raise awareness."



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***"For a leader within our agencies, an ultimate goal is now focusing on the development of an organizational culture where behavioral wellness is as important as strong firefighting skills."***

**Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager,  
Bureau of Land Management**

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**Nelda St. Clair, National Critical Incident Stress Program Manager, Bureau of Land Management:**

"Suicide can be prevented, and most suicidal people desperately want to live. They are often just unable to see alternatives to their problems. This is why a change in firefighting culture is imperative. Firefighters need to feel comfortable asking for help—not only at work but also in their personal lives—without being seen as weak. The fire community must understand the implications of someone asking for help and how to respond to the signs that something might be horribly wrong.

The concept of 'Situational Awareness' is a recognized concept within the wildland fire and aviation community. That is, maintaining a heightened level of awareness relative to our surroundings and those we engage. The same principle can be applied to the behavioral wellness of fellow firefighters and others. Ultimately, people want to know that someone cares about their well-being and that someone is checking on them. For a leader within our agencies, an ultimate goal is now focusing on the development of an organizational culture where behavioral wellness is as important as strong firefighting skills.

Here are two websites with helpful information: [https://gacc.nifc.gov/cism/documents/ff\\_suicide\\_report.pdf](https://gacc.nifc.gov/cism/documents/ff_suicide_report.pdf); and <https://gacc.nifc.gov/cism/index.html>.

Finally, just a thought about those among us who don't get to choose to retire but are forced out by illness or injury. They have been plucked from the team. Think a moment about their pain, their loss of that sense of belonging. Please remember, it is our obligation to reach out to them, to ease their transition. After all, we are a brotherhood and sisterhood."

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