

## **Supporting Alabama’s First Responders: Communicating PTSD and Crisis Resources**

Throughout its work to strengthen mental health support, awareness, and communication for Alabama’s first responders, the Interim Study Commission on PTSD in First Responders has received information from state leaders, reviewed newly developed resources, and affirmed its strategy to distribute critical information through strong partnerships with state, municipal and county associations.

### **A Unified Mission to Support Mental Health**

The committee is charged with identifying effective ways to connect first responders with existing resources to address the growing need for PTSD education, treatment, and support. Findings from a recent survey highlighted two major challenges: lack of education on available PTSD resources and the persistent stigma surrounding mental health.

Alabama Department of Mental Health (ADMH) Commissioner Kimberly Boswell briefed the commission in November on tools designed to help first responders access treatment and crisis support.

1. [988](#) is the nationwide three-digit Suicide & Crisis Lifeline that provides immediate, confidential, 24/7 support for individuals experiencing emotional distress, mental health challenges, or a behavioral health crisis.

For first responders—who are at higher risk of PTSD due to repeated exposure to traumatic events—988 offers a critical, accessible lifeline. First responders who contact 988 can:

- Speak directly with trained crisis counselors who understand trauma, high-stress professions, and the unique pressures faced by emergency personnel.
- Receive immediate emotional support during moments of overwhelming stress, anxiety, intrusive memories, or panic.
- Be connected to local resources, mental health providers, crisis centers, or follow-up services in their community.
- Access help without stigma, since calls are confidential and do not involve workplace reporting.

ADMH reported that the local answer rate for the 988 hotline reached 90.7% in October, which means calls answered by local centers, giving local resources.

2. The [Connect Alabama app](#), maintained by ADMH and VitAL (University of Alabama), is a free mobile resource for finding behavioral health, substance use, and mental health services, offering a treatment locator, crisis hotlines (click-to-call/text), opioid overdose prevention info (like Naloxone access), and educational resources, available for both iPhone and Android devices. It helps individuals, families, and professionals locate treatment, connect to help quickly, and access essential support for mental and substance use disorders.
3. Alabama has a network of 24/7 [Crisis Centers](#) across the state (Mobile, Huntsville, Montgomery, Dothan, Birmingham, Tuscaloosa) for mental health/substance use crises, offering evaluation, stabilization, and resources, accessible by calling 988 or walking in, with Mobile Crisis Teams available for response, all part of the [Alabama Crisis System of Care](#).
4. ADMH has also created a statewide flyer specifically for first responders. It includes:
  - The 988 suicide and crisis hotline
  - A QR code for the Connect Alabama app
  - A QR code for crisis centers across the state
5. Another important resource, [is the VitAL First Responder webpage](#), tailored specifically for veterans and first responders with training videos, toolkits and direct resources.

Boswell emphasized the importance of normalizing help-seeking behaviors. "It's not a personal failure or weakness, it's a natural psychological response to traumatic events," she said. "Getting that message out is one of the things that I think this committee could do that is really important."

## **Understanding PTSD and Related Risks**

PTSD symptoms vary widely and may appear within months or even years after a traumatic event. Symptoms may fall into four categories:

- Intrusive memories
- Avoidance
- Negative changes in thinking and mood
- Changes in physical and emotional reactions

April Turner, state head injury coordinator for the [Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services](#), highlighted to the committee the connection between traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and PTSD. Mild TBIs—often overlooked due to “invisible” symptoms—can double the risk of PTSD. She noted that the cultural norms of first responder professions, which emphasize loyalty and courage, can both support and hinder mental health care. “It is crucial that we address traumatic brain injury alongside PTSD,” Turner said. Individuals who have experienced brain injury can contact the Alabama TBI Helpline at 1-888-879-4706 to begin an assessment.

## **Collaborative Communication Through State and Local Government Partners**

To ensure all resources reach the first responders who need them most, the committee is working closely with the Alabama League of Municipalities (ALM) and the Association of County Commissions of Alabama (ACCA). Information will also be distributed to the Local Government Insurance Board and law enforcement agencies. These partnerships are essential to distributing materials efficiently to municipal police and fire departments, county sheriff’s offices, volunteer fire agencies, and emergency management teams across the state.

Through these established networks, the committee will distribute digitally and in print:

- PTSD education materials
- Crisis hotline and app information
- Flyers and digital toolkits

- Training and awareness resources for local governments and emergency agencies

### **Building a Stronger, More Supported First Responder Community**

The Interim Study Commission on PTSD in First Responders is composed of representatives from the Alabama Fire College, ADMH, state legislators, the Legislative Services Agency, ACCA, the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (ALEA), and the League of Municipalities. Together, they are shaping a comprehensive strategy to address PTSD, reduce stigma, and connect first responders to lifesaving mental health resources.

By aligning its goals with the communication power of statewide associations, the committee is ensuring that first responders in every Alabama community receive the guidance, tools, and support they need—strengthening both individual well-being and public safety across the state.