



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Pete Harckham

Harckham, Burdick and Mental Health Advocates Call for the Passing of the First Responder Peer Support Bill

PETE HARCKHAM June 4, 2025

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State Sen. Pete Harckham at the podium during the press conference with Asm. Chris Burdick and Glenn Liebman from MHANYS

Albany, NY – New York State Senator Pete Harckham and Assemblyman Chris Burdick, along with mental health advocates, first responders and other state legislators, called today for the passing of the First Responder Peer Support Bill at a press conference held in the State Capitol.

Introduced by Harckham and Burdick, the First Responder Peer Support Act ([S.5407A / A.7285](#)) would establish a statewide mental health and peer support training program tailored to the unique needs of first responders across New York. First responders routinely face highly stressful and traumatic situations as they fulfill their duties to protect and serve our communities. The nature of their work exposes them to traumatic events, loss, and constant pressure, which can have profound effects on their mental well-being.

To see a video of the press conference, click [here](#).

“Our first responders are always there for us—so much so, that we take their bravery and dedication for granted, even as they experience much higher rates of trauma than the rest of us,” said Sen. Harckham. “The First Responder Peer Support Act will help address the deep emotional toll experienced by first responders by providing accessible statewide resources for help—programs that allow individuals with personal experience to assist others—through increased awareness, empathy and vigilance.”

Added Sen. Harckham, “We cannot wait any longer to ensure that our first responders can get the help they need—with confidentiality in place and no fear of career consequences. Today, we want our first responders to know: we will not let you down! With peer-to-peer support, help can always be there when it is needed.”

“New York State’s volunteer and professional firefighters and first responders are heroes who, every day, provide essential services for the health and safety of our citizens. Ensuring that there are programs in place to protect their health and safety is of the utmost importance,” said Asm. Burdick. “Sadly, emergency first responders are at an increased risk for mental illnesses such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder. Instituting the peer-to-peer support program that this bill creates is essential to the well-being and mental health of those who protect us.”

State Sen. Jacob Ashby, a cosponsor of the legislation, said, “This is a proven, efficient model. Our state’s peer support services for veterans have saved lives. It’s always been a difficult, emotionally draining job to be a first responder. After dealing with a global pandemic, escalating opiate epidemic and industry-wide staffing shortfalls, it’s tougher than ever. This is a program that can’t wait.”

Recent survey data on the mental health of New York’s first responders further underscores the need to pass and enact The First Responder Peer Support Act, as it will provide the infrastructure and support for establishing first responder peer-to-peer support programs across New York State.

In May 2024, the New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services released the results of a survey conducted as part of the state’s inaugural first responder mental health needs assessment. The survey found 80% had negative impacts to home life from their work as first responders, 79% reported negative impact on physical health, and 72% reported challenges to family and interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, 16% reported suicidal thoughts, which is four times higher than the general population, according to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Importantly, the survey found that more than 90% reported services including individual therapy and peer support groups “...would help improve first responder mental health, if they were free and easily accessible.”

The First Responder Peer Support Program Act will help address the deep emotional toll of this work by providing accessible statewide resources for help—programs that allow individuals with personal experience to assist others—through increased awareness, empathy and vigilance. Peer support includes emotional validation from a peer and personal understanding of triggers and exposure to trauma. Peers also know the importance of early

intervention.

Modeled after the Joseph P. Dwyer Veteran Peer to Peer Support Program, which began on Long Island in 2012, the first responder peer support program in Harckham and Burdick's bill would be open to law enforcement, firefighters and emergency medical responders statewide.

Glenn Liebman, CEO of Mental Health Association in New York State (MAHNYS), said, "The passage and enactment of the First Responder Peer Support Program Act this session is critical as the mental health and wellness of our first responders is paramount. MHANYS is grateful for the leadership of the sponsors of this legislation joining us today including Senator Harckham, Senator Ashby, and Assemblymember Burdick, and the first responder agencies here who have worked tirelessly to advocate and rally support, recognizing the toll first responders face every day in responding to emergencies and serving their communities so selflessly. It is essential that New York embrace the needs of first responders through peer-to-peer support and the creation of a culture of wellness."

Sheriff James Allard, Sheriff Steuben County, and a member of the New York State Sheriffs' Association / New York State Sheriffs' Institute, said, "The First Responder Peer Support Program Act is a lifeline for those who put themselves on the line every day. It brings vital support directly to the front lines, ensuring first responders can turn to trained peers—who share their experiences and understand their struggles. By protecting confidentiality and setting a statewide standard for peer support, this Act ensures first responders receive the trusted, effective help they deserve when they need it most."

Eugene Perry, President, Firefighters Association of the State of New York, said, "New York's first responders are the backbone of our public safety infrastructure. As we ask them to do more, the physical and mental challenges they face become more intense. The establishment of a

statewide peer support program is a critical component in addressing the mental health issues faced by the men and women who protect their communities every day.”

Aidan O’Connor, Jr., Executive Director of Greenport Rescue and Board Member of the New York State Volunteer Ambulance and Rescue Association, said, “Every day, EMTs and paramedics carry the weight of other people’s worst moments—often without a place to set it down. The First Responder Peer Support Program Act gives us something we’ve long needed: a safe, confidential space to talk to those who understand. This is how we protect the people who protect everyone else.”

RELATED LEGISLATION

2025-S5407A

- Introduced
- - In Committee Assembly
 - In Committee Senate
- - On Floor Calendar Assembly
 - On Floor Calendar Senate
- - Passed Assembly

- Passed Senate

- Delivered to Governor

- Signed By Governor

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Relates to the first responder peer support program act

February 21, 2025

In Assembly Committee

Sponsored by **Pete Harckham**

Do you support this bill?