



**Supporting Mental Health in
First Responders**

Family Night Facilitator Guide

BCFirstRespondersMentalHealth.com

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Introduction

Family members are often a primary support for first responders and the first to notice changes in the mood and behaviour of their first responder loved one. Not only can family encourage their loved ones to get help and seek support but they are often a source of support long after an incident has happened. It can be helpful for families to understand the importance of mental health, how to identify the early signs and symptoms of those who are struggling, and how to access resources to support their first responder loved ones and themselves.

Research shows that those who have mental health conditions or experience psychological symptoms can have a greater likelihood of positive outcomes when supported by family, friends, and their workplace. Families, especially, can help in tackling barriers and improving the mental health of their loved ones. Family members should also be mindful of their own mental health and strategies for resilience, as mental health challenges can impact everyone in the family.

In this guide, family is defined as anyone that loves and supports their first responder loved one. In recognition of the importance of family in the resilience of first responders, and for the well-being of family members themselves, first responder organizations have hosted **family nights** for the purpose of educating, supporting, and connecting first responders and their family members.

Family nights are an opportunity to bring first responders, their loved ones, peer support and/or Critical Incident Stress team members, mental health professionals, leadership, and others together to build sense of community, share mental health resources and information, and to allow for support in navigating the mental health challenges that can arise as a result of the nature of first responder work.

Please note that this guide is based on the knowledge and experiences of first responders themselves and contains information gathered from the insights of members of the BC First Responders' Mental Health Committee. This guide provides considerations and recommendations gathered by committee members in their experiences of hosting and facilitating family nights for first responders. Although access to resources will vary and depend on each respective first responder organization, this guide provides broad-level considerations that can be adapted and applied generally.

How to Use This Guide

To coordinate and plan for a family night, there are a number of steps to consider. The following are the phases of hosting a family night with suggestions for things to consider at each phase. These are broad-level suggestions that can be adapted to each respective first responder organization and used in accordance to what is appropriate and feasible to your organization.

Phases of Hosting a Family Night

- **Identification** – As the starting place, this is the first step in deciding what is the reason for planning the family night and what are the goals of the event. In the identification phase, you should be asking the question: what are we trying to achieve?
- **Planning** – Upon deciding the purpose of the family night, we next want to begin to plan the event, which includes identifying your agenda, guest speakers, the audience (would this be an invitation to all family, spouses, children – consider the question: how are we defining family and who should attend?), the goals and topics to be covered. Additionally, now is the time to consider the required logistics to host your event; refer to the checklist in Appendices.
- **Implementation** – During this phase we focus on getting all parties involved and collaborating with peers, leadership, and union members in the organization. With all hands on deck, the event will be informed by a number of perspectives. In this phase, it will be important to identify a master of ceremony or perhaps those that would be appropriate to co-host the event.
- **Post-implementation** – Upon completion of the family night there is an opportunity to focus on what can be learned from the event. A post-event survey or a method of gathering data to measure how the family night was received by those that participated is the last and optional phase.

To understand the phases in more detail and for information that may be helpful to guide you through the process, below are the phases described in more detail.

Identification

As the first step to host a family night, perhaps the most important question to consider is the purpose of the event.

- Will the family night be focused on support for first responders in communicating with their family members?
- Will the focus of the event be based on what information could be helpful for family to know about first responder culture and the impacts of occupational stressors or how to support their first responder loved one?

In some situations, it may be that several areas are focused upon. You may decide that there is something else that requires focus – the purpose will really depend on the needs of your unique organization. In this phase, it may be helpful to get a sense of where the gaps may be by asking to hear from a range of perspectives which could include frontline first responders, leadership, administrative/HR personnel, spouses or others that could speak to what might be important to focus on.

Planning

Upon identifying the purpose and goals for your family night, you may wish to organize the event in sections so that thought can be put into each part of the event and what might be required. Creating an agenda may be helpful in organizing the event and could include an introduction/meet and greet, refreshments, ice breaker, guest speaker(s), sharing of information/education, sharing of resources available, and a meaningful way to conclude the event.

A simple family night agenda may include:

- Sign-in and refreshments
- Introductions/meet and greet
- Ice breakers
- Guest speakers/education and information sharing
- Sharing of mental health resources by member(s) of the organization
- Conclusion/mention of surveys

There are a number of topics that may be helpful to cover during a family night and this will vary depending on the needs of your organization. Here are some topic suggestions:

- education on understanding stress
- trauma and its physiological impacts
- the nature of first responder work
- the impact of shift work
- education on self-care for families (how family members can look after themselves and manage the role they play in the life of their first responder loved one)
- what specific mental health benefits are available through the first responder organization

These topics can be selected and shared with guest speakers as potential themes for their presentation at the family night.

Another consideration is to identify a mental health professional for clinical oversight to ensure planning is appropriate. It can be helpful to liaise with a mental health clinician in the planning phase and perhaps, to also be present during family night (to support those potentially triggered or who have clinical questions). An example of how input from a mental health clinician can be useful is would be advice on whether uniforms are appropriate dress for a family night and how dress is important for the tone that may be set. The mental health clinician may be someone that is already connected with your

organization and could provide consultation and support with the planning of the event from a trauma-informed, clinical lens. It may also be an idea for the mental health clinician to act as a guest speaker, if appropriate and fitting for the event.

Some other considerations:

- Optional activities – method of introductions, ice breakers, meet and greet, drinks/refreshments
- Types of guest speakers – who might be a good fit based on the event goals
- Being mindful of safety and confidentiality; sensitivity to triggers and access to follow-up support – clinical oversight can help manage risks and provide necessary support at the event
- Budget – cost of event; food/drinks expenses
- Plain clothes versus uniforms – first responders showing up as “off-duty self” may help in creating a sense of connection and community with family members and others at the event
- Choosing a venue – consider the pros and cons of holding the event at the workplace or outside of the workplace

Family night video series

The BC First Responders Mental Health committee has created a series of videos that may be used in place of guest speakers, should your organization not have access to guest speakers. The videos are available in the Family Resilience Perspectives video series section at www.bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com and are available for free download.

The videos cover a variety of perspectives and can be utilized for awareness raising and education at any first responder family night.

Law Enforcement

In this 24-minute interview with two law enforcement officers we hear from the lived experience of this couple on their journey together and individually, as first responders. Both partners share their strategies on taking care of their own mental health and how they have learned to support one another, as well as their children.

Paramedicine

This 26-minute interview with a paramedic discusses the insights of a first responder married to a first responder which presents strengths and unique challenges. Learn about the importance of self-care and creating a healthy separation from first responder work and identity, as a strategy for positive mental health and resilience.

Firefighting

In this 24-minute interview with a firefighter we hear about the impacts of occupational stress on the first responder and their family. Learn about navigating conversations with family about first responder work and culture, how peer support can help, and tips on self-care from the insights of a first responder in the field.

Dispatch

This 22-minute interview with a dispatcher discusses how family members can support a first responder, and how the family unit as a whole also needs support. Learn about the occupational stressors that dispatchers face, how this unique work can impact mental health, some of the ways family members can support their first responder loved-one, and tips on self-care from the insights of a first responder in the field.

Mental Health Clinician

This 35-minute interview with a mental health clinician discusses how family members can support a first responder, and how the family unit as a whole also needs support. Learn about the most common challenges for first responders and their families and the keys to family resilience from the perspective of an expert in the field of mental health.

Spouse

This 26-minute interview with a firefighter's spouse walks through the lived experience of a first responder and their family in navigating the mental health challenges after a traumatic incident. The struggles, strategies, and learnings are all shared from the perspective of a spouse of a firefighter.

Implementation

When the planning phase of the family night has taken place and we are now ready for implementing the event and it can be beneficial to take a collaborative approach. Consider getting all parties involved, which may include engaging:

- your peer support team
- leadership
- union members
- chaplain or spiritual leader
- human resources staff
- other first responder agencies in the community that may not have the same resources. For example: in smaller communities – a family night may be an opportunity for bringing people together; many don't live where they work so by inviting other organizations, this opens up the opportunity to attend in your local community and connect with others to foster a sense of community
- Other community groups – mental health organizations (Canadian Mental Health Association -CMHA, local resources)

Selecting a facilitator

Identifying a master of ceremony (MC) or facilitator(s) for the event is also important. This may mean considering co-hosts with union and management if a joint effort is most appropriate for the audience. In some cases, the MC may be a representative from one or the other – it will depend on the workplace culture and what is most fitting for your organization. You may wish to consider a representative (union or management) that has personal experience or acts as a mental health champion in the organization or peer support/CISM coordinator.

Post-implementation

After your family night, a post-event survey can be a helpful way to measure the impact of the event, identify any gaps and areas that could be focused upon going forward, as well as what worked well from the insights of those that participated. Gathering data in the form of surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews with participants are all methods that can provide feedback to inform the planning of future events.

Conclusion

Hosting a family night can be a helpful and meaningful way to build resilience for first responders, their families, and first responder organizations to foster a greater sense of community by bringing people together. With mental health being important now more than ever, family nights can demonstrate the importance of promoting positive mental health through social connection, education, and providing support.

Families are a crucial part of support system for many first responders and it is beneficial to turn our attention to providing families with the supports that will help them better support their first responder loved ones and also support their own mental health. We are all in this together.

To help, please see the included resources and templates.

Resources

Complete the contact details for the resources available in your workplace to be able to provide to attendees. You may need to contact your human resources department or union to collect this information.

Organizational resources	Contact name	Phone	Email
Employee assistance program			
Organizational peer support team			
Organizational critical incident response team			
Employee's union			
Organizational chaplain			
Extended health benefits provider			

Other Resources

BC First Responders' Mental Health

bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com

The BC First Responders' Mental Health Committee has created and compiled tools and resources to help friends and family members recognize the signs of mental health issues in first responders.

At  bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/looking-to-help/as-family-friends/



A great place to begin is *Supporting Mental Health In First Responders: A Guide For Families* at bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/resource/supporting-mental-health-in-first-responders-a-guide-for-families/

Appendices

- Appendix A: Family Night Planning Checklist
- Appendix B: Sample Family Night Agenda
- Appendix C: Sample Invitation for Event
- Appendix D: Sample Invitation for Guest Speaker(s)
- Appendix E: Sample Post-event Survey

Appendix A: Family Night Planning Checklist

- Identify the reason for hosting a family night – what are you trying to achieve?
- Identify your agenda (duration of the event)
- Who is your audience? Consider if the invitation is to all family, including children
- Consider themes and guest speakers – videos can be used in place of guest speakers (see section in guide on family night videos)
- Involve various members of the organization to speak to themes and guest speakers for their perspectives (Human Resources, frontline staff, etc.)
- Confirm location of event
- Identify a facilitator or MC (you may wish to have representation from labour and management)
- Consider your budget – will you provide refreshments, snacks, etc.
- Consider consultation with a mental health professional – to get their insights on event and perhaps for them to also attend as mental health support/debriefing, should it be needed
- Determine if you want to measure feedback and whether a post-event survey may be beneficial. You may wish to hand out surveys to complete at the event.

Appendix B: Sample Family Night Agenda

Agenda:

- Sign-in and refreshments
- Meet and greet
- Introductions - MC
- Ice breakers
- Guest speakers/education and information sharing
- Sharing of mental health resources by member(s) of the organization
- Conclusion/mention of surveys

*Scheduling time slots for each item on the agenda can help with managing duration of the event.

Appendix C: Sample Invitation for Event

Subject: Family Night – Guest Invitation

On behalf of (insert name of host organization),

Please accept this invitation to participate in our upcoming family night, taking place on (insert date), at (insert event location). This event is an opportunity to bring family members and first responders together. Our aim is to share mental health education, stories, resources, and strengthen our first responder community and families.

(Optional): Insert agenda items here. Alternatively, include a general description of what will occur, such as, "Presentations on family resilience by guest speakers (insert names) and sharing of mental health resources will be followed by a networking reception with refreshments."

Please RSVP by (insert deadline date) if you are interested in attending. You can RSVP to: (Insert contact details). We hope you will join us!

Thank you,

Your Name
Your Organization
Contact details

Appendix D: Sample Invitation for Guest Speaker(s)

Subject: Family Night – Speaker Invitation

Dear (insert name),

Please accept this invitation to participate in our upcoming family night, taking place on (insert date), at (insert event location). This event is an opportunity to bring family members and first responders together and is hosted by (insert host organization). Our aim is to share mental health education, stories, resources, and strengthen our first responder community and families.

Insert specific ask of speaker here. Include the exact date and time according to the family night agenda, and include a description of the topic you would like them to present. For example to “provide a presentation on the importance of communication with family and key strategies to assist with this.”

Please let me know if you are available and interested. If so, I’ll follow up with more information and we can discuss the details and logistics related to your participation.

Thank you,

Your Name
Your Organization
Contact details

Appendix E: Sample Post-event Survey

On behalf of (insert your organization here), thank you for attending our first responder family night. It was a pleasure to have you and we hope that it was a valuable experience. Our organizers would appreciate your feedback to help plan for future events. Please take five minutes to share your opinions, and rate your experience of the family night. Your responses are anonymous.

Please provide your feedback by (insert deadline date).

Thank you,
(insert name/organization here)

1. Overall, how would you rate your experience of the family night event that took place on (insert date here)?
 - a) Excellent
 - b) Very good
 - c) Good
 - d) Fair
 - e) Poor

2. Please describe the best part of participating in the event:
 - a) [open text]
 - b) I did not enjoy so there is no best part
 - c) Unsure

3. What aspect of the family night was the most informative for you? (e.g. speaker, learning about resources, networking)
[open text]

4. Alternately, what aspect was the least informative for you? (e.g. specific presentation or speaker)
[open text]

5. Please add any additional comments and suggestions about the Master of Ceremonies, presenters, and speakers.
[open text]

6. How likely are you to attend another family night hosted by us in the future?
 - a) Definitely likely
 - b) Probably likely
 - c) Neither likely or unlikely
 - d) Probably unlikely
 - e) Definitely unlikely
 - f) Not applicable/unsure

7. What topics or information would you like to hear more about?

[open text]

8. Please add any additional comments about the structure and content of the family night.

[open text]

9. Was the location of the family night, a good place to hold the event?
(Yes/Neutral/No)

10. How would you rate the food, refreshments, and beverages?
(Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, Poor)

11. Any additional comments or anything that we have missed?

12. Are you a first responder, spouse, family member, allied health professional, human resources representative, staff member? Please describe your role below.

[open text]

Thank you for participating!