

CASE STUDY

# How Main Line Health Created a Psychological First Aid Team

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Provide immediate, on-unit emotional support to frontline staff

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# Overview

## The challenge

Health care is in no short supply of emotionally taxing and traumatic incidents that drain an employee's resilience. When frontline staff are exposed to traumatic events, they often feel too busy with patient care activities to take time to debrief and recover. Instead, they opt into the "I'm fine" culture, either forgoing emotional support or relying on personal coping mechanisms that might not be healthy or sufficient.

## The organization

Main Line Health is a five-hospital health system headquartered in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, serving portions of Philadelphia and its western suburbs.

## The approach

Psychological first aid is a type of emotional support often used by disaster relief organizations. Implementing the same approach, Main Line created a psychological first aid team to help support staff in the immediate hours following trauma. The goals are to reduce initial distress caused by trauma, enhance coping strategies, and actively connect individuals with ongoing support services.

## The result

The psychological first aid team increased availability of immediate emotional support services and increased employee assistance program (EAP) utilization by staff and first responders. It also increased manager awareness of their staffs' emotional states and helped them feel more equipped to support their staff during times of distress.

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# Approach

## Main Line Health implemented a psychological first aid team for their frontline staff

To better support their frontline staff, Main Line created a team dedicated to providing immediate psychological support. This case study outlines the up-front training and processes necessary to build a successful response team.

### The three components

Main Line followed the three steps below to create and roll out their program:

**01** Create a team of trained psychological first aid responders

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**02** Activate psychological first aid following traumatic events

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**03** Connect frontline staff with ongoing emotional support

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# 01 Create a team of trained psychological first aid responders

Leaders at Main Line Health recruited clinical and non-clinical staff to serve on their psychological first aid team. To qualify, staff must be employed for at least 90 days and have a high communication score on their most recent performance evaluation. Recruited team members must complete a day-long psychological first aid and resiliency training program that will be followed annually by a four-hour refresher course. This training focuses on effective communication, healthy coping strategies, and program specifics, such as scheduling requirements and how to refer staff to ongoing support services.

Psychological first aid responders at Main Line Health are compensated when they respond to a trauma. Hourly workers receive their hourly wage for the hours worked on the call, while salaried employees receive a \$150 stipend each time they respond to a call. Including training, compensation, and other resources, the annual expenses for Main Line's psychological first aid team is roughly \$10,000.

# 02 Activate psychological first aid following traumatic events

When a traumatic event occurs (unexpected patient outcome, medical error with patient harm, point-of-care violence, traumatic patient death, etc.), the unit manager or staff can request psychological support from the first aid team by calling a central hotline.

Two on-call psychological first aid responders will arrive within one hour of the request and provide emotional support to staff as long as needed. The psychological first aid team is not meant to replace critical incident debriefing or professional mental health treatment. Instead, it is designed to gather information about the incident through active listening, validate and acknowledge staff emotions, teach coping strategies, and refer staff to ongoing emotional support services as needed. Emotional support can be provided one-on-one or as a group. During this time, the unit manager, other nursing leaders, or peers cover staff members' patients while they receive psychological first aid.

## Key steps in psychological first aid team's response process



**1 Activated by manager or peer**

Manager or peer requests psychological first aid on behalf of colleague following a serious traumatic event



**2 Response within one hour**

Two responders arrive within one hour; response teams are available 24/7, anywhere in the system



**3 Trigger next steps and other support**

Responders activate additional support for staff from their department or EAP

# 03 Connect frontline staff with ongoing emotional support

The psychological first aid responders recommend additional support for frontline staff, if needed. This which may include formal incident debriefing, counseling, or other support through the EAP. Responders connect staff to the EAP by sharing informational materials or calling the program on the spot. This removes the burden from the individual in need, making it as easy as possible for them to access the resource. Main Line Health also requires psychological first aid responders to connect directly with EAP within 72 hours of a trauma response. The goal is to prevent secondary trauma by debriefing with responders.

## EAP involvement in Psychological First Aid Response

| Ways EAP is involved           | For individual staff                                                                                                     | For psychological first aid responders                                                               |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Overview of the program</b> | Responder shares <b>brochure about EAP services</b> with staff member during initial psychological first aid interaction | All responders are <b>trained on EAP services</b> during initial psychological first aid training    |
| <b>Activation of services</b>  | <b>Responder activates EAP services</b> for staff member receiving psychological first aid                               | <b>EAP stays on the line</b> during psychological first aid response to support the responder        |
| <b>Long-term follow-up</b>     | Initial activation of EAP <b>triggers follow-up support</b> for staff in need of more clinical services                  | <b>Responders required to debrief</b> with EAP within 72 hours of delivering psychological first aid |

# Results

## How we know it's working

Main Line Health's psychological first aid program requires up-front investment to train and compensate psychological first aid responders. However, manager-triggered psychological first aid is an effective method to help prevent secondary trauma among frontline staff who are exposed to traumatic incidents during their daily work. Qualitative feedback emphasizes the value of this program for managers as well as frontline staff, including results such as:

- Increased use of immediate emotional support services
- Increased manager awareness of staff members' emotional state
- Increased EAP utilization by staff and first responders



The work we do is tough and sometimes takes us to our emotional limits. The [psychological first aid] program has created an easily accessible avenue to provide immediate support and has proven to be a valued asset in times of great distress.”

**Nurse Administrator**  
Main Line Health



# Supporting artifacts

## Psychological first aid team's follow-up form<sup>1</sup>

Responders at Main Line Health use a special form to log incidents and help a team coordinator compile data about staff well-being. To protect confidentiality, responders do not record staff names. By ensuring anonymity, frontline staff are more likely to share emotions and use the psychological first aid team effectively. Main Line Health tracks incident type, key details, frequency, and number of staff affected, then reports trends to senior leadership, as needed. For example, if the number of incidents of point-of-care violence increases in one unit, this trend is shared with senior leaders so they can address it.

|                                                                                                                                                                    |                              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| *Facility:                                                                                                                                                         | Choose an item.              |
| *Department:                                                                                                                                                       | Choose an item.              |
| Incident type:                                                                                                                                                     | Choose an item.              |
| Brief description of incident:                                                                                                                                     |                              |
| *Estimated number of affected employees:                                                                                                                           |                              |
| <b>REQUEST FOR CIRT RESPONSE</b>                                                                                                                                   |                              |
| Telephonic assessment by (name)                                                                                                                                    |                              |
| *Date: <a href="#">Click here to enter a date.</a>                                                                                                                 | *Time:                       |
| CIRT Response needed: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No                                                                                     |                              |
| Notes:                                                                                                                                                             |                              |
| <b>CIRT RESPONSE</b>                                                                                                                                               |                              |
| CIRT Responders: 1.                                                                                                                                                |                              |
| 2.                                                                                                                                                                 |                              |
| Additional CIRT Responders:                                                                                                                                        |                              |
| *Time CIRT arrived on scene:                                                                                                                                       |                              |
| *Time CIRT Response ended:                                                                                                                                         | *Time spent on site (hours): |
| *Number of employees met with:                                                                                                                                     |                              |
| Common theme(s): <input type="checkbox"/> Anger <input type="checkbox"/> Fear <input type="checkbox"/> Chaos <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety                      |                              |
| (check all that apply) <input type="checkbox"/> Helplessness <input type="checkbox"/> Hopelessness <input type="checkbox"/> Sadness                                |                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grief <input type="checkbox"/> Other:                                                                                                     |                              |
| <b>ADDITIONAL INFORMATION</b>                                                                                                                                      |                              |
| Name of Manager:                                                                                                                                                   |                              |
| FirstCall contacted from the scene? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No                                                                       |                              |
| If so, for CIRT Member? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No For distressed employee? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |                              |
| *Departmental intentional follow-up recommended with FirstCall? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No                                           |                              |
| Notes:                                                                                                                                                             |                              |
| Unusual circumstances encountered:                                                                                                                                 |                              |
| Suggestions for improvement:                                                                                                                                       |                              |
| Completed by:                                                                                                                                                      |                              |
| Additional Information:                                                                                                                                            |                              |

Responders briefly describe incident, including number of affected staff; staff names omitted to protect confidentiality

Responders suggest next steps, such as critical incident debriefing or EAP support

1. CIRT stands for Critical Incident Response Team, how Main Line Health refers to their psychological first aid team.

## Annual expenses of Main Line Health’s psychological first aid team

The pro forma shown here details annual team and training expenses for Main Line Health’s psychological first aid team.

| Line item                                | Amount <sup>1</sup>                      |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Psychological first aid training course  | \$7,000 <sup>2</sup> (2 classes)         |
| Responder ID badges                      | \$500 (50 badges)                        |
| Pagers                                   | \$960 <sup>3</sup>                       |
| Printed materials and training handbooks | \$250                                    |
| Responder compensation (hourly)          | \$370 (10.5 response hours) <sup>4</sup> |
| Responder compensation (fixed-rate)      | \$1,500 (10 stipends) <sup>4</sup>       |
| <b>Total annual expenses</b>             | <b>\$10,580</b>                          |

1. Predicted expenses based on 150 members, 2 shifts per day x 2 teams per day x 365 days per year.


2. Training is offered 2-4 times annually, depending on recruitment needs.

3. This is a maximum cost, as not all responders will need a pager.

4. Hourly and fixed-rate compensation varies by year based on staff demand but is approximately \$2,000.


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