

# OLEAN TIMES HERALD

## Olean Fire Department Receives \$80,000 to Support Mental Health

By BOB CLARK *Olean Times Herald*



OLEAN — A new state grant program will help city firefighters deal with the mental stress of their job.

The state Office of Mental Health announced \$80,000 over two years for the Olean Fire Department, while another grant was offered to the Allegany County Sheriff's Office to help corrections officers at the county jail.

Olean Fire Chief Tim Richardson is excited to have the funds to help staff deal with such an important issue, and looks forward to a peer counseling system, travel and overtime for attending conferences on staff mental health, and other resources previously unavailable.

"Once we get peer counseling in our department, members can go to other members in a confidential manner and get peer-to-peer help," Richardson said, adding the program will offer "a safer method of dealing with what we see out on the street on a daily basis ... letting our people know that there's a way out, and you can talk about it."

The statewide initiative is targeted at first responders, ranging from police and firefighters to EMS crews and corrections officers. Suicide rates among such workers are higher than the national average, a situation typically attributed to high stress and workplace cultures.

The Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance reported that 114 firefighters nationwide committed suicide in 2019 — more than twice as many who died on duty.

According to a study by the Journal of Affective Disorders, 8% of firefighters in a survey reported having suicidal thoughts, 5% made at least one suicide attempt, 4% have reported self-harm, and 2% have made plans to commit suicide.

Richardson said that while the department has not had any staff suicides in recent years, other agencies in the area have had first responders take their own lives.

"You get the stigma that we're all tough guys and women as first responders," Richardson said. "Everybody is susceptible to this, and we want to put this out there for our members."

Richardson said some firefighters nationwide resort to addictions to alcohol, drugs or gambling to cope with the stress.

The International Association of Firefighters reports that the average career firefighter drinks on half of their off-duty days, and 85% reported drinking in the past month — with nearly half reportedly binge drinking in their off-duty time. High rates of other substance abuse have also been reported.

Along with such heavy issues, general stress and employee burnout will also be targeted.

The grant is in two \$40,000 payments, and will fully fund the program.

Richardson said Mary O'Leary, director of community services with Cattaraugus County Community Services, Suicide Prevention Coalition coordinator Amy Mann, and Donna Kahm and Alicia Broadbent of Southern Tier Health Care System assisted the department in the grant application process.