

Suicides Among Local EMTs Prompts Push For Counseling, Support

Medical emergency workers die from suicide at twice the rate of the general population. Saratoga County, fire departments search for ways to confront PTSD among rescuers who face traumatic scenes.

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Cindy and Robert Gagliardi hold onto a photo of their son, Ryan Gagliardi, an EMT/firefighter who committed suicide in September, on Friday, Nov. 18, 2022, at their home in Colonie, NY. (Jim Franco/Times Union)

COLONIE — Ryan Gagliardi had plans.

The emergency medical technician with the Malta-Stillwater EMS unit had just taken the Albany County sheriff's deputy exam. He was planning a trip to Europe with his best friend, Jon Silvernail. He planned to enroll in online arson investigation classes. And he vowed to help his mother after her upcoming surgery.

But on the night of Sept. 26, after he and his best friend had some drinks and played poker, he walked to his apartment and shot himself. He was 21 and no one — friends, family and co-workers — saw it coming.

“There was no sign, no signs at all,” said Mark Silvernail who took a photo of Gagliardi and his son together on that final night. “We have no idea what happened. Why he did it? I don’t know.”

He wondered if it was the memory of a baby who recently died in Gagliardi's arms on a call, or simply being single. Silvernail, who is a volunteer firefighter at Fuller Road Fire Department, where “Gags,” as he was known, also volunteered, suspects the cause was the accumulation of gruesome scenes Gagliardi was sent to.

Body parts in the road, charred remains in fires, gunshot victims bleeding out and a host of other sights that Silvernail said no one should see.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 17 to 24 percent of EMTs and paramedics have post-traumatic stress disorder, while another 24 percent have symptoms of depression. The National Library of Medicine found that 5.2 percent of deaths among EMTs and paramedics are caused by suicide. That is more than double the 2.2 percent rate of the general public.

Three suicide deaths of EMS workers in a six-week period this fall in the Capital Region is one of the reasons the Saratoga County Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, along with the county's EMS Council, has launched a new program. Beginning this week, the Peer Support Team, as it is dubbed, will provide individual and group debriefing support to emergency responders. It is aimed at helping emergency workers cope with what the county says are "elevated levels of anxiety, depression, PTSD, suicidal ideation and attempts, addiction and divorce."

With a mission to "respond to responders," it has trained 50 peers in the field, including members of law enforcement and firefighters, to support those who respond to accidents and disasters. The group, which includes mental health professionals, is trained to assess if someone needs ongoing, one-on-one care.

"There is a growing recognition of the demands on the first responders in particular," said Dr. Michael Prezioso, commissioner of the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. "It increased substantially since the pandemic. We looked at that and thought we should put together a team to intervene to help build their resilience and offer them help."

It's a move supported by Mark Deavers, vice chair of New York State Volunteer Ambulance and Rescue Association and director of operations for Gouverneur Rescue Squad outside Watertown. Over the past few years, he said he had two employees kill themselves and has seen a rise in EMS deaths since the pandemic.

"It has always been there, but it was kind of ignored for a very long time," Deavers said. "I saw the increased rate in suicides three or four years ago. The pandemic made it much worse, just the stress of the pandemic, the increased hours and the increased workload. People are working 70 to 80 hours a week. It takes a toll."

Still, Deavers said seeking help is frowned upon. Silvernail agreed saying if Gagliardi spoke up, he might end up on desk duty, something he didn't want. There is also a generational divide where the older members expect the younger ones to just move on from one catastrophe to the next. He said on Tuesday night there was a horrible rollover crash on Route 7 where people were seriously injured. Three on the call were young "probies" or probationary members.

"Is anyone going to talk to them?" Silvernail wondered. "No. Nothing has changed, even after what happened to Ryan. What is it going to take?"

Jessica Ricciardi, a volunteer at Fuller Road with Gagliardi, said there is a gender divide, with the men in the department feeling they have to pretend it doesn't bother them.

"You have to be able to talk to other people to express your struggles and hardship," Ricciardi said. "It's just one of those things that the men don't do. It's a hard thing to figure out how to fix."

She's concerned that many fire stations have alcohol on the premises and that the members drink to destress.

"It's good for camaraderie," Ricciardi said. "But it doesn't help because alcohol is a depressant. They drink but it's not a good way to cope. In the scope of mental health, it's not healthy."

When asked about debriefings after traumatic calls, Fuller Road Chief Roy Stiles said that they do debrief when there are fatalities and that they were done" for Gagliardi's suicide. He would not commit to doing debriefings for every difficult call because it wasn't feasible.

Regarding alcohol being consumed on the premises, he said he would not consider making changes. He also said that the night Gagliardi died, he wasn't drinking at the station, but at his friend's house.

Prezioso said there needs to be a balance.

"People need to reach out to each other," he said. "Having the bar open, it's a place to gather and process grief. They can connect with each other, but they should not devolve into abusing drugs and alcohol."

Age could be a factor, too. Gagliardi was only 15 when he became a volunteer firefighter. Prezioso said that allowing a child to become a volunteer is up to the teen and the parents, but he cautioned "the brain is not fully developed." However, he added, suicidal ideation can hit at any age because it's about the cumulative and career stress.

Scott Skinner, the executive director of the Malta-Stillwater EMS where Gagliardi worked, said he is pleased with the effort that the county is making. However, he said, it's often the case that no one sees the problem. Gagliardi is the perfect example of that.

"People are really distraught over Ryan because it snuck past the goalie," Skinner said. "People who were friends with him, his family. Unfortunately, he's not the first and won't be last. If people don't openly discuss it and keep things internal ... we are going to be losing colleagues."

Mohawk Ambulance Services, which has stations throughout the Capital Region, said they have been trying to focus on their employees' mental health in recent years. Despite those efforts, in August they lost a member to suicide. They responded by bringing in a psychologist who works with firefighters and EMTs to speak with its crews in Schenectady where the paramedic worked. While the participation rate was not high, Mohawk Ambulance tried to reach everyone by streaming it live.

"That was new for us and new for the staff and the station," said Ashley Davison, the director of human resources at Mohawk. "Although the participation wasn't what we want to be, the level of engagement was gratifying. It is baby steps. The more we are open and available to people, the more they will be available. They don't have to be a superhero and pretend nothing bothers them."

She said they will continue their efforts because their members are "under great stress every single day."

Unless it's expressed, the trauma of the job lurks, hidden and toxic.

No one knows that better than Gagliardi's mother, Cindy. Gagliardi, she said, sat with one of his friends who had a gun, until he was able to persuade him not to shoot himself. Her son's cellphone voicemail after his death was full of heartbreaking messages from colleagues asking him why he didn't reach out to them. It leaves her to wonder why he, her only child, didn't.

"How did I not see this?" Cindy Gagliardi asked. "That child came to me for everything, why not this."

She also said she wants to see important changes happen. And it has to be more than a group debriefing.

"They need one-on-one time, that's private and not on a floor with 30 people with half of them three times their age," she said. "They need a place to let all your vulnerabilities out. Ryan is getting all of this attention now. Let's use it for something good."