



# Wellness & Workforce Summit

February 18-19, 2026 | Phoenix, AZ

APCO International Summit Series



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- Nationally Registered EMT
- Peer Support Team Leader | CISM Member
- Certified Handler, First Responder Therapy Dogs
- Master's in Business and Organizational Leadership





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## Scope of Presentation

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Educational and experience based



Not presented as official county policy



Designed to complement existing wellness programs



Not a substitute for clinical care



Who are we supporting when we talk about wellness?





# Wellness & Workforce Summit

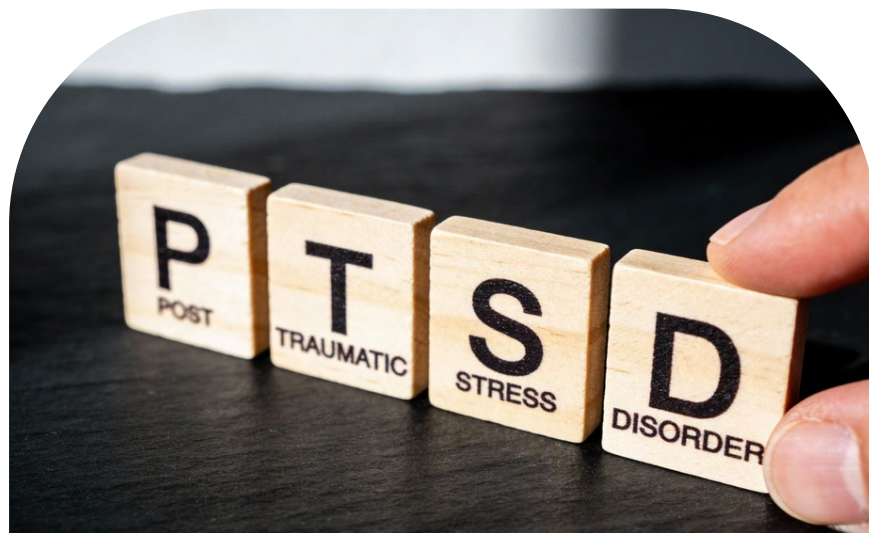
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# The Weight We Carry



## What the Research Tells Us



Up to 24% of dispatchers  
report PTSD symptoms



2–3x higher than general  
population

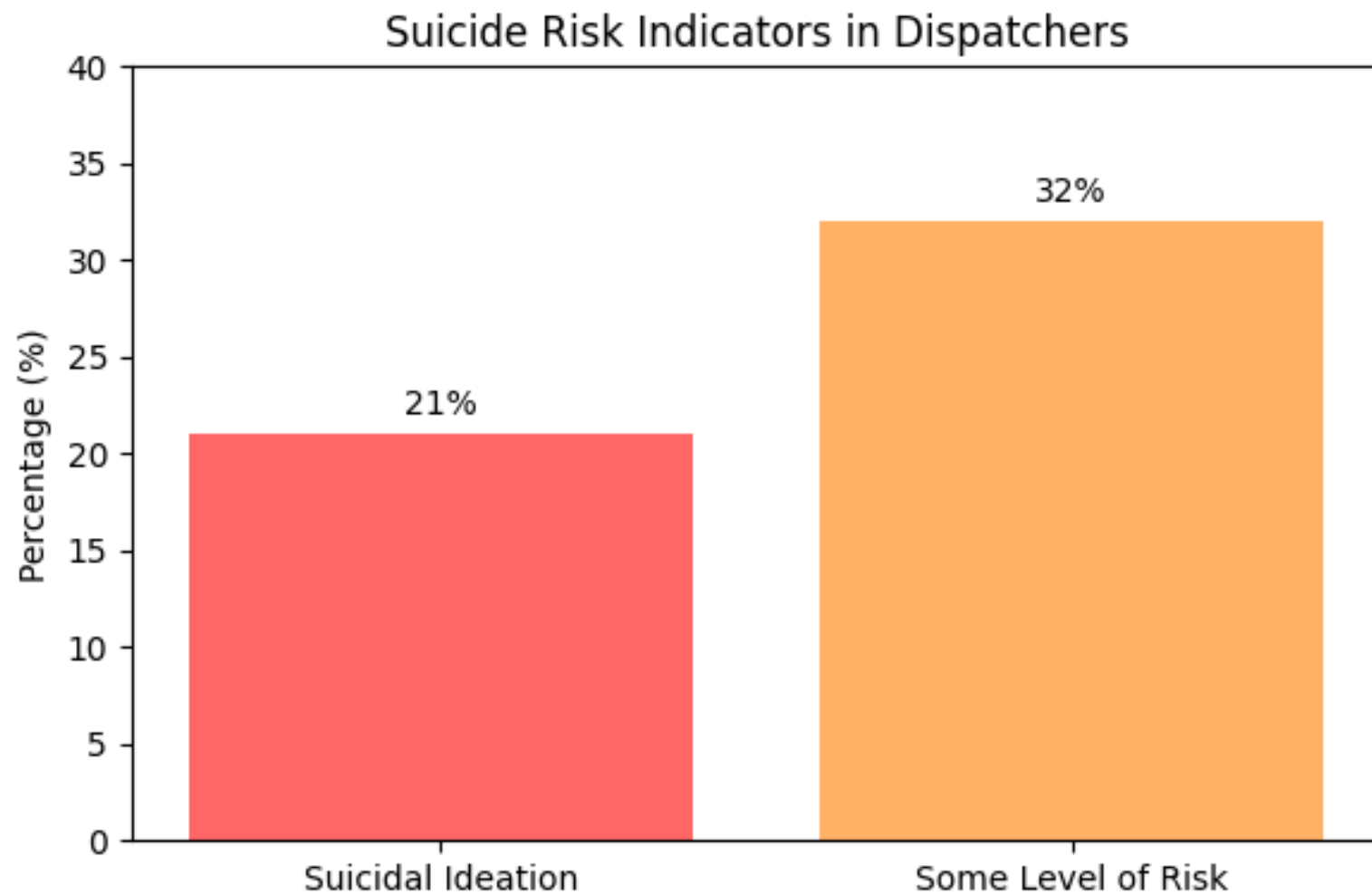


Chronic stress linked  
to sleep issues,  
anxiety, burnout



# Why Dispatcher Wellness Matters

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Repeated exposure to traumatic content



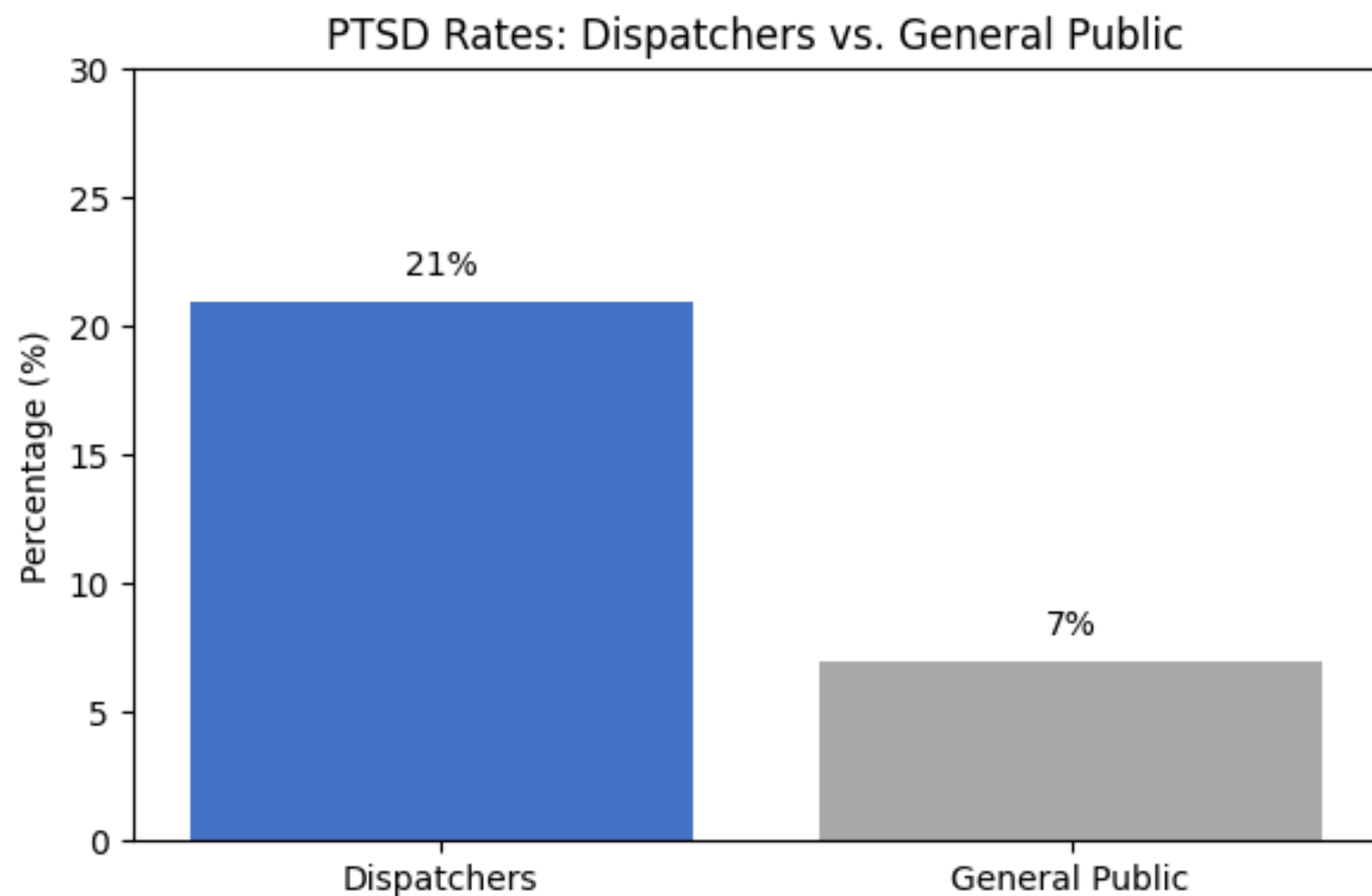
Stress is cumulative and often invisible




Limited opportunity for decompression



# Dispatcher Wellness and Therapy Dogs



- Practical considerations for peer support and CISM
  - Grounded in First Responder Therapy Dogs training and experience
  - Designed for real world application
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## Wellness... or Wishful Thinking?

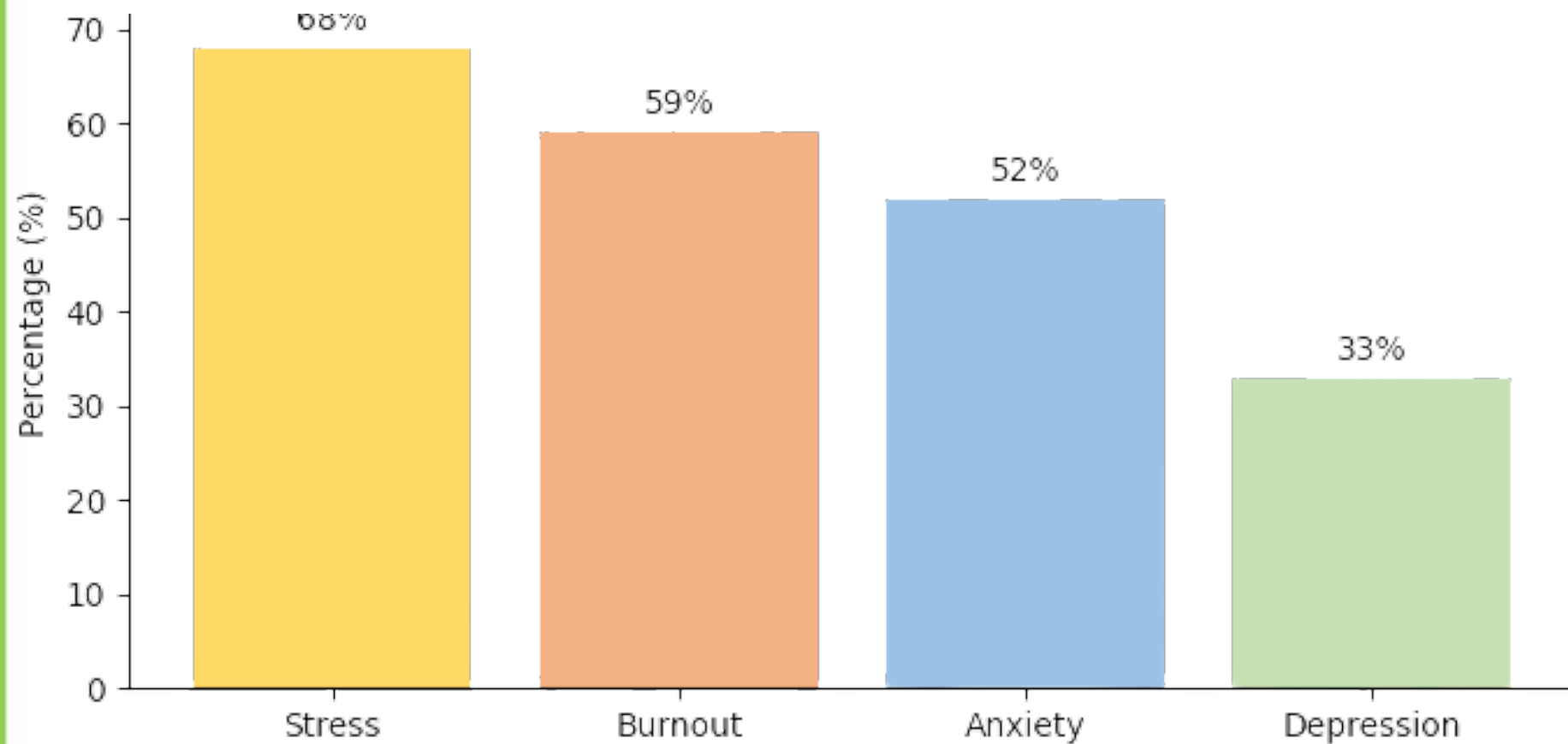
**Our center encourages people to use their vacation time.**

**We offer peer support, but no one really talks about it.**

**After a hard call, we are told to take the next one.**

**Wellness has to be complicated to be effective.**



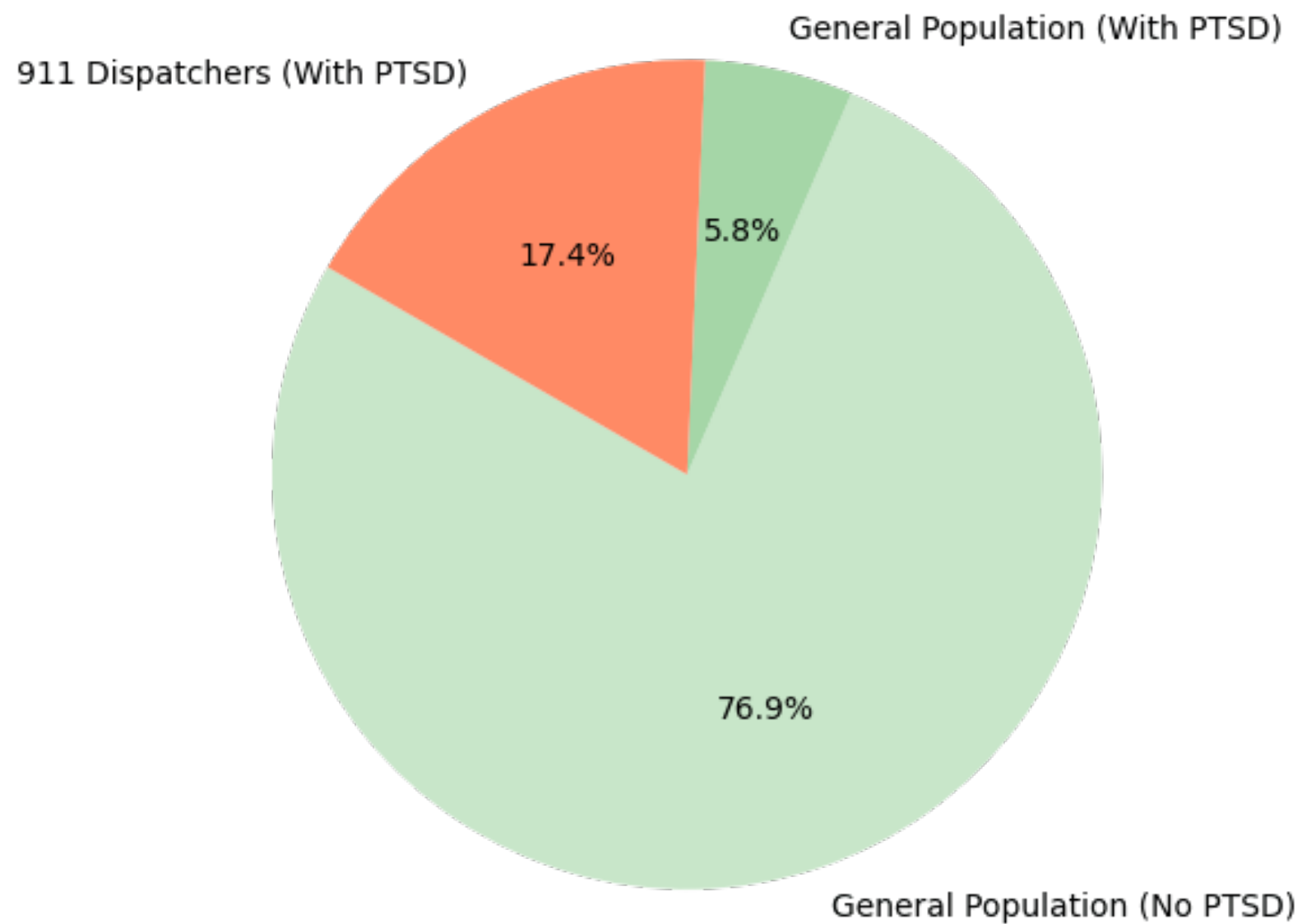


# Suicide Risk in Public Safety

- Suicide is a leading cause of death in public safety
- Elevated ideation among telecommunicators
- Stigma and invisible trauma increase risk



# PTSD Across Populations

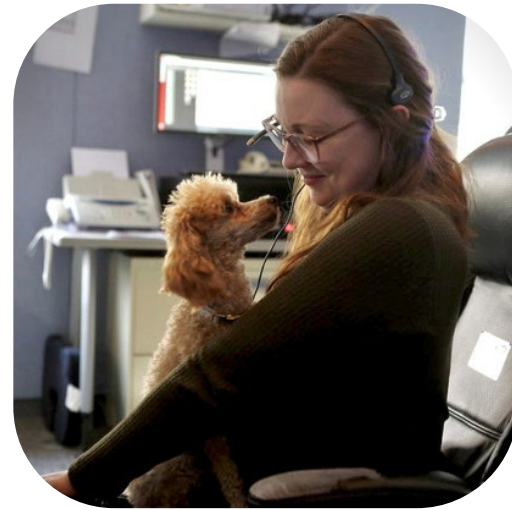


Exposure is auditory, emotional, and continuous



# Why Therapy Dogs Help

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Reduce cortisol, support nervous system regulation



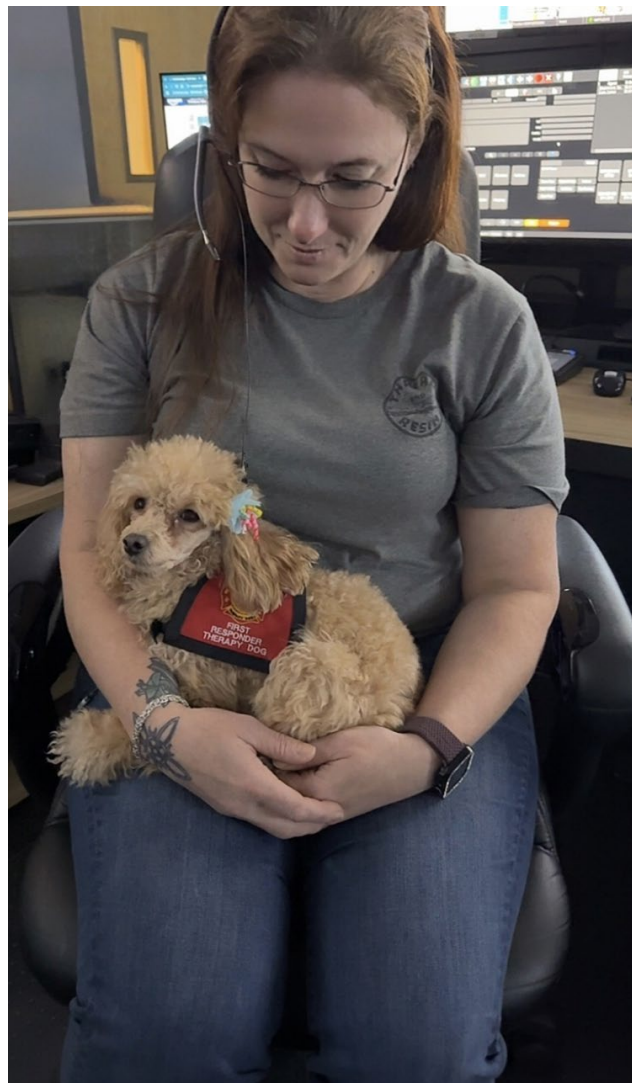
Grounding presence during high stress



Non-judgmental, calming effect



# Why Therapy Dogs Work in Dispatch



Quiet, controlled environment

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Strong peer culture

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Supports decompression after tough calls



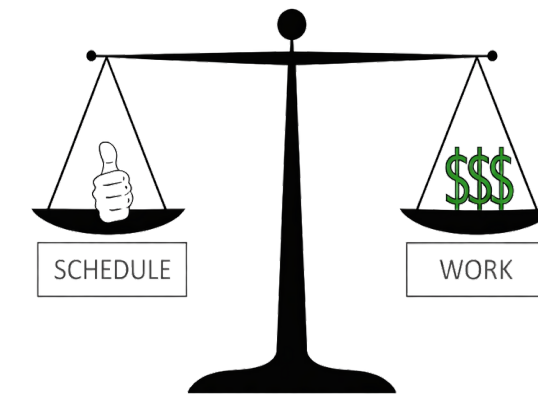
# Program Strengths



Often low or no  
cost to implement



Supports existing peer  
support efforts



Flexible  
scheduling and  
visit frequency





Liability and policy questions

# Addressing Common Concerns



Allergies or fear of dogs



Workflow disruption and professionalism



## Role of First Responder Therapy Dogs

- National organization focused on responder wellness
- Standardized handler and dog certification
- Emphasis on safety, consistency, and professionalism





# Therapy Dog Certification Basics



AKC requirements and behavior standards



Handler evaluation and public access readiness




Ongoing evaluation and training





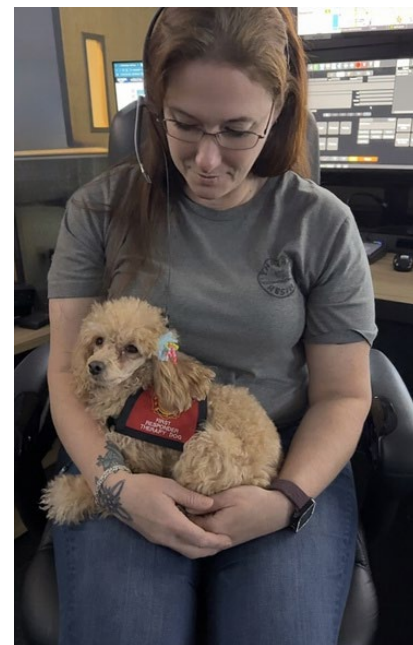
# Therapy Dogs in Peer Support & CISM

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- Not a replacement – a complement
  - Helps initiate conversation and reduce tension
  - Works best alongside trained peer teams
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# Lessons Learned from the Field



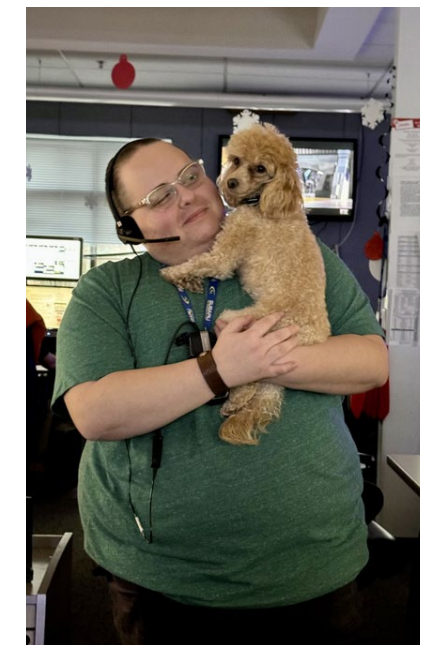
Consistency and routine visits matter



Clear boundaries maintain professionalism



Start small and build momentum



Let the team lead the pace



## 5 STEPS TO SUPPORT & BUY-IN



- Highlight wellness benefits and minimal cost** of certified therapy dog visits
- Emphasize formal training**, certification, and liability coverage of therapy dog teams
- Start with pilot** visits to build familiarity and comfort
- Coordinate** with peer support, CISM, and HR from the start



# What Would This Look Like in Your Center?

 Scan to answer anonymously.



# Resources for Further Learning



First Responder  
Therapy Dogs  
([FRTD.org](http://FRTD.org))



AKC Therapy Dog  
Program  
([AKC.org](http://AKC.org))



IAED & APCO  
wellness  
resources



Peer Support and  
CISM programs  
([CertPeerSupport.com](http://CertPeerSupport.com))  
([icisf.org](http://icisf.org))



Dispatcher wellness deserves creative support



Therapy dogs are one tool in the toolbox



Meet teams where they are – and grow from there

# Closing Thoughts

