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North River Fire District Blazes New Trails in Mental Health and Wellness for First Responders with Preventive Tools from ICARE

Orlando & Palmetto, Florida – May 9, 2024 - North River Fire District (NRFD) proudly announces its pioneering efforts in prioritizing the mental health and wellness of its dedicated team of first responders. With a strong emphasis on caring for its family of 75 employees, NRFD has partnered with the [International Center for Addiction and Recovery Education \(ICARE\)](#) to implement programs to support the mental wellbeing of its workforce and mitigate potential substance misuse.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health reports up to 40% of firefighters engage in alcohol abuse. Despite the importance of mental health in this high stress profession, there is an undeniable cultural stigma concerning mental healthcare treatment. Fear of being seen as weak or not up to the job of a first responder keeps many from seeking help and can lead suffering individuals to turn to using substances to cope.

"At NRFD, our mission is C.A.R.E. - Courage, Accountability, Respect, and Excellence. This extends beyond fighting fires; it encompasses the holistic wellbeing of our loyal, service-minded employees," says Chief Joe Sicking who has been with the district for 18 years.

"Family is our number one core value. Our firefighters, with an average age of 25, face incredibly stressful situations daily. Despite no reported incidents of drug and alcohol addiction, we understand the impact of working in such a traumatic workplace environment. It's our responsibility to ensure our team members have the support they need to be healthy in mind, body and spirit, both on and off the job."

NRFD's commitment to employee wellbeing goes beyond conventional measures such as insurance-based EAP services. Since 2016, NRFD has seen the profound impact of its Fire Chaplain program, spearheaded by Chaplain Kelvin Foster, a former firefighter with military service experience and part of Tampa Bay's Regional Critical Incident Team.

Recognizing the unique challenges faced by first responders, Chaplain Foster introduced the Fire Chaplain program to NFRD to assist employees with managing the tremendous stress inherent in their profession. As part of the program, the district offers employees three free sessions with a healthcare professional of the employee's choice for those experiencing mental or physical health issues, ensuring anonymity and access to support services.

The Fire Chaplain program has been instrumental in providing peer support and counseling services to NFRD employees since the pandemic in 2020. "Chaplain Foster has been the heart of our mental health initiatives," Chief Sicking adds. "His dedication to the wellbeing of our team is unparalleled and I have total confidence in his judgement."

In December 2023, Chief Sicking introduced ICARE to NFRD, trusting Chaplain Foster's thorough vetting of the organization. The subsequent administration of [ICARE's Healthy Self Checkup](#) in March revealed exceptionally high levels of stress, anxiety, and sleep deprivation among NFRD employees. Chief Sicking recognizes these challenges as potential precursors to alcohol and substance misuse, highlighting the importance of accountability in maintaining sobriety within the firefighting profession.

"I understand the value of providing preventive care to our employees. Through initiatives like ICARE's Healthy Self Checkup and our Fire Chaplain program, we are pioneering mental health and wellness practices on a national level," Chief Sicking states.

"I am encouraged by the work ICARE is doing to facilitate optimum wellness within the NFRD family. The first step is bringing awareness of the potential problem of alcohol and substance misuse in a high stress work environment. Secondly, it's equipping our managers with skills to identify and address possible issues around these problems."

In late May, as part of their ongoing commitment to employee development, ten of NFRD's managers will undergo management training from ICARE's Vice President and Executive Director, Cheryl Brown Merriwether. "ICARE is honored to be associated with an organization that values its people so highly," notes Merriwether. "NFRD is taking preemptive steps to foster a [Recovery Friendly Workplace](#), which includes creating a psychologically-safe, stigma-free workplace environment."

NFRD's proactive approach to mental health and wellness sets a precedent for first responders nationwide. According to Chaplain Foster, under Chief Sicking, NFRD has earned a reputation as an industry leader in addressing the inherent stressors of being a first responder. "As trailblazers, the district will continue to embrace best practices and evidence based resources such as ICARE to support NFRD's dedicated men and women."

Chief Sicking hopes their efforts will inspire others to prioritize employee wellbeing. "Firefighters are dedicated to serving others and don't like asking for help, but it's essential they feel safe seeking support if and when they need it," he concludes.

About North River Fire District

The North River Fire District (NRFD) serves the communities of Manatee County, Florida, with a dedicated team of 75 employees committed to providing exceptional service. NRFD's mission is rooted in C.A.R.E. - Courage, Accountability, Respect, and Excellence.

The purpose of the NRFD is to serve, protect and educate the public. The district encompasses 82 square miles among which lie the communities of Ellenton, Gillette, Memphis, Palmetto, Parrish, Palm View, Piney Point, Rubonia, Snead Island and Terra Ceia. North River was formed in 1988 when the Ellenton Fire Control District and the Palmetto Fire Control District merged. For more information about North River Fire District, visit: <https://www.nrfd.org/>

About International Center for Addiction and Recovery Education (ICARE)

The International Center for Addiction & Recovery Education (ICARE) is a Center of Excellence for bringing together people and processes to overcome the unprecedented societal challenges of addiction. The culmination of 25+ years of work in the field of recovery and addiction, ICARE is deeply rooted in the principles of Resilience and Emotional Sobriety. ICARE is committed to raising the awareness of addiction in our culture and helping individuals live their best lives, free from problematic behaviors and past stigma.

ICARE was founded in 2020 during COVID 19 as a response to the surge in substance misuse occurring during this devastating time. The brainchild of Dr. Jean LaCour, ICARE is a DBA of parent organization, the NET Training Institute (NTI), a 501 (C)(3) nonprofit. ICARE Workforce Solutions and the International Association for Professional Recovery Coaches (IAPRC) are additional subsidiaries operating under the NTI umbrella. Together these entities provide resources and credentialed training programs to both individuals and corporations to solve the growing global problem of addiction in individuals, families, communities, and the workforce. For information visit www.ICARE-Aware.org.

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