

Boots on the Ground supports mental health of first responders across Ontario

By Rob Paul

This year was the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon that neared 3,000 deaths and saw over 400 first responders killed. An unfathomable amount of first responders put others before themselves that day in the name of duty.

To raise awareness about PTSD for first responders, on the 20th anniversary of the attacks Caledon firefighters took to the Elora Cataract Trail for a 15-kilometre hike. The goal was not only to honour the sacrifices made 20 years ago, but to bring focus to the importance of mental health for first responders.

The hike was a joint initiative between Caledon firefighters and the organization Boots on the Ground, a confidential anonymous helpline that supports first responders in their time of need, to help first responders in the community know there's someone out there to talk to.

"We provide 24/7 peer support to all first responders across Ontario," said Dave McLennan, founder of Boots on the Ground. "That includes police, fire, EMS, corrections, and nurses, that's both their frontline and civilian members of all these organizations and both serving and retired. What we have is a 24-hour helpline that is answered by trained first responders and retired first responders to help our fellow first responders out. We're in a position where we can offer them referrals to vetted resources such as clinicians, psychologists, and social workers to give them further assistance after we've spoken to them. We also offer in-person visits in most areas of Ontario if people prefer to meet face to face. We're a charitable organization that is completely run and staffed by volunteer first responders."

As a former police officer, McLennan knows firsthand the stresses first responders deal with and wanted to ensure others in the line of duty could have an organization to lean on with the exposure to trauma that comes with being a first responder.

"Basically, it started with me looking for something in my retirement and I wanted to get into peer support, and I saw a need for independent resources outside of what employers offer," he said. "It's not that they're doing a bad job, but the stigma still exists and there's still confidentiality fears for people who don't want to go to their own peer support team and know who they're talking to. We saw a need for independent resources, and I started the organization with a committee of 20 other dedicated police officers and we took two years to develop the program and launched it in November of 2018. It's mostly seeing a need for a resource independent of an employer so that first responders have choices that they're comfortable with."

Sometimes the general population can forget what first responders have to go through on a daily basis while serving their communities and McLennan doesn't want them to feel like there's nobody to talk to when they're dealing with the hard part of the job.

"First responders are human," he said. "They wear the uniform, but when they take the uniform off and go home to their families, they're just like everyone else. They're going to have bad and difficult times that they have to go through so it's huge for first responders to have people who understand and get what they're going through available to them to help through those tough times. First responders are used to being the ones who are helping people and they're not the best at asking for help, so, if we offer them an anonymous service then nobody needs to know that they've reached out. We want them to be able to get the help they need without worrying about the stigma or those types of issues."

Though first responders are viewed as the heroes in communities, the stigma of asking for help is still there and despite it getting better over the years, McLennan says there's still a long way to go to get past that.

"There's even a stigma in the general population still, and even though we've come a long way, there's still a stigma around mental

health," he said. "People still don't want to admit they need help sometimes and I think it's at another level with first responders because we're used to being the ones who help. Traditionally, first responders have the mentality of not wanting to show weakness or ask for help or show something bothers you. We know that's not healthy, and first responders need someone to talk to. 30 years ago, when I was a police officer, it wasn't spoken about, and we didn't even know about PTSD back then. It's come a long way, but we still have a long way to go, and the stigma definitely still exists, unfortunately. People are afraid if they have mental health issues it will affect their job and though that stigma still exists, we're making strides. We feel offering the anonymous support doesn't eliminate the stigma, it does reduce it because people can call, and we don't ask their name or where they work. All we ask is what line of duty they're in and offer the assistance they need."

McLennan and the team at Boots on the Ground's top priority is making sure first responders know they're there for them whenever they might be needed to help those who help so many others in the community.

"Raising awareness is huge for us," he said. "We're always available for any and all first responders. We're there for them 24/7 and we just need to raise the awareness that first responders have someone to turn to when they don't think they do. It's about giving them hope and letting them know there are resources out there that can help them through these times. A lot of the time when people get in these difficult situations, they think there's no hope or they think nobody can help, but there's lots of things that can be done to help people through those difficult mental health struggles."

First responders are there for people when they need them, and one of the best ways to be there for the first responders when they're the ones who need help is to support organizations like Boots on the Ground.

"We have a GoFundMe page (www.gofundme.com/f/tkqbpy-boots-on-the-ground-ptsd) and we're also on Canada Helps (www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/boots-on-the-ground-peer-support-for-first-responders/) or they can email us at info@bootsontheground.ca," he said. "Any and all support is amazing."

For more information about Boots on the Ground visit <https://www.bootsontheground.ca/>, or to call the anonymous helpline dial 1-833-677-2668.