

Special Report:

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Why it's only a matter of time before COVID-19 paralyzes corrections

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Family support resources for first responders

Governments and private groups step up with resources and assistance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

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By Robert VanNieuwenhuyze

As the COVID-19 emergency evolves and directly impacts first responders across the nation, new and continued support is available for public safety families so responders can focus on their duties.

As an essential employee, no matter what your typical assignment is, the declared state of emergency due to COVID-19 will demand more of your time and attention and, undoubtedly, disrupt your work/family balance. Routine needs such as childcare, pet care and financial responsibilities will be joined by an ever-increasing need for self-care, resiliency strategies and mental health support. How, then, do you and/or your family obtain assistance for these tangible and intangible needs?



From childcare to pet care, there are lots of challenges facing first responders and their families as COVID-19 disrupts work/family balance. (Photo/Pixabay)

FINDING HELP

Many agencies and local governments are already doing a good job providing direction and assistance to responders and their families. Unfortunately, however, not all responders and administrators plan for such contingencies or become familiar with available resources until a crisis hits. Fortunately, we live in a time when resources are often at our fingertips.

If your agency is providing adequate direction and assistance to its responder families, that's great news. Take advantage of what they offer. If not, now is the time to assess your needs and personally seek out appropriate assistance

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SUPPORT OFFERINGS

Start with your local resources, but do not limit yourself. Many governmental and private organizations provide existing support services, and some are rolling out new or enhanced services in light of the pandemic. Even a quick internet search reveals several available resources and/or services.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), for example, is an obvious resource for the general public, but the agency also offers [information specific to first responders and their families](#). The CDC is aware that first responders, in order to take care of others, must be feeling well and thinking clearly. One effective way of accomplishing this is to ease the burden of responsibility at home through the implementation of family support systems.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) has issued a bulletin, [COVID-19: Health and Safety for Law Enforcement Families](#), offering tips and guidelines for LEOs and their families. IACP also offers a downloadable [Employee and Family Wellness Guide](#) that may offer relevant advice for managing the current situation.

Have you considered The National Child Traumatic Stress Network for information focused on helping families cope with COVID-19? Though not specific to first responder families, the [Parent/Caregiver](#)

Guide to Helping Families Cope With the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) provides useful information pertaining to parenting during this challenging time. Educating yourself and your family may serve to enhance family preparedness and reduce anxiety.

CHILDCARE RESOURCES

In a profession often filled with young families, childcare may be an immediate need during this time of changing schedules, quarantines and long work hours. A first responder who cannot find safe childcare during the COVID-19 crisis is a first responder who cannot do their job.

Maybe your spouse is working from home and struggling to keep your child engaged in their new online schooling program. Or, maybe you're a single parent whose normal childcare agency has been ordered temporarily closed. Suddenly, turning to the grandparents to fill in and watch the kids may not be feasible or even advisable in this current crisis.

Whatever the case, public and private organizations appear to be stepping up to fill this need. In some municipalities, for instance, several entities have come together to provide first responders and public safety communication personnel with free, discounted, and/or 24/7 childcare availability. Initiatives like these are made possible through collaboration among local leaders and YMCA, United Way, and Red Cross affiliates, among others, as well as public schools and healthcare providers. In other areas, some childcare providers are being allowed to remain open for the sole purpose of providing childcare services to public healthcare workers and first responders.

PET CARE PLANNING

How about pet care assistance? The CDC encourages pet owners to plan and prepare a disaster kit for their pets and, in the case of hospitalization, to have friends or family members take care of your pet, as pets will be more comfortable in familiar environments with familiar people.

If friends or family are unable to care for your pets during planned or unplanned absences, you may want to reach out to your local animal shelter or rescue group for direct support or referrals. Maybe a K-9 officer knows where your pets can be safely boarded, perhaps at a discounted rate. Some private organizations are even creating assistance programs to cover the cost of temporary pet boarding, for people requiring hospitalization.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The COVID-19 crisis will have far-reaching financial implications, and first responder families are not exempt. If necessary, take advantage of available programs to ease the burden.

For instance, The First Responders Children's Foundation COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund has been established to provide financial aid to eligible first responders who are protecting communities during this outbreak. Certainly, there are more existing and newly forming resources than can be discussed here, but they are out there.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Let us not forget that many resources already support first responder families in addressing potential mental health issues related to the job. Some resources aim to help children understand the role their parents play at work, in an effort to reduce anxiety among this vulnerable group. These resources are certainly applicable to the current pandemic.

Governmental resources pertinent to mental health and family adjustment, specific to post-deployment and reintegration of first responders from disaster situations, are available and may now be extremely useful to first responders and their families.

These resources include the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and their downloadable guide, [Tips for Families of Returning Disaster Responders: Adjusting to Life at Home](#). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) similarly provides [A Post-Deployment Guide for Families of Emergency and Disaster Response Workers](#).

SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND HELP

The unique needs of first responders and their families during this unprecedented time cannot be fully identified here. References to organizations and programs are not meant to be all-inclusive; they simply demonstrate that resources exist and can be located if you simply look for them.

As a first responder today, you have a lot on your plate. But, none of us can afford to sit on our hands and expect relief and support to fall into our families' laps. Hopefully, your agency and/or municipality has implemented necessary supports for you and your family.

If not, you can search for resources now. Go online, make some calls, talk to others. Do not narrow your search only to first responder-focused material. There are many nationwide and local services available to help you through this crisis – so don't wait.

About the author

Robert VanNieuwenhuyze is a content developer for Lexipol. He served 26 years with the Smithfield Police Department in Rhode Island, retiring as deputy police chief. He holds a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice Studies and a master's degree in Administration of Justice and is a graduate of the FBI National Academy Session #236.

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