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MMA's Serve Strong Program Featured on the Voice of Maine

Augusta, Maine. On November 16, Anthony Ward, Casco Town Manager and member of the Association's Executive Committee and Rebecca Graham, MMA's Senior Legislative Advocate, joined Ric Tyler and George Hale on the Voice of Maine to discuss MMA's Serve Strong initiative. You can listen to the interview [here](#).

The program, which will be fully implemented and made available to MMA member towns and cities in February 2024, is designed to provide first responders access to web-based mental health services offered by providers familiar with the stresses and trauma experienced by members of the law enforcement, firefighter, emergency medical services, dispatcher, and correctional communities.

"Serve Strong is a program that MMA began discussing in September of 2023 during our goal planning," said Ward. "We came up [with the program] as an Executive Committee, as we really began to understand that mental health and the wellbeing of first responders is critical. We currently have some programs that deal with the immediate trauma after events...but nothing that dealt with the long-term effects of trauma based mental health issues."

Highlights of the program, which is being offered to municipal associations nationwide via a collaboration between NLC-RISC and Alliant Insurance Services, include:

- **Web-based Website.** A web-based platform, accessible 24/7, that provides access to essential resources tailored for first responders and family members.
- **Professional Mental Health Assessments.** The Serve Strong mental health assessment and the accompanying tele-therapy services are designed to work together to allow first responders to seek support for their most pressing challenges in a confidential environment.
- **Preventative Tele-therapy.** The program provides resilience training and therapy for trauma-based mental health conditions, as well as immediate support prior to a diagnosis of PTSD or other significant mental health conditions.
- **100% Confidential.** Serve Strong serves as a preventative program to combat rising PTSD among first responders.

Equally important, the program is designed to provide services to first responders, dispatchers, and correctional officers, who serve in communities or counties across the state and of varying populations.

Pointing to the recent incident in Lewiston as an example in which area first responders played supporting roles, Ward stated that “any first responder, whether you are in Casco or the City of Portland...are all exposed to various levels of trauma.”

In referencing an MMA legislative initiative, LD 1857, *An Act to Create the Public Safety Health and Wellness Reimbursement Fund to Benefit Public Safety Workers and Volunteers*, sponsored by Rep. Copeland of Saco, Graham stressed that the Serve Strong program is just one piece of a larger puzzle.

As Graham explained, the bill seeks to assist in the recruitment and retention of law enforcement officers and first responders by providing “access to some key health screenings and resources that affect all those individuals regardless of their employment status, whether they are full time, whether they are volunteers, or whether they work for a municipality, a county or a state government.” An amended version of the bill currently sits on the Appropriation’s Table awaiting the Legislature’s return in January.

The work on LD 1857 began two years ago and as Graham mentioned the idea “was born from concerns from law enforcement officers and leadership that they are operating in an environment that is demanding more of their services, requiring longer response times...without any access to needed tools. For example, they are dealing with homelessness in our communities, substance use disorder, and a lack of access to programs and services needed for the mental health of the folks that are just within our communities.”

Graham further noted that the lack of resources “weighs down on their morale, as well as their mental and physical health. Just by the nature of their job they are already identified to have significant health impacts from... repeated exposure to the trauma that civilian screenings don’t catch.” This includes the lack of access to physical health diagnostic services, as well as mental health services, “particularity trauma informed ones that are geared to understanding the unique needs of first responders.”

More information about the Serve Strong program will be shared with member communities in the coming months via the Maine Town & City magazine and website. Municipal officials interested in being notified when the product is released, are urged to email Kate Dufour (kdufour@memun.org).

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About the Maine Municipal Association: Founded in 1936, the MMA is a voluntary, non-partisan, member-service organization to which 484 municipalities in Maine belong. It has a core belief that local government is a fundamental component of a democratic system of government. MMA’s services include advocacy, education, and information, professional legal and personnel advisory services and self-funded group insurance programs.

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