



Audit Report

Sworn Public Safety Employee Mental Health

July 2026



The City of Austin provides resources to support the mental health of their sworn public safety employees at Austin Fire, Austin Police, and Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services. However, employees may be hesitant to use resources and feel that they do not address root causes of strains on mental health. We also saw that support resources vary between departments and the available support may not be proactive.

Sworn Public Safety Employee Mental Health

Objective

To determine if the City is supporting the mental health of sworn public safety employees.

What We Found

Public safety employees in Austin's Fire, Police, and EMS departments face serious stress and exposure to potentially traumatic incidents as part of their daily work. The City offers multiple mental health and wellness services to support employees, but many employees do not feel this is enough to address other core causes of their stress. They noted that their work schedules and lack of sleep had a significant impact on their mental health. They also reported feeling unsupported by leadership, fear that seeking help could hurt their careers, and concerns about whether their information will stay private. As a result, employees may avoid the very services designed to support them.

Additionally, mental health support differs from department to department. We found that peer support teams, a critical element of mental health support, do not have the same level of training or resources across departments. Follow-up after potentially traumatic events is inconsistent, and only firefighters receive routine mental health screenings. We also saw that while employees get some information on mental health early in their careers, continuing education and mental health awareness efforts later on can be inconsistent.

The City currently maintains a wellness center that houses some support services for public safety employees. We observed that the center is outdated, in poor condition, and raises several privacy concerns. However, the City is currently developing a new public safety headquarters that will include a new wellness center to bring all wellness resources into one space.

What We Recommend

Department leaders should strengthen mental health support for public safety employees by improving trust in wellness services and enhancing proactive support resources. To do this, we recommend setting clearer expectations for follow up after critical incidents, providing additional training to supervisors, improving training for AFD and EMS peer support teams, exploring proactive mental health check ins for all employees, and ensuring staff receive consistent mental health education throughout their careers.



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Cover: City of Austin, 2025.

Mental Health Content Note

This report discusses topics related to mental health including traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and suicide. If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, please call the crisis lifeline at 988 or call Austin Travis County Integral Care's helpline at 512-472-4357 for Austin-area support.

Objective

To determine if the City is supporting the mental health of sworn public safety employees.

Background

As of February 2026, the departments reported they had about 1,255 sworn employees at AFD, 1,488 at APD, and 604 at EMS.

The Austin Fire (AFD), Austin Police (APD), and Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) departments are responsible for keeping the community safe and responding to emergencies. Together, AFD, APD, and EMS employ thousands of sworn and civilian employees.

Sworn employees' work is governed by the Texas Civil Service law, and specific contracts periodically negotiated with the City. Most employees at AFD, APD, and EMS are sworn, but some are civilian. Civilian employees are subject to different laws. Both civilian and sworn employees are essential to keeping Austin safe, however, this audit specifically focuses on the mental health of sworn employees.

Sworn public safety employees routinely respond to serious incidents involving violence, injuries, and death. The stress of these experiences can have an impact on their mental health and well-being over time. A body of research has shown that first responders may have greater risks for serious mental health impacts like post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide than the general population. Some City of Austin sworn employees have died by suicide in recent years, and staff reported that some employees struggle with challenges like depression, the effects of stress, anxiety, and substance use. When first responders are not mentally well, their own safety and the safety of the people they serve can be compromised, making mental health support critical for effective public safety operations.

Best practices for public safety agencies emphasize the importance of developing comprehensive wellness programs and resources to support first responder wellness.

Peer support teams are trained groups of employees that provide confidential emotional and practical support to their coworkers. While they do not replace licensed mental health providers, research shows that peer support is a popular and trusted support service for public safety wellness programs.

The City provides a range of wellness services to help public safety employees manage these stresses, including:

- in-house licensed psychologists
- peer support teams
- chaplains
- fitness services
- medical services
- pet therapy teams

Although some services are department-specific other services, such as medical care, are shared across all three departments. The City also offers free counseling to all employees through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The Public Safety Wellness Center, a facility available to all sworn City of Austin employees, brings some of these resources together including medical services, some fitness programs, and two licensed psychologists.

Finding 1

The City has resources to support the mental health of public safety employees. However, some employees expressed concern about using these resources and felt that they may not always address the root causes of stress.

According to best practice groups, public safety organizations should conduct proactive engagement, build a culture of wellness around mental health, and cultivate strong leadership support for mental health.

We found that the City's available resources and support services largely align with best practices and peer cities. We spoke with 5 peer cities and they all took similar, multi-faceted approaches to wellness through peer support teams, City-sponsored mental health providers, employee assistance programs, volunteer chaplains, and occasionally pet therapy programs. (See Appendix B for a full look at peer cities comparison.)

To learn more about the effectiveness of the City's mental wellness services, we conducted three surveys of sworn public safety employees in each department to learn about what impacts their mental health and their experiences with wellness services. We had a response rate of 23% (279 responses) for AFD, 21% (294 responses) for APD, and 31% (190 responses) for EMS.

Management across all three departments reported that the approach and attitudes towards mental health had improved over the last 10 to 15 years. We saw a mixed response reflected in the survey. Many respondents felt generally satisfied with the wellness support they received. 41% of AFD respondents, 45% of APD respondents, and 45% of EMS respondents, reported that they believe their department is doing enough for their health and wellness.

Survey responses across all the departments showed that employees overwhelmingly feel more supported by peers than by their executive leadership, with the feeling of support declining sharply the higher one's position is in the organizational hierarchy. Respondents reported feeling less supported by leadership the higher those leaders are in the organizational structure.

Exhibit 1: Respondents feel more support from their peers than executive leadership

	AFD		APD		EMS	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Respondents who felt their peers cared for their well-being and mental health	265	95%	259	88%	148	78%
Respondents who felt chiefs and executives cared for their well-being and mental health	59	21%	74	25%	39	21%
Respondents who felt City Council cared for their well-being and mental health	9	3%	4	1%	11	7%

Source: Auditor survey of public safety employees, February 2026. The response rate for AFD was 22% (279 responses), 20% (294 responses) for APD, and 31% (190 responses) for EMS.

When given the opportunity to share their concerns, employees' first and second most reported concern was about leadership. Employees reported feeling unheard, disconnected, and unsupported by leadership. Wellness staff also reported that employees were distrustful of wellness resources and the department in general.

Exhibit 2: Some public safety employees expressed concern about support from leadership

"It isn't the external stress or cumulative trauma from call response. It's the internal stress from feeling devalued or mistreated by the city and the department leadership... [The resources] come from the sources of the stress, so the same offices that are causing the issues are pushing out the solutions."

-APD Employee

"It is all based on additional stress put onto the employees by management not providing the resources to do our job and distrust between the two groups. Management may provide mental and wellness services but failing to support its employees with the resources it needs defeats those provided services. No one really trusts those services and there is a general feeling that it does not matter."

-AFD Employee

"Morale in the EMS department is at the lowest I've experienced... [it] impacts the culture and relationships amongst personnel and is directly contributing to separations and worsening burnout with no realistic changes foreseeable from executive leadership"

-EMS Employee

Source: Auditor survey of public safety employees, February 2026.

Employees may not fully use wellness resources because they may not feel there is enough separation between services and management decisions.

Mental wellness is important for public safety employees for their own safety and the safety of the people they serve. Employees may be removed from their jobs or have their duties changed if they are not mentally or physically well enough to perform their job effectively. Management reported job changes happen, for example, if someone threatened to hurt themselves or someone else.

Despite efforts to keep wellness services and employment decisions separate, wellness staff reported that employees may still be hesitant to engage with services for fear of retaliation or job impacts.

Across multiple questions in the survey, we saw that respondents did not want anyone at the City to know about their mental health challenges, were concerned about how using services may impact their jobs, and some expressed distrust of any service affiliated with the City.

Some employees said they did not want to use the wellness services because of their experience with the providers during the hiring process. Currently, wellness center licensed psychologists conduct hiring assessments for EMS candidates, and they used to do the same for AFD candidates. Although the City contracts an outside provider to conduct these assessments for all three departments, the wellness center licensed psychologists still conduct a large portion of the EMS assessments. This accounts for a significant portion of the licensed psychologists' time and may make EMS employees hesitant to use wellness services throughout their career.

Employees also expressed concern about confidentiality in wellness services. All information shared with mental health providers and peer support team members is confidential unless there is a concern that they are an imminent threat to themselves or others. However, employees may still be concerned about how their mental health information might be used, including whether it could be released through public records requests, used in other internal investigations, or accessed by people in their chain of command.

Some wellness providers went to great lengths to reassure employees that their information would not be used inappropriately. A wellness provider conducting mental health questionnaires would only attach a name to the questionnaire with a sticky note then shred the note. Providers will also offer to meet off site and schedule sessions with employees directly via text or phone call to protect their privacy. Despite these efforts, more than 30% of respondents in all departments had concerns about the privacy and confidentiality of their information.

The City's public safety wellness resources may not address the root causes of stress such as workload challenges and schedules.

Public safety employees told us their mental health is affected not only by what they experience on the job but also by the structure of their work, including their workload, schedules, and the amount of sleep and recovery time they get. According to our survey, 73% of AFD respondents, 58% of APD respondents, and 73% of EMS respondents reported sleep had a high or significant impact on mental health.

We reviewed policies that define how much, and when, public safety employees can work. Each department sets some limits on the number of hours that can be worked in a given period of time, but employees expressed concern that they may still not get enough recovery time.

"Ideally, the Department would encourage things like taking time off. Due to critical staffing shortages, the opposite is true. I've had supervisors request that I come in while physically ill due to lack of staffing, so there is no way I would request time off for a 'mental health day.'" ... "Budget constraints and staffing shortages are real, actual problems, so I don't see anything else the Department could really do better. In short, like many things in our chosen profession, you just understand that life will sometimes be unpleasant and hope your brain isn't too screwed up when you make it to retirement." – APD employee, audit survey, February 2026

Exhibit 3: Survey respondents felt work schedule improvements and better access to mental health treatment would better support their mental health.

	AFD		APD		EMS	
	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>
Improved work schedules	240	86%	144	49%	89	47%
Improved access to licensed mental health providers	114	41%	138	47%	78	41%
More education/training on mental health	73	26%	71	24%	62	33%
Improved access to peer support team members	32	11%	71	24%	41	22%
Improved access to specialized treatments like EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing)	111	40%	171	58%	35	18%
Nothing	12	4%	38	13%	24	13%

Source: Auditor survey of public safety employees, February 2026. The response rate of for AFD was 22% (279 responses), 20% (294 responses) for APD, and 31% (190 responses) for EMS.

AFD and EMS respondents most often selected “improved work schedules” as the change that would best support their mental health, and APD respondents ranked schedule changes as their second most needed improvement.

Most respondents (AFD: 80%, APD: 59%, and EMS: 75%) reported having missed some work due to mental health reasons. However, some employees felt that policies surrounding taking time off for mental health reasons were unclear or insufficient. Even when allowed, an APD employee reported that they felt taking time for mental health reasons was looked down upon because it puts stress on coworkers to fill in gaps.

When asked to share their thoughts, one of most frequent concerns expressed by EMS employees was the number of calls they were working. EMS employees reported high call volumes, with some describing 24-hour shifts without any rest. APD employees expressed similar workload strain.

However, a recent contract agreement requires AFD to develop and implement a new standard schedule by October 2027 to improve recovery time for firefighters. Also, EMS leadership noted they have begun using an application that flags medics who may need rest or recovery time.

Finding 2

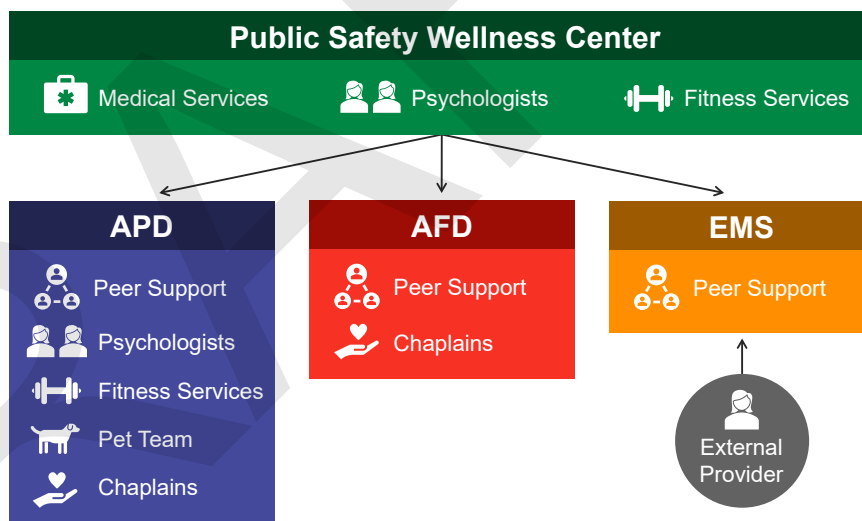
Public safety employees may not receive consistent or proactive mental health support across departments. As a result, mental health concerns may go unaddressed.

Public safety employees frequently use services from licensed psychologists, peer support teams, and contracted providers. Wellness service providers reported feeling overwhelmed by demand and often working long hours. Although Austin's wellness services include many recommended best practices, departments still take a mostly reactive rather than proactive or consistent approach across departments.

The wellness resources provided to public safety employees vary across the three departments.

Each department operates independently, with its own dedicated budgets, policies, staff, and professional and legal standards. While each profession has unique needs, they generally benefit from the same core approaches to mental health support, including peer support teams, licensed mental health providers experienced with first responders, and chaplain services.

Exhibit 4: Some resources are shared across departments, while others are dedicated to specific departments



Source: Auditor review of City wellness resources, April 2026.

The public safety departments and wellness staff make efforts to coordinate resources across the departments, but some resources are dedicated to specific groups. Each public safety department shares some of the cost for the Austin Public Safety Wellness Center (APSWC) which is intended to serve all public safety employees and provides medical, fitness, and mental health services.

Two licensed psychologists are located at the wellness center. This is the primary mental health resource housed at the center. Although the cost of these two positions is shared between AFD and EMS, the licensed psychologists reported that they primarily see AFD employees.¹

¹ Licensed psychologists estimated that the ratio of AFD clients to EMS clients is about 4 to 1. However, these figures could not be independently verified because licensed psychologists only keep the total number of employees they see in each department.

Additionally, the wellness center itself is currently located in a building that houses other AFD functions. These factors combined could create the perception that the wellness center is focused on AFD employees. Management reported that this may have been the impression in the past, but it has improved over the years.

In addition to the wellness center, each of the three public safety departments maintain separate peer support teams and have separate procedures and processes for providing support. While all three of these teams conduct outreach to their peers following significant events and provide referrals to peers in need, some peer support teams have more resources than others.

Exhibit 5: Peer support teams vary between departments.

	AFD	APD	EMS
Number of paid peer support staff	1 full-time lieutenant	5 full-time sworn employees	0
Approximate number of peer support volunteers	50	35	40
Number of contacts provided by peer support between FY 2023 and FY 2025*	900	5,200	5,900

*Each department uses different methods to track the contacts. We could not independently verify these numbers because the contacts are confidential and anonymous.
Source: Department interviews and auditor analysis of tracking data.

The peer support teams are also used at different rates in each department. According to our survey, 54% of APD respondents, 41% of EMS respondents, and 38% of AFD respondents reported using peer support. Each team also tracks the number of contacts they made.

Some peer support teams also receive more training than others. All peer support procedures across the three departments require some initial and recurrent training. We saw that APD peer support had consistent and regular records of training throughout the scope period. For AFD peer support, some individuals appeared to be missing required training, and some members had received more training than others. EMS peer support had the least amount of training. According to management, only one peer support team training was conducted during the scope period. It was held in October 2025.

Departments may not be doing consistent, proactive follow-up after major events

All sworn employees will likely be exposed at some point during their careers to a potentially traumatic event. In our survey, over 98% of respondents said they had responded to a significant event that they considered traumatic.²

² Examples provided in the survey included a critical incident like a serious injury or death, a fire, a natural disaster, a traffic fatality, significant violence, an incident involving officer use of deadly force, a juvenile fatality, an assault against a juvenile, a homicide, a suicide, or anything else they considered significant or traumatic.

“We experience trauma all the time at work. We see people dying all the time. We see people lose their infants. We see people lose their spouses. We see people lose their homes. All while being sleep deprived.” – AFD employee, audit survey, February 2026

Although evidence is inconclusive on specific approaches, professional organizations recommend providing some kind of support following major events.

All three departments reported conducting check-ins with people who responded to major events. These follow-ups are done by peer support teams and sometimes City licensed psychologists. However, more than half of respondents to each survey said they had never or rarely received a check-in or debrief with someone in their department peer support or chain of command. 66% of APD respondents, 62% of EMS respondents, and 52% of AFD respondents said they never or rarely received a check-in. Respondents to the survey frequently mentioned the desire for more follow-up after major events as something that their department could do to help support them.

APD and AFD have specific policies that state how follow-ups should be conducted after “critical incidents.” However, APD defines critical incidents broadly and it may not be possible to directly follow up with each person after each event. While AFD defines critical incidents more narrowly and may not respond to other events that might warrant follow-up. EMS similarly does not have a clear definition or process for when to follow-up, and we heard that follow-up after a major event often occurs on a case-by-case basis.

Only AFD employees receive proactive mental health screenings

The National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) guidelines state that firefighters should receive screenings during their annual physicals that evaluate firefighters for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance use, and suicidality. These assessments aren’t intended to be diagnostic, but to identify possible areas of concern.

While all public safety employees are required to complete a psychological assessment as part of the hiring process, only firefighters receive annual mental health screenings. These screenings are short, paper questionnaires that are used to identify possible mental health concerns. They should be offered to all firefighters but are voluntary and can be declined. Although not all firefighters appeared to have been offered assessments annually during the scope period, when offered, more than 80% completed the screening annually.

The wellness center licensed psychologists conduct these anonymous assessments annually. However, they report that they are not effective at identifying mental health concerns because firefighters are reluctant to respond honestly. We reviewed the anonymized results of the assessments completed during the scope period. As part of one assessment, only 73% of firefighters said they had experienced an event like a fire or serious accident. Given the nature of their work, almost all firefighters would likely have experienced some type of serious incident. However, even if the screens do not always spot problem areas, wellness center staff said these visits help them regularly check in with firefighters and open conversations about mental health.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) reports that evidence is still inconclusive as to whether public safety employees should receive regular mental health assessments but that it is a growing best practice. The benefits of regular assessments include reducing stigma around accessing mental health support, identifying those who may need additional support, and helping to foster a wellness culture.

Public safety workers get some training about mental and behavioral health during their academies, but after that, training and awareness efforts are irregular.

We saw that all public safety departments provide some mental and behavioral health education during their academies. Police cadets meet the peer support team and receive introductory information during the academy, and EMS and AFD cadets receive training on topics such as stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep, resilience, and self-care from City licensed psychologists. These early sessions align with best practice guidance, which recommends resilience and stress management training for public safety workers. However, training after graduation is poorly attended or offered inconsistently. Only about 30% of respondents in all three surveys felt that mental health and wellness were regularly discussed and promoted in their departments.

APD has the most robust structure for continuing education. At APD, nearly all employees completed required training on promoting officer health and preventing misconduct, but participation in voluntary education was low. Just 5-10% of APD employees completed voluntary training on topics like managing stress and burnout. AFD shares wellness messages and offers occasional continuing education courses, but the last wellness course was offered in 2023. EMS reported that there was no department-wide mental health training for established employees from 2023-2025. Wellness staff and management reported that they try to train supervisors on signs to watch out for in their employees, but more education for supervisors could be helpful.

Additional Observation

A new wellness center

The physical space dedicated to wellness will be changing in the coming years. The City of Austin recently acquired new buildings on the Mopac Expressway that will be used as the headquarters for all public safety operations. At this location, the majority of two floors will be used to house wellness resources including medical services, a fitness center, offices for all City licensed psychologists, and space for peer support teams. This new center will bring all public safety wellness resources into one place. We reviewed the plans for this center and compared them with the current wellness staffing needs. It appears there will be enough room to accommodate the current staff, and it will include needed features like sound proofing and secure file storage. There will also be a separate entrance to the wellness center to protect employees' privacy. Some wellness staff felt that locating wellness services at headquarters would be problematic because employees might avoid using them for fear of being seen by leadership. However, employee feedback was mixed: some survey respondents said they wanted more resources less affiliated with the City, while others did not view the headquarters location as a major deterrent.

Despite hesitations about the location, the new wellness center will likely be an improvement over the current center. We visited this center on Pleasant Valley Road and observed that it is outdated with poor lighting and a confusing layout that does not present a welcoming environment. Wellness staff also felt the current space was rundown and uncomfortable. We also noted access issues with the building. The main door must be accessed by badge, but staff reported that not all public safety employees have badge access. This means that someone in the building must open the door for visitors. Additionally, the space houses several AFD offices and other functions, which could lead to a perception that it is primarily for AFD employees.

Although the new center will not be fully removed from official City operations in a way that may best protect employee confidentiality and privacy, these changes will likely offer employees a more supportive and functional environment than the current space.

Recommendations and Management Response

- 1 | The Assistant City Manager over public safety should:
- Work with public safety department management to address concerns about the privacy and confidentiality of wellness services.
 - Outsource all pre-hire assessments for EMS employees to reduce reluctance to use wellness services and reduce wellness center licensed psychologists' workloads.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan: See management memo below

- 2 | The Assistant City Manager over public safety should:
- Work with public safety department management to define appropriate and feasible procedures for following up after critical incidents.
 - Work with departments' management to ensure education is provided to public safety supervisors to build skills for providing support, identifying those in need, and intervening to prevent harm.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan and Date: See management memo below.

- 3 | The Austin Fire Department Chief and Austin EMS Department Chief should ensure those responsible for wellness initiatives work with peer support coordinators and team members to ensure introductory and recurrent education is provided to all peer support team members in accordance with best practices and department procedures. Ensure all peer support training records are maintained and accurate.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan and Date: See management memo below.

- 4 | The Austin Police Chief and Austin EMS Chief should direct a qualified team to explore methods for instituting periodic, proactive mental health assessments for all employees. Any method identified as appropriate, beneficial, and feasible should be implemented.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan and Date: See management memo below.

- 5 | The Assistant City Manager over public safety departments should work with public safety management to ensure employees receive adequate education throughout their careers to support positive mental health. Relevant education may include topics such as resilience, identifying mental health concerns, the impacts of traumatic stress, and how to access resources. Wherever possible, identify opportunities to collaborate across departments to share education applicable to all public safety employees.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan and Date: See management memo below.

Management Response



MEMORANDUM

To: Jason Hadavi, City Auditor

Through: Ramón Batista, Assistant City Manager *RB*

From: Chief Lisa Davis, Austin Police *LD*
Chief Joel Baker, Austin Fire *Joel Baker*
Chief Robert Luckritz, Austin-Travis County EMS *R*

Date: July 2, 2026

Subject: **Management Response to Sworn Public Safety Employee Mental Health Audit**

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide a collective response to the City Auditor's draft audit report on *Sworn Public Safety Employee Mental Health* for Austin Police (APD), Austin Fire (AFD), and Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services (ATCEMS) personnel. The public safety portfolio appreciates the thorough examination of each agency's mental health support resources, and the associated recommendations intend to improve and further develop the wellness programs.

The health and wellness of our sworn workforce is a core priority, and we are committed to continuous improvement through the adoption of wellness programs and initiatives that strongly support the women and men who keep our community safe. Wellness programs that address common stressors for first responders, including shift work, fatigue, trauma processing, physical exertion, and toxin exposure, build a healthier, more resilient workforce. Continued investments in holistic, research-based wellness models provide our employees with the tools they need to pursue lifelong careers in public safety.

The internal audit is an opportunity to further develop and refine our wellness programs, tailoring them to the unique and evolving needs of our sworn workforce. Below are the proposed implementation plans for each recommendation.

Recommendation 1

The Assistant City Manager over public safety should:

- *Work with public safety department management to address concerns about the privacy and confidentiality of wellness services.*
- *Outsource all pre-hire assessments for EMS employees to reduce reluctance to use wellness services and reduce wellness center licensed psychologists' workloads.*

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Management Response

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan:

APD / AFD / ATCEMS agrees that trust in the confidentiality of wellness services is foundational to their effectiveness. Audit data reflecting concerns about privacy among employees and within leadership underscores the urgency of this work. All three departments are committed to strengthening employee confidence when seeking any type of support for their wellness. This commitment will focus on trust to ensure employees are not avoiding assistance for fear of negative impacts on their careers or standing in their department.

The Public Safety Wellness Center has a long-standing Governance Board representing management and associations at AFD / AFD / ATCEMS. The Governance Board, in coordination with the Assistant City Manager, will establish a Behavioral Health subcommittee to gather feedback. The subcommittee will include sworn and civilian employees, union representatives, wellness program staff, and leadership to review existing confidentiality protections, identify opportunities for improvement, and enhance communication about privacy safeguards.

One of the subcommittee's first tasks will be to develop clear, written guidance outlining what information is and is not shared with executive and command staff, the circumstances under which disclosure may be required by law, and how employee wellness records are handled and stored. This guidance will be communicated to employees through multiple channels, including shift and supervisory training, as well as resources available on the intranet. Related training, such as the newly developed APD supervisor training created by Public Safety Wellness and Victim Services staff, is already directly addressing supervisors' role in fostering a culture of trust and reducing stigma around help-seeking. Supervisor training to encourage wellness engagement without monitoring or pressure, reinforcing the understanding that accessing services is a sign of professional strength, will be enhanced.

Implementation will be ongoing. Public Safety Wellness leadership currently tracks utilization trends and will collect employee feedback to continually assess how changes improve confidence in behavioral health services.

Austin Fire separates behavioral health services from employment-related decision-making, and Austin Travis County EMS supports adopting the same approach, provided that funding is allocated to cover the outsourcing of pre-hire psychological assessments where appropriate.

Proposed Implementation Date:

Establish Public Safety Wellness Behavioral Health Subcommittee – September 2026
Disseminate findings on behavioral health information security measures- March 2027
APD Supervisor Training – June 2026 – October 2026
ATCEMS outsourcing of pre-hire assessments - TBD, dependent on budget

Management Response

Recommendation 2

The Assistant City Manager over public safety should:

- *Work with public safety department management to define appropriate and feasible procedures for following up after critical incidents.*
- *Work with departments' management to ensure education is provided to public safety supervisors and command staff to build skills for providing support, identifying those in need, and intervening to prevent harm.*

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan:

APD / AFD / ATCEMS agrees that structured, consistent follow-up after critical incidents is essential to long-term well-being. Work to strengthen that process is already underway, and all three departments will continue formalizing it through policy and programming development.

Austin Fire will review current critical incident follow-up practices and identify opportunities to improve consistency. The review will consider critical incident notification criteria, defined follow-up expectations, supervisor responsibilities, peer support involvement, and available wellness resources. Austin Fire will continue to emphasize a tiered approach that connects employees with peer support, chaplain services, behavioral health resources, and other support services based on individual needs, consistent with nationally recognized wellness practices in the fire service.

APD/AFD/ATCEMS use the following working definition to guide follow-up practices. "A critical incident is any event that has the potential to overwhelm an individual's usual coping abilities due to its traumatic, emotionally intense, or unusually stressful nature." This includes, but is not limited to, officer-involved shootings, line-of-duty deaths, incidents involving children, mass-casualty events, and serious injuries. The impact of a critical incident varies from individual to individual, and an event need not be high-profile or catastrophic to affect a public safety professional's well-being.

APD will work to define in writing follow-up thresholds and procedures, ensure consistency across shifts and divisions, and incorporate these standards into the department's General Orders.

APD and ATCEMS Peer Support and Public Safety Wellness staff review reports to identify personnel involved in difficult or potentially traumatic cases and proactively reach out to them. This practice has been formalized through a new program called Checkpoints or ReachOuts, which provides structured, proactive check-ins conducted either immediately or within two weeks of a potentially difficult or traumatic call.

APD psychologists are required to follow up with officers involved in officer-involved shootings. APD is expanding this model so that psychologists and Peer Support team members will also conduct check-ins after other cases identified as potentially impactful, including, but not limited to, line-of-duty deaths, traumatic cases involving a child, and incidents involving traumatic or significant loss of life. Because impact is not always tied to incident type or severity, the Checkpoints referral pathway provides an additional layer of outreach to increase opportunities to identify and engage officers who may need support.

Management Response

The newly developed frontline APD supervisor training will further strengthen this model by equipping sergeants and supervisors to recognize signs of acute stress and trauma in their personnel and to initiate or facilitate appropriate follow-up. This distributed approach, which combines clinical, peer, and supervisory touchpoints, helps ensure that no officer navigating a difficult incident goes unseen.

Proposed Implementation Date:

Austin Fire update on critical incident follow-up process improvements - June 2027

ATCEMS status update on critical incident follow-up process enhancements – June 2027

APD revision of General Orders – September 2026

APD Supervisor Training – June 2026 – October 2026

Recommendation 3

The Austin Fire Department and Austin EMS Department Chief should ensure that those responsible for wellness initiatives collaborate with peer support coordinators and team members to provide introductory and recurrent education to all peer support team members in accordance with best practices and department procedures. Ensure that all peer support training records are maintained and accurate.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan:

AFD and ATCEMS concur with this recommendation and reaffirm the departments' commitment to ensuring that all personnel responsible for wellness initiatives coordinate closely with peer support coordinators, team leads, and team members to deliver comprehensive introductory and recurrent training. To support this effort, AFD and ATCEMS will enhance oversight mechanisms to ensure that all peer support training activities are properly scheduled, consistently delivered, and systematically evaluated for quality and effectiveness. Additional controls will ensure that all associated training records are complete, accurately maintained, and readily accessible for review.

To accomplish this recommendation, AFD and ATCEMS will implement the following plan:

- Establish a coordinated training schedule, developed jointly by Public Safety Wellness leadership, peer support coordinators, team leads, and team members, to ensure all training is delivered on a recurring schedule.
- Revise and standardize training content and materials to align with current best practices and review them annually.
- Designate responsible personnel within the Public Safety Wellness section to oversee documentation, ensure timely entry of training records, and conduct periodic audits to verify accuracy and completeness.
- Training for peer support is constrained by funding availability. AFD recently submitted a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant application to fund advanced peer

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support training and provide backfill funding so peer support counselors can attend training on duty. Notification regarding the grant is expected in September 2026.

- Provide annual status updates to department leadership to ensure accountability and continual review and improvement.

Proposed Implementation Date:

First annual update, including a review of training documentation - July 2027

Recommendation 4

The Austin Police Chief and Austin EMS Chief should direct a qualified team to explore methods for implementing periodic, proactive mental health assessments for all employees. Any method identified as appropriate, beneficial, and feasible should be implemented.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan:

AFD is not mentioned in this recommendation because it currently administers a mental health assessment each year alongside firefighter physical health assessments. The assessment was designed by the psychologists at the Public Safety Wellness Center. They also review responses to the assessment and reach out to firefighters who indicate a need for counseling and/or intervention.

APD and ATCEMS support the intent of this recommendation and recognize the potential value of proactive, periodic mental health assessments as part of a comprehensive wellness strategy. The two departments approach this recommendation with openness and recognize that designing an assessment model that is clinically sound, legally defensible, and trusted by employees requires careful groundwork before implementation.

APD and ATCEMS will direct a qualified team comprising department psychologists, Public Safety Wellness leadership, police and EMS association representatives, human resources, and legal counsel to research best practices for periodic, proactive mental health assessments for law enforcement and EMS personnel. The team will review models from peer agencies, consult with relevant professional bodies, and assess feasibility within the department's operational and legal context. A key consideration throughout will be ensuring that any assessment model does not discourage honest engagement or raise employees' concerns about career consequences. Findings and recommendations will be presented to APD and ATCEMS leadership and the Assistant City Manager, including a staff recommendation.

Proposed Implementation Date:

Findings presented to Assistant City Manager - July 2027

Recommendation 5

The Assistant City Manager over public safety departments should work with public safety management to ensure employees receive adequate education throughout their careers to support positive mental health. Relevant education may include topics such as resilience, identifying mental health concerns, the impacts of traumatic stress, and how to access resources. Wherever

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possible, identify opportunities to collaborate across departments to share education applicable to all public safety employees.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan:

APD, AFD, and ATCEMS agree that wellness education should be continuous, career-spanning, and embedded in the department's culture, rather than limited to onboarding or crisis response. The three departments are actively building this infrastructure and welcome the opportunity to collaborate across public safety departments to maximize reach and consistency.

In addition, Austin Fire will review existing supervisor and professional development programs and identify opportunities to enhance employee wellness education. Education shall include recognizing personnel in distress, critical incident follow-up, available wellness resources, and supportive intervention strategies. Austin Fire will continue to reinforce the role of supervisors and leaders in supporting employee well-being while maintaining operational readiness and organizational effectiveness.

ATCEMS will also evaluate current supervisor and professional development programs to identify ways to strengthen employee-wellness training. This training will cover recognizing when personnel may be struggling, providing appropriate follow-up after critical incidents, understanding available wellness resources, and applying supportive intervention strategies.

APD Employee Wellness, in partnership with Victim Services, will continue to develop training for all sworn supervisors that integrates officer wellness, trauma-informed supervision, and victim-centered practices. This supervisory training serves as a force multiplier, extending wellness education organically through daily supervisory relationships and interactions. Eventually, all employees will have access to this training as continuing education.

APD also offers Wellness Wednesday, a recurring virtual class open to all APD staff that covers a range of wellness-related topics. This course can be opened to Fire and ATCEMS, and information about it will be widely distributed. For first responders and front-line staff, a quick-reference card with brief regulatory techniques has been developed and is being circulated for feedback; once approved, a brief training video will be distributed department-wide. Wellness content is also integrated into cadet training, including coursework on mindfulness. A continuing education course on burnout and resiliency is available to all staff. The Public Safety Wellness team and all three departments will make self-assessment tools available on their SharePoint site for private mental health assessment and for seeking support.

APD/AFD/ATCEMS recommends incorporating mandatory wellness blocks into required in-service training for personnel, ensuring that consistent, recurring education reaches all sworn staff, regardless of assignment or schedule.

APD/AFD/ATCEMS will work with the Assistant City Manager's office to identify topics, training, and software resources applicable to all public safety employees, with the goal of developing shared

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educational offerings that reduce duplication and build a common wellness vocabulary across departments.

Proposed Implementation Date:

APD Supervisor training for frontline (patrol) supervisors – June 2026 – October 2026. This training will be offered on a broader scale after October 2026.

Austin Fire refreshes and re-administers suicide prevention and substance abuse training to all supervisors through Operations Captains' complements and Staff Divisions – July 2027

ATCEMS update and reissue suicide prevention, substance abuse, and resilience training for all supervisory personnel via Commanders, Division Chiefs, and Captains – July 2027

All three departments will work with Public Safety Behavioral Health professionals, drawing on their expertise and motivation to prioritize and promote mental health education and resilience well into the future.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact Austin Police Chief Lisa Davis (Lisa.Davis@austintexas.gov), Austin Fire Chief Joel Baker (Joel.Baker@austintexas.gov), or Austin-Travis County EMS Chief Robert Luckritz (Robert.Luckritz@austintexas.gov).

cc: Heather Arispe, Public Safety Wellness Administrator
Dr. Marc Kruse, Austin Fire Psychologist
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Dr. Celesta Taylor, Austin Fire Psychologist
Dr. Jessica Peller, Austin Police Psychologist
Roxana Ortega, Licensed Clinical Social Worker - Supervisor

Appendix A: Additional Survey Results

Exhibit A1: Response rates

This table shows how many sworn employees participated in the survey.

	AFD	APD	EMS
Number of sworn employees*	1255	1488	604
Valid survey respondents**	279	294	190
Response rate	22%	20%	31%

*As of February 2026. Some counts are approximate due to turnover and hiring.

**Some responses were excluded because they were not from sworn employees or were duplicates

Exhibit A2: Respondent tenure

This table shows the number and percentage of how many years respondents have worked with the City.

Tenure	AFD		APD		EMS	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Less than 1 year	1	>1%	-	-	3	2%
1-5 years	32	11%	14	5%	69	36%
6-10 years	87	31%	50	17%	40	21%
11-15 years	49	18%	68	23%	26	14%
16-20 years	36	13%	87	30%	36	19%
21 years or more	74	27%	75	26%	16	8%

Exhibit A3: Access to resources

This table shows the number and percentage of respondents who said they knew how to access the City's mental health support services.

AFD		APD		EMS	
Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
255	91%	253	86%	169	89%

Exhibit A4: Missed work

This table shows the number and percentage of respondents who said they had missed work to care for their mental health.

AFD		APD		EMS	
Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
223	80%	174	59%	143	75%

Exhibit A5: Used services

This table shows the number and percentage of respondents who said they had voluntarily used City mental health services.

AFD		APD		EMS	
Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
144	52%	142	48%	110	58%

Exhibit A6: Impacts to mental health

This table shows the percentage of respondents who said that the following areas have a high or significant impact on their mental health.

Impact area	AFD		APD		EMS	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Cumulative stress	163	58%*	171	58%*	121	64%*
Financial challenges	149	53%*	79	27%	82	43%
Lack of leisure time	142	51%*	119	40%	72	38%
Lack of sleep or sleep schedule disruptions	205	73%*	171	58%*	138	73%*
Relationships with family and friends	145	52%*	152	52%*	80	42%
Relationships with managers and coworkers	121	43%	133	45%	59	31%
Responding to traumatic events or critical incidents	119	43%	119	40%	75	39%
Work schedule	163	58%*	119	40%	61	32%

*A majority of those who responded to the question said the factor had a high or significant impact on their mental health.

Exhibit A7: Service use rates

This table shows the percentage and number of respondents who said they had used the various types of wellness services.

Service	AFD		APD		EMS	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Peer support	105	38%	160	54%	77	41%
Fitness specialists	135	48%	94	32%	72	38%
Medical services	128	46%	71	24%	82	43%
Chaplains	41	15%	55	19%	15	8%
City licensed psychologists*	143	51%	123	42%	53	28%
Contracted mental health provider*	-	-	-	-	115	61%
Employee assistance program	58	21%	78	27%	78	16%

*EMS has an external licensed mental health provider contracted for their employees.

Exhibit A8: Respondents who felt services were helpful

This table shows, of all respondents who said they had used a service, the number and percentage of how many thought the service was helpful or very helpful.

	AFD		APD		EMS	
	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>
Peer support	78	74%	129	81%	49	64%
Fitness specialists	101	75%	60	64%	60	83%
Medical services	87	68%	37	52%	51	62%
Chaplains	19	46%	26	47%	2	13%
City licensed psychologists*	117	82%	83	67%	20	38%
Contracted mental health provider*	-	-	-	-	83	72%
Employee assistance program	31	53%	43	55%	15	50%

*EMS has an external licensed mental health provider contracted for their employees.

Exhibit A9: Respondent rating of wellness resources

This table shows the respondents' average rating of wellness resources on a scale of one to ten.

AFD	APD	EMS
6.2	5.8	5.8

Appendix B: Peer Cities Comparison

We spoke with 5 peer cities and learned that they provide many of the same mental health support resources.

City	Department	Wellness Center?	Employee Assistance Program?	Peer support team?	Chaplains?	Pet Program?	Licensed Mental Health providers?
Austin, TX	Police	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Yes
	Fire	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Yes
	EMS	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Charlotte, NC (Mecklenburg EMS)	Police	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Fire	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	EMS	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Dallas, TX	Police	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
	Fire/EMS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Fairfax County, VA	Police, Fire, and EMS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fort Worth, TX	Police	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
	Fire/EMS	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
San Antonio, TX	Police	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
	Fire/EMS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

*AFD and APD have dedicated volunteer chaplains.

Scope

The audit scope included all sworn employees and mental health and behavioral functions from calendar years 2023 to 2025.

Methodology

To complete this audit, we performed the following steps:

- Interviewed staff from Austin Police, Austin Fire, Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services, and Austin Financial Services
- Interviewed public safety union representatives and Public Safety Commission members
- Reviewed Council Resolutions, General Orders, Behavioral Health Guidelines, Civil Service Commissions' Rules and Regulations, contracts, departmental Standard Operating Procedures, and departmental policies related to mental health resources for public safety employees
- Reviewed peer support information for each public safety department
- Reviewed data of mental health services provided to public safety employees
- Reviewed budgets and spending for wellness resources
- Analyzed vacancy data, surveys, monthly wellness center reports, and emergency call data
- Conducted an on-site visit of the current Public Safety Wellness Center
- Attended an in-person peer support training session
- Identified and selected peer cities for analysis, conducted interviews and analyzed information received from peer city staff. Peer cities reviewed included: Charlotte, NC, Dallas, TX; Fairfax County, VA; Fort Worth, TX; San Antonio, TX
- Reviewed and documented best practices for wellness spaces
- Conducted interviews to assess needs for the wellness space in the new public safety headquarters
- Developed, administered, and analyzed three surveys of sworn public safety employees across the three public safety departments
- Selected and interviewed a random sample of two participants per public safety department who volunteered to be interviewed by the audit team, for a total of six interviews – due to the size of the sample, the results should not be projected to the population
- Evaluated risk of fraud, waste and abuse related to the City's public safety mental health supports
- Evaluated internal controls related to the City's public safety mental health support efforts and practices

Audit Standards

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

The Austin City Auditor's Office was created by the Austin City Charter as an independent office reporting to City Council to help establish accountability and improve City services. We conduct performance audits to review aspects of a City service or program and provide recommendations for improvement.

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