



Austin Public Safety Wellness Center

517 S. Pleasant Valley Rd., Austin, TX 78741 (512)974-0200phone (512)974-0222fax



1 Can you provide an overview of the overall goal and mission of the Public Safety Wellness Center in Austin?

The mission of the Wellness Center is to empower public safety workers to achieve lifelong wellness. The Wellness Center works to ensure that all first responders are prepared to best serve the citizens of Austin. The five pillars of the Wellness Fitness initiative that guide our program are Medical, Fitness, Rehabilitation, Behavioral Health and Data Collection.

2 What specific services does the Public Safety Wellness Center offer to members of the Austin Fire Department (AFD), Austin-Travis County EMS (ATCEMS), and Austin Police Department (APD)?

The Wellness Center offers medical exams, health interventions, vaccinations, fitness services, and occupational exams that help first responders return to work safely, prevent injuries, and physically prepare them for their job tasks.

3 How does the Public Safety Wellness Center address the unique mental health and wellness needs of first responders in Austin?

The Wellness Center has two staff psychologists who provide behavioral health services to AFD and EMS. Both psychologists have a combined over 20 years of experience in working directly with first responders. Each agency also has a Peer Support team that works directly with the sworn members to provide support services. APD has a separate employee wellness program that encompasses their Behavioral health units, Victim Services and nutrition and fitness.

Yearly behavioral health check ins are offered at the Wellness Center to AFD members during their annual exams. Our medical physician is a Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine and is board certified in occupational medicine. Case management services are also offered to the agencies who opt to participate, this service helps to improve chronic conditions of members.

4 In what ways does the center collaborate with AFD, ATCEMS, and APD to ensure that the support provided aligns with the specific needs of each department?

The Wellness Center has a Governing Board of six members, two from each public safety agency. The members from each agency consist of one union representative and one management representative. The Board meets quarterly to discuss Wellness operations and initiatives. Additionally, the Public Safety Administrator provides a monthly report of the clinic activities. There are also regular check-ins



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between the Administrator and each agency management board representative to assess agency needs.

5 Are there any existing programs or initiatives aimed at proactively promoting mental health and wellness within the public safety departments, and if so, can you describe them?

Yes, fitness station visits are conducted for AFD and EMS. During station visits the team of Exercise Physiologists visit with crews to conduct fitness assessments and provide exercise guidance and information. The Exercise Physiologists also provide a Resiliency presentation to each APD cadet class. There are also behavioral health check-ins that are conducted during AFD annual exams. During all Wellness annual exams, cancer screening and health interventions are offered to prevent injuries and disease.

6 What challenges or gaps in services does the Public Safety Wellness Center currently face in supporting responders, and how can our Commission assist in addressing these challenges?

One of our biggest challenges in services is providing a consistent infection control program across the three agencies. In order to provide this service, we need an additional member to the clinic. This is being addressed in the APD budget ask for FY25.

The lack of an electronic health record (EHR) system has also been an ongoing subject of discussion. An EHR system has been identified and funds were allocated across the agencies, however, the barrier to the project has been in the way of technical support for the system from either the Communications department or the department who holds the current contract under consideration.

7 How does the center prioritize and tailor its services to address the diverse needs of individuals within the public safety agencies, considering factors such as rank, role, and exposure to traumatic incidents?

The Wellness Center continuously monitors the issues and concerns facing first responders through conferences, cultural awareness and education. We also monitor events that occur in operations in an effort to make our resources available to address traumatic incidents. We prioritize medical exams and aim to conduct annual physicals for all sworn members so there remains a regular and constant line of communication.



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8 Can you share any success stories or positive outcomes resulting from the services provided by the Public Safety Wellness Center to AFD, ATCEMS, and APD?

In the past, an AFD personnel was dealing with the delta variant with COVID. At the time he was short of breath, continuous fever, muscle aches, fatigue and had comorbidity of Diabetes. We recommended monoclonal antibodies, and at the time you needed a PCP referral to do so. He could not get a referral and by day 7 with continuous fever the situation was life-threatening. Our nurse called several facilities and was able to have our physical put in a referral even though we were not their PCP. He states that Wellness saved his life.

An EMS personnel came in for their annual. He stated that he was very tired all the time due to shift work. His own PCP stated that he was tired to shift work and not sleep apnea and therefore did not order a sleep study. Our Wellness physician identified that his blood work was abnormal compared to his previous years' lab work which could be a side effect from sleep apnea. The Wellness physician encouraged the patient to ask their PCP again and insist on a sleep study. A sleep study was conducted, and the patient had severe sleep apnea and received a prescription for CPAP. He was able to sleep much better even with shift work.

9 What strategies does the center employ to raise awareness, reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues within the public safety community?

Recently we held our first ever Public Safety Wellness Fair. The fair consisted of booths for various resources offered by the Wellness Center and the City of Austin. The aim was to informally raise awareness of our mental health services and provide information. Peer Support and the psychologist work to conduct regular station visits to help build relationships in operations. APD has also invited the Wellness Center to present to Command Staff and cadet classes to increase awareness of services.

10 Are there any specific resources or support needs that the Public Safety Wellness Center has identified in order to enhance its capacity to provide effective services to first responders?

Additional clinic personnel, a Registered Nurse, would assist the Wellness Center in providing clinic services to the entirety of our first responder population. This need is being addressed in the APD FY25 budget. We could also benefit from obtaining an EHR system to improve health data privacy.



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11. How does the program ensure privacy for their encounters with the Public Safety Wellness Center and are the leaders of the departments given notice if an employee seeks treatment”? (from Commissioner Pena)

The Wellness Center is a secure facility. We have paper charts due to the lack of an EHR system and keep records in a secured room. We do not allow personnel without clearance into areas where records are being held or stored. Though there is always room for improvement when it comes to paper record storage. Leadership/management of the agencies are not given notice for treatment an employee receives. Health information is never shared with anyone outside of the Wellness Center. All Wellness staff sign a “health privacy” form to inform them of the expectations of privacy.