



# ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2024.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact Gage Harter.

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Hanover County

Program Title: First Responder Health & Colonoscopies

Program Category: Health & Human Services

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: JAY A. BROWN

Title: DEPUTY COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Signature: 

## **First Responder Health & Colonoscopies**

### **Executive Summary:**

Hanover County Government offers robust health and wellness benefits. Among these benefits are the Responder Health and colonoscopy benefit. The Responder Health program is a mental health service provided free of charge to all Hanover County first responders and their family members. First responders, particularly firefighters, experience frequent exposures to harmful substances that could lead to fatal illnesses, such as colon cancer. The colonoscopy benefit offers free preventative colonoscopies and polyp removal to Hanover County employees. Its purpose is to promote early detection and ease financial burden.

### **Problem:**

Significant mental health challenges are common among first responders. These challenges can include high rates of suicide and psychological distress. First responders risk their lives each day as they serve their community. In 2021, 141 first responders died in the line of duty in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Between 1999-2017, an alarming 298 firefighter suicides and 84 emergency medical personnel suicides were recorded.<sup>2</sup> These shocking statistics heighten the need for mental health support for first responders and their families.

Along with the mentally taxing obstacles faced by first responders, their profession can also be incredibly physically taxing, placing them at a higher risk of developing serious, and sometimes fatal health issues. These health issues can result from harmful exposure to carcinogens in the line of duty. For firefighters, these risks are amplified by the toxic products generated during fires, as well as the presence of carcinogenic substances that are trapped in protective equipment. Exposure to these harmful carcinogens can lead to serious, and sometimes

fatal, health issues, including colon cancer. In 2021, Hanover County suffered the loss of one of our beloved firefighters, Battalion Chief Jeff Phipps, due to late-stage colon cancer found at his first screening. Since 2021, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends that colorectal cancer screenings start at age 45, as compared to the previous recommendation of age 50.<sup>3</sup> It is possible for colon cancer to pose no symptoms, making it difficult to detect that a colonoscopy is needed.

### **Program Description:**

Responder Health is a resource powered by Armor Up America that was created by first responders, for first responders and their family members. The Responder Health benefit looks at the physical and mental stress that is placed on those in emergency services to provide support and resources that are tailored to address the challenges faced by those in the field. Significant mental health challenges are common among first responders. These challenges can include high rates of suicide and psychological distress. Responder Health began as a pioneering solution to address the mental health crisis among the first responder community. Developed by first responders and their families, Responder Health offers a multifaceted approach to mental health support. One of its key innovations is the confidential peer hotline. Through this hotline, Responder Health offers 24/7 support to first responders while eliminating the fear of judgement. This hotline makes sure individuals receive immediate assistance from peers who truly understand the challenges they face. To create a successful resource for first responders, Responder Health utilizes first responders, their families, and mental health professionals in all areas of the program. By using the expertise of those with firsthand experience in the field, Responder Health ensures that the services are relevant and effective to the target audience. Moreover, this program employs qualified mental health professionals to offer referrals based on

the specific needs of the individual and their health insurance coverage. This collaborative approach offers first responders support that is specifically tailored to their situation. Providing our first responders with resources and care is a top priority for Hanover County. The Responder Health resource is available to Hanover County First Responders at no cost. This service is covered fully through Hanover County Government.

Responder Health serves as a model for other localities who are seeking to administer a mental health support program for first responders. The program's emphasis on peer support, training, and family involvement offers a holistic approach that can be used by other communities around the country. One portion of the Responder Health benefit, Responder Health University, further extends the program's reach by providing accessible learning resources and clinical self-assessment tools. To ensure that individuals receive the highest quality mental health support, only experienced mental health professionals with at least 10 years of experience are used to staff this program. The program's 24/7 peer support hotline, training webinars, daily email contact, family support, and peer coaching are carried out through a dedicated team committed to serving the needs of first responders and their families.

Hanover County strives to provide employees with rich health and wellness benefits to promote mental health, early detection, fast recovery and less financial burdens. To achieve these goals, Hanover County offers a colonoscopy benefit to address the importance of early detection of colon cancer and encourage employees to get checked as early and as often as possible. This benefit involves comprehensive preventative coverage of colonoscopies and polyp removal at 100% for Hanover County employees. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that adults aged 45 to 75 be screened for colorectal cancer.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, the employee's provider might feel that a

colonoscopy at an earlier age is appropriate. Hanover County covers 100% of the cost associated with the colonoscopy and polyp removal when the claim is billed as wellness/preventive and done at an in-network facility, by an in-network provider.

**Program Results/Success:**

Over the years, Responder Health has made significant progress in addressing the mental health crisis among first responders. Providing easily accessible and confidential services, this program helps to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health in this community. This extensive approach to mental health has led to decreased suicide rates among first responders. 2023 was our first year with this benefit with 81 reported calls to the first responder hotline. By utilizing personalized support and providing easily accessible services, Responder Health has increased the number of individuals seeking help.

Colonoscopies are associated with as much as a 69% decrease in new cases of colorectal cancer and an 88% decrease in risk of death from it.<sup>4</sup> Since the passing of Jeff Phipps, Hanover County firefighters have been proactive when taking care of their health. Many of the county firefighters have shared how Jeff Phipps saved their lives. His legacy continues to encourage early detection and screening among the firefighter community.

## References

1. Rita F. Fahy and Jay T. Petrillo, Firefighter Fatalities in the U.S. – 2019 (Quincy, MA: National Fire Protection Association, 2021), <https://www.nfpa.org/%2F-%2Fmedia/Files/News-and-Research/Fire-statistics-and-reports/Emergency-responders/osFFF.pdf>.
2. Vigil, N. H., Beger, S., Gochenour, K. S., Frazier, W. H., Vadeboncoeur, T. F., & Bobrow, B. J. (2021). Suicide Among the Emergency Medical Systems Occupation in the United States. *Western Journal of Emergency Medicine: Integrating Emergency Care with Population Health*, 22(2), 326–332. <https://doi.org/10.5811/westjem.2020.10.48742>
3. Colonoscopies Clinic, C. (2024, March). *Colon Cancer Screenings: When To Start*. Cleveland Clinic; Cleveland Clinic. <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/when-should-you-start-getting-screened-for-colorectal-cancer>
4. Ladabaum U, Dominitz JA, Kahi C, Schoen RE. Strategies for Colorectal Cancer Screening. *Gastroenterology*. 2020;158(2):418-432. doi:10.1053/j.gastro.2019.06.043