

HUGS@HOME PROJECT TO 'SUPPORT THE SUPPORTERS'

First responders often lean on family members and close friends for social support to cope in the aftermath of difficult events at work. A new project now aims to 'support the supporters' by training them in the elements of Hearing, Understanding, Guiding and Supporting (HUGS) at home to improve the mental health and wellbeing of their loved ones.

Going home after a difficult shift may sometimes be the hardest task for first responders to deal with, due to the stressful events they experience at work. Public service in times of extreme need, such as the recent Covid pandemic, is one such key role they play.

Extreme situations can be distressing and difficult to process, and first responders rely on formal and informal supports to help them cope with these stresses. Early intervention of Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) reduces the symptoms of post-traumatic stress, but access to support services remains limited due to lack of resources or the stigma associated with seeking help.

Social support is one proven way to help combat the after-effects of these stressful events and first responders often lean on their colleagues, families or close friends for this support.

This new project, entitled 'HUGS@Home' builds on research undertaken by Dublin Fire Brigade, which found that recruit firefighters/paramedics preferred to talk to a family member or friend after a stressful incident in work. This finding led to the introduction of a Recruit Family Night, to raise awareness around how the training and operational role of a firefighter/paramedic has an impact at home. It helped to open the lines of communication between family members and first responders.

The project aims to better equip family members or friends to support their first responder by training them in the elements of 'HUGS': Hearing, Understanding, Guiding and Supporting. This can help to reduce the impact of what their first responders take 'Home' – enhancing the wellbeing of first responders and their loved ones.

Family members and friends who participate in the project will receive a pre-course handbook, outlining the common reactions to some of the situations their

FOR MORE INFORMATION
hugsathome.eu

RCSI SIM

SUPPORT the SUPPORTERS

HUGS@home

HEARING, UNDERSTANDING, GUIDING, SUPPORTING

IS YOUR OFF DUTY SUPPORT IMPORTANT TO YOU?

If so, we want to hear from you!

PLEASE SCAN THE QR CODE

OR VISIT [HUGSATHOME.EU](https://hugsathome.eu)

FUNDED PROJECT
MOVEMBER

Mental Health Ireland

FOR MORE INFORMATION
hugsathome.eu

RCSI SIM

HUGS@home

HEARING, UNDERSTANDING, GUIDING, SUPPORTING

IS YOUR LOVED ONE CURRENTLY WORKING AS A FIREFIGHTER OR PARAMEDIC IN IRELAND?

If so, we want to hear from you!

Our new project, supported by Movember, aims to support family members/friends to communicate better with their first responders, following difficult incidents at work.

WE WANT TO SUPPORT THE SUPPORTERS!

IF YOU & YOUR FIRST RESPONDER WOULD LIKE TO GET INVOLVED
PLEASE SCAN THIS QR CODE
OR VISIT bit.ly/3TKv3jp

OR VISIT [HUGSATHOME.EU](https://hugsathome.eu) TO REGISTER & A MEMBER OF OUR TEAM WILL CONTACT YOU!

FUNDED PROJECT
MOVEMBER

Mental Health Ireland



Project team members (l-r): Anna Tjin, Research Assistant at RCSI SIM; Dr Angeline Traynor, Post-Doctoral Researcher at RCSI SIM; Brian Doyle and project co-leader Michelle O'Toole, former first responders and CISM peer supporters with Dublin Fire Brigade. Missing from the photo are project co-lead Prof Walter Eppich, Chair of RCSI SIM; and Dr Claire Mulhall, Research Programme Manager at RCSI SIM.

first responders may witness and how sometimes these reactions may have an impact at home.

Based in the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland (RCSI) SIM Centre for Simulation Education and Research, HUGS@Home is one of 15 projects funded by Movember's Veteran and First Responders Grant and the only project in Ireland to receive this funding.

Project co-leader Michelle O'Toole and Brian Doyle, former first responders and CISM peer supporters with Dublin Fire Brigade, have been joined on the project team by project co-leader Prof Walter Eppich, Dr Claire Mulhall, Dr Angeline Traynor and Anna Tjin, from RCSI SIM.

SCENARIO-BASED TRAINING

"Training in practical techniques will enhance the communication skills of family members and friends, thereby enabling them to recognise signs and symptoms of stress, encouraging them to engage with their first responders to support them. The training involves simulation enhanced scenario-based interactions, which will prompt reflection and discussion, before having the opportunity to practice their newly acquired skills in a safe environment," Michelle O'Toole told 'Emergency Services Ireland'.

She added that organisational psychosocial education should emphasise how it can be perfectly normal to experience a stress reaction following a critical incident, and how sometimes we take these reactions home.

Research outlines how men, in particular, may be hesitant to put their hands up and look for help particularly in terms of their mental health and sometimes it is those who are closest to them who notice it first.

"The need for CISM does not simply cease when first responders leave their workplace; bolstering their existing off-duty support networks will bring mental health and wellbeing benefits to first responders and those closest to them," she pointed out.

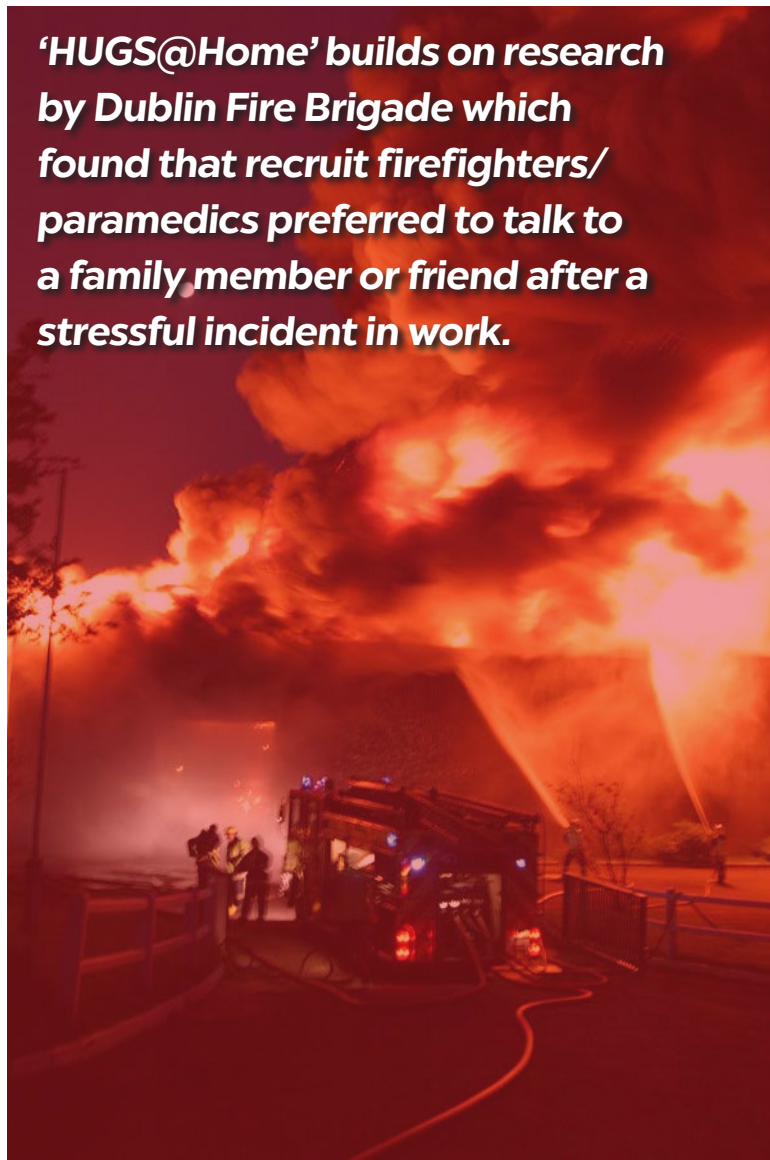
MENTAL HEALTH IRELAND

The project team has collaborated on this new initiative with Mental Health Ireland (MHI) – Ireland's longest established mental health charity – which aims to support individuals with lived experience of mental health issues, and those who support them in dealing with these issues. MHI promotes and enhances the mental health, wellbeing and recovery for both individuals and communities through the provision of resources and advocates on their behalf at a local and national level.

"We have been very fortunate to collaborate with MHI since the start of the project and their guidance on the co-production process has been instrumental in the evolution of our project. Catherine Brogan, MHI's Deputy CEO, Sonia Rennicks, Head of Education, Training and e-Mental Health, and Gina Delaney, Development Officer, have been wonderful advocates, giving practical advice, providing access to MHI resources and establishing 'Connect

Café; peer support groups for family members or friends who undertake HUGS@Home training," noted O'Toole.

'HUGS@Home' builds on research by Dublin Fire Brigade which found that recruit firefighters/ paramedics preferred to talk to a family member or friend after a stressful incident in work.





Going home after a difficult shift is sometimes the hardest thing for first responders to do. HUGS@Home empowers family members or friends to provide social support by raising awareness and teaching practical stress management skills.

"It provides an opportunity to stay connected after training, either online or in person. Connect Cafés are structured events that bring people together to connect and start conversations on different themes and topics. This form of social connection can provide a sense of community among our family members and friends, and a source of support when they are feeling down or struggling with something.

"Having a connection to give and receive support with others with a similar lived experience is a strong protective factor for personal mental health and well-being. Co-creation team members have trained to co-facilitate these groups and are ready to help provide peer support for other family member and friend participants."

CO-CREATION PROCESS

With guidance from Mental Health Ireland, co-creation focused on bringing all of 'the people who matter' to this issue, together, to

share their experiences, generate ideas and discuss key factors that affect the first responder community.

For the team, O'Toole said that it was important that the co-creation outcomes were pragmatic and addressed the real-life experiences of the first responders and their family members/close friends, rather than being tokenistic or short-sighted.

To pursue these goals, the 'people who matter' were invited to be a part of the project from the outset of the design and development process and in every phase, thereafter, including piloting, implementation and evaluation.

"Along with our collaborators from MHI, and Dublin Civil Defence, key stakeholders included 16 first responders, seven family members and six organisational representatives. Together, at the RCSI SIM Centre, this co-creation team engaged in a series of co-design meetings where all members are equal, and all voices are heard."

She noted that difficult and much-needed conversations were held in a safe space on topics that included barriers and enablers of help-seeking; existing and preferred resources and supports; experiences of coping with critical incidents; effective and ineffective communication skills; cultural stigma; peer support and how to bring the best of this learning forward.

"This co-creation process informed several aspects of the project, including the current project name, project website, the recruitment approach, the training content, resources for friends and family members, and support services tailored to the needs and preferences of these trusted loved ones."

VOICES OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS

The voices of family and friends is one of the main pillars of this project, with their experiences shaping the programme's development. The team describes the project as "training for friends and family, to

feel empowered, supported and connected with people who 'get it'.... it's a course you wish you had taken in the early days of being a supporter of a first responder and one you want to take as you continue that journey."

HUGS@Home provides an opportunity to connect with others who have or are about to have similar experiences or and may benefit from the insight of others at the frontline. It teaches or revises effective communication and psychological first aid skills so they may be passed on to those observing inside and outside the home, across a first responder's social support network.

"In working with family, friends and organisational representatives of first responders, the team has learned so much. Peer support is essential within first responder organisations, and it is equally essential to those trusted loved ones outside of the first responder organisation, who support their loved ones, while striving to maintain wellbeing and quality of life."

The HUGS@Home team and key stakeholders have continued in their work together, moving from design into project implementation, where they have started inviting friends and family members from the community to take part.

RECRUITMENT DRIVE

Following the launch of the HUGS@Home website www.hugsathome.eu the official recruitment drive started in August 2022. However, the project has also been receiving expressions of interest from first responders and family members since late 2021 after the publication of the RCSI promotional material in a national newspaper.

Presentations on HUGS@Home took place at several events during 2022, including the Irish Network of Healthcare Educators (INHED) conference for healthcare educators, and the Irish Paramedic Education and Research Network (IPERN) conference.

In September following the design and production of recruitment posters and flyers, team members attended the National Services Day Celebrations in Dublin. Since then they have been actively recruiting first responders and their family members and friends with presentations at RCSI SIMposium, the Civil Defence Officers' Association and the International Initiative for Mental Health Leadership.

Targeted recruitment of firefighters has taken place within Dublin Fire Brigade, and some of the regional fire services. Paramedic specific targeted recruitment

has also been underway with recruitment drives ongoing courtesy of the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC).

Another collaborator, Dublin Civil Defence, is also providing the critical volunteer perspective, with some volunteers taking part in tailored training as simulated participants as well as contributing to the data collection process with several focus groups. Michelle O'Toole said that the team has been very grateful for the support of community partners in Dublin Civil Defence, in particular Fergus Byrne, Dublin's Assistant Civil Defence Officer.

If you're interested in getting involved, please complete the 'Expression of Interest' form by scanning this QR code. For more information email simulationresearch@rcsi.ie or visit www.hugsathome.eu



With guidance from Mental Health Ireland, the co-creation process has been about bringing 'the people who matter' together to share their experiences, generate ideas and discuss key factors that affect the community.