



Retirement and Mental Health

Supporting Firefighters Through the Transition to Retirement

Vancouver Fire Rescue Services

Last Updated: April 10, 2025

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Retirement and Mental Health:

Retirement is a big shift for any firefighter, but for those at Vancouver Fire Rescue Services, it comes with some unique challenges. With a call volume more than twice the national average and the constant strain of the opioid crisis, the impact of the job does not just disappear when you hang up your gear.

A career in the fire service means years of exposure to trauma, high-pressure calls, and daily stress. Over time, that takes a toll. While many firefighters look forward to retirement, the reality is that stepping away from the job can bring unexpected challenges. Research shows that retirees, especially first responders, are at a higher risk for depression, anxiety, and other mental health struggles.

For many, the fire service is more than a job. It is an identity, a purpose, and a brotherhood. Retirement can feel like losing a part of yourself. Without the structure of shift work, the support of your crew, and the sense of purpose that comes with the job, it is easy to feel disconnected. And if you have dealt with Occupational Stress Injuries, anxiety, depression, or substance use during your career, those struggles do not always fade just because you have retired. In some cases, they get worse.

Some firefighters find the transition harder than expected, especially if most of their support system is tied to the job. If you have ever filed a WorkSafeBC mental health claim, or even if you have not but have felt the weight of this career, retirement can bring up new challenges. It is important to plan not just for financial security, but for your mental well-being too.

This guide breaks down what to expect in retirement, the mental health risks to be aware of, and practical steps to help you navigate this next chapter with the same strength and resilience you brought to the job.

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STAGES OF RETIREMENT

Pre-Retirement (Less Than Five Years to Retirement)

This is the preparation phase. While retirement may still feel like it is a ways off, big changes are on the horizon.

Common Stressors:

- Uncertainty about the future. The job has been a core part of your identity. What comes next?
- Financial concerns. Even with a pension, adjusting to a new financial reality can be stressful.
- Health and fitness. Years of physical wear and tear may start catching up, leading to concerns about long-term health.
- Peer relationships. Colleagues may begin treating you differently as they know you are leaving soon.
- Fear of slowing down. Going from high-adrenaline emergency calls to a quieter life can feel like an abrupt shift.

How to Navigate It:

Start planning early. Think beyond finances, consider what hobbies, work, or activities will keep you engaged.

Talk to retirees. Learn from those who have already transitioned and see what worked for them.

Test out new routines. Begin setting up a post-retirement lifestyle before leaving the job.

Prioritize health. If you have ignored physical or mental health issues, now is the time to address them.

Rookie Retiree (Retired in the Last Year)

The first year of retirement is often the hardest. Many firefighters experience an initial honeymoon phase, followed by a sense of loss or disorientation.

Common Stressors:

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- Loss of identity. The fire service has shaped who you are for decades. Who are you without it?
- Disconnection from the crew. The shift from being part of a team to being on your own can be isolating.
- Loss of routine and structure. Without shifts, training, and calls, days can feel empty or unproductive.
- Mental health struggles. PTSD, anxiety, and depression may surface or become more pronounced without the distraction of work.
- Relationship adjustments. Family dynamics shift when you are home full-time, which can lead to tension.

How to Navigate It:

Stay connected. Keep in touch with the fire service, join retiree groups, or find new communities.

Create structure. Set goals, maintain routines, and engage in purposeful activities.

Give yourself time. The transition takes adjustment, some days will feel great, and others will feel off. That is normal.

Seek support. If you are struggling, reach out to a counsellor or peer support network.

First Class Retiree (Three to Five Years Retired)

At this stage, the initial adjustment period is over, but long-term challenges begin to emerge. Some firefighters find their stride, while others start feeling adrift.

Common Stressors:

- A growing sense of disconnection. The job keeps moving forward, and you may feel left behind.
- Health concerns. Aging, past injuries, and years of high stress may start catching up.
- Boredom or lack of purpose. If you do not find meaningful activities post-retirement, this can become an issue.
- Changing social circles. If most of your friends were firefighters and they are still working, you may see them less.

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How to Navigate It:

Keep challenging yourself. Try new things, travel, take courses, or mentor younger firefighters.

Stay active. Physical activity and hobbies are key to maintaining both mental and physical health.

Reevaluate priorities. Now is a good time to ask: Am I happy with my routine? What do I want to change?

Keep checking in on your mental health. Depression and anxiety can creep in slowly, so stay aware of how you are feeling.

Senior Retiree (Five or More Years Retired)

By now, retirement has become your new normal. Some firefighters thrive, while others struggle with feeling irrelevant or disconnected.

Common Stressors:

- Feeling forgotten. The fire service was once central to your life, but now you may feel like an outsider.
- Health challenges. Chronic injuries, illness, and aging become more prominent concerns.
- Mortality awareness. As you and your peers age, facing the loss of fellow firefighters can be difficult.
- Regret or reflection. Some may struggle with unresolved trauma from the job or regret over how they spent their career.

How to Navigate It:

Find ways to give back. Volunteer, mentor, or stay involved in the fire community.

Prioritize social connections. Isolation is a major risk factor for mental health issues, and staying engaged with family and friends.

Focus on health and longevity. Keep up with medical appointments, stay active, and maintain good mental health habits.

Enjoy the life you built. Retirement is a reward for years of service. Make the most of it.

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Filing a WorkSafeBC claim in retirement

(Cancer, hearing loss, mental health):

1. As a Retired Worker, you can start by calling WorkSafeBC's Teleclaim service at 1-888-967-5377.
2. When you report your injury, they will ask you for the following information:
 - a. Contact information for yourself and your employer
 - b. The date of your injury and how it occurred (when you were diagnosed, cancer, mental health issue, hearing loss, etc.)
 - c. Who you reported your injury to (doctor, health care provider, specialist, etc.)
 - d. Names and phone numbers of your health care providers (doctor, physiotherapist, etc.)
 - e. Your social insurance number
 - f. Your personal health number (from your BC Services card or CareCard)
3. How workers report a workplace injury or disease: [\(CLICK HERE\)](#)

More Retiree Information on WorkSafeBC:

- Click HERE: [BCPFFA WSBC Retiree Claim Info](#)

Pre-Retirement Checklist for Vancouver Fire Rescue Services Members

- ☐ **Review your mental health benefits** – Understand what support is available through VFRS **before** and **after** retirement, including extended health benefits.
 - [IAFF 18 Benefits Document](#)
 - [BCPFFA Pension Brochure](#)
 - [BCPFFA WSBC Retiree Claim Info](#)
- ☐ **Prioritize your health check-ups** – Use your benefits for mental health check-ins, dental, hearing, physiotherapy, and other healthcare needs before they change in retirement.
 - [How to Find a Clinician for Help Video](#)
 - [Clinical Directory of Counsellors \(Culturally Aware\)](#)
 - [List of Presumptive Injuries WSBC](#)
 - [Doctors Checkup for Physical Presumptive](#)

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- **Build your mental health support network** – Connect with a therapist, peer support, or retired VFRS members who have navigated this transition.

Never talked to a counsellor before? Don't know what its like?

The Connection to Care service is a free and confidential phone support line available to municipal workers in BC. This service connects individuals with trained mental health professionals who have completed the FireFighter Occupational Awareness Program, ensuring they understand the unique challenges and pressures associated with firefighting. You call this service to help with any stress or situation you may be facing, you don't have to be struggling to call.

Monday-Friday 7am - 10pm

778-247-2273 (CARE)

Psycho education video series:

- [More than Fighting Fires Video Series](#)

- **Have conversations with your family** – Discuss your retirement plans with those who will be impacted by your new routine and lifestyle. Ensure they themselves have the resources they might need to transitioning into a retired firefighter household.
 - **Free First Responder Family Based Education and assistance** ([CLICK HERE](#))

- **Explore mental health resources**

[Vanfirewellness.com](#) Is a Mental health and wellness one stop shop of information, from understanding the symptoms of stress and trauma to what to do once you notice them. This page has many links and connections to many organizations supporting us.

Firefighter's [Occupational Awareness Training](#)

Created by firefighters, for firefighters, this series provides education on how the fire service impacts your brain, your family, and how you perceive and navigate the world. This free, three-year program is available to you—just sign up and start watching!

Wirth Hats – Free Counselling ([Click here](#))

Wirth Hats was founded with a mission to remove the barriers that prevent people

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from accessing mental health support. One of those barriers that many face is affordability. Through the sale of our hats and donations from our community, we are happy to provide free therapy support for those who would otherwise be unable to afford it. Each individual who is sponsored by Wirth Foundation will receive up to eight free therapy sessions with a registered therapist.

BC First Responders Mental Health Resources:

- [Resources specific for First Responders: REACH OUT](#)
- **Identify what gives you purpose** – Consider what activities, hobbies, or roles will provide meaning and fulfillment after leaving the job.
 - [BC Men's Shed Organization](#)
- **Ensure financial readiness** – Meet with a financial planner or review your pension and savings to make sure you are set for retirement.
- **Stay connected with your crew and community** – Maintain social connections and build regular interactions into your new routine to avoid isolation.
- **All of these are too much and I'm struggling.**

WorkSafeBC - Crisis Support Line

Contact WorkSafeBC if you are an injured worker, and you or your family is in emotional crisis.

1-800-624-2928

Suicide Phone / Crisis line BC

Call **9-8-8** for our BC 24/7 Crisis line and Suicide phone line

[Click this Page for REACH OUT options](#)