



## LOCAL NEWS

# LA County supervisors move to support suicide prevention among first responders, others



Los Angeles County Fire Chief Daryl L. Osby speaks to his firefighters Tuesday, Sept. 11, following a discussion at the Board of Supervisors on suicide prevention of first responders and other workers. (Staff photo)

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By **BRENDA GAZZAR** | [bgazzar@scng.com](mailto:bgazzar@scng.com) | Daily News

For Sophia Johnson, whose Los Angeles County firefighter husband Billy Johnson took his own life 13 months ago, it's a "day to day" struggle to cope.

But on Tuesday, she was offered some sense of relief when the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a motion aimed at tackling the "sensitive and urgent" matter of suicide among first responders, emergency services professionals and death investigators.

"(Billy Johnson) was struggling for many years but he said 'I can't speak to anyone at the fire station because they will think I'm a coward or they'll think I'm a sissy,'" his widow from Anaheim Hills recalled. "He held onto that for a long time before he was able to finally speak to somebody."

The motion, approved on the 17th anniversary of the devastating Sept. 11 terror attacks, requests that the county fire chief, the sheriff and the chief medical examiner/coroner, among others, review their current policies and services that address suicide prevention, critical incident stress management and trauma-informed education and outreach for first-responders and other affected employees.

The motion also requests that they work with experts who specialize in understanding "the unique issues" related to suicide and first responders to further develop protocols, policies, education and outreach.

"I'm hoping they listen to the membership because they are the one who need the answers, they are the ones who will go to the (mental health professionals) they want to go to," Johnson said. "Let them go to whoever they need to go to and not put limitations on who they need to see and who they feel comfortable with."

Her husband sought outside help from a professional but was penalized if he couldn't get off work and had to cancel that day, she said.

"Now we're suffering. The children are suffering. (Billy Johnson's) friends are suffering," Johnson said of her firefighter specialist husband, who died at the age of 52. "My hope is that information is out there, that it gets used and nobody else suffers the way my family has suffered."

In August, authorities confirmed that L.A. County Fire Department Capt. Wayne Habell, whose body was found in a canyon in Santa Barbara, also took his own life.

Supervisor Kathryn Barger, who submitted the motion with Supervisor Janice Hahn, noted first responders are faced with grueling situations every day that take an emotional and psychological toll.

In fact, she said, more law enforcement personnel and firefighters die as a result of suicide than in the line of duty.

"They sacrifice so much to save the lives of others," Barger said. "It's time that we pay them the same respect and save theirs."

She noted that the county is making strides in the issue of suicide prevention, including the board's approval of five critical medical staff positions along with support staff for the fire department.

David Gillotte, president of Los Angeles County Fire Fighters Local 1014, said county managers have tried to use their behavioral programs to deal with suicide for more than four decades but have failed to capture "the confidence of our employees to come out of the shadows."

Gillotte argued that progressive, contemporary peer-based programs that are union run and use "culturally competent fire department-centric trained clinicians" is the solution.

But such help must be confidential and not jeopardize one's job so that people feel comfortable to come forward, he said.

He also argued that the fire department's leadership must keep up with hiring and promotions to improve working conditions for other firefighters.

The Los Angeles County Fire Department is holding a three-day safety stand-down starting Wednesday in which all drills and all work activities will be canceled in order to train on behavioral health, suicide prevention and awareness.

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