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Researchers from the University of Winnipeg, MacEwan University and Memorial University to analyze workplace stress for public safety officials in Alberta

Edmonton - Researchers from the University of Winnipeg, MacEwan University and Memorial University are collaborating on a research project to investigate the mental health effects of workplace stress experienced by public safety communicators. Public safety communicators such as 911 operators, call-takers, dispatchers and tactile support communicators are the first point of contact in emergencies.

The research team will be directed by Dr. Marcella Siqueira Cassiano from the University of Winnipeg. The faculty members from MacEwan University are Tim Williams, chair, Public Safety and Justice Studies, and Douglas Johnson, assistant professor, Public Safety and Justice Studies. Dr. Stephen Czarnuch and Dr. Rosemary Ricciardelli from Memorial University are also involved in the project.

Public safety communicators need to stay calm as they gather crucial information while people are in distress. It's a demanding job that requires a high level of skill and resilience. Responding effectively to incidents can involve deciphering concealed messages of distress, exposure to violent and disturbing events and testifying in court. But these workers receive little attention from the public, and occupational health and safety in this line of work tends to be overlooked. As many professionals say, public safety communication is still a "thankless job."

The project has been awarded a research grant of over \$150,000 from the Government of Alberta for their study, *Alberta CARES*, which will examine the mental health and wellness of public safety communicators across Alberta. They will look for operational stress injuries such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorders and will identify factors associated with them. The team will also interview students enrolled in MacEwan's Emergency Communication and Response program about the value of their education in learning to cope with occupational stress.

"I am very grateful to the Government of Alberta for selecting our project and honored to work and learn from individuals who are simply the best in their areas of expertise," said Cassiano. "We will use this study to produce much-needed knowledge about employee wellness in such a crucial service for society."

Cassiano is also excited about using this study as a student training opportunity. "We will use this study as an environment to teach research methods and substantive knowledge to undergraduate and graduate trainees. We need to spark the interest of young scholars in the labour side of public safety."

"The secret of our project is collaboration," says Johnson. "The whole research process will be participative. We want the organizations working with us – police departments, fire departments, and emergency services – to have a voice in the project. While we know research, the services know the context and its limitations."

Johnson said the team hopes to create “useful and deployable” knowledge.

Johnson will use his four decades of field experience to inform research design and data collection. Williams will use his experience as chair of MacEwan’s Public Safety and Justice Studies Program to convert study findings into an enhanced curriculum. Czarnuch will help the team consider the impact of technology advancements on employee wellness. Ricciardelli, a founding member of the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment (CIPSRT), will help the team convert study findings into policy recommendations.

Johnson and Czarnuch want to ensure communicators are prepared for the evolving technology of next generation 9-1-1 and use this research as a platform to explore appropriate training delivery models to ensure communicators are aligned with any and all emerging technologies and societal changes.

Data collection will begin in fall 2024 and the team hopes to start sharing findings in summer 2025.

For more information, please contact archerj24@macewan.ca

Founded in 1971, MacEwan University inspires its students with a powerful combination of academic excellence and personal learning experiences. Offering more than 90 programs including undergraduate degrees, applied degrees, diplomas, certificates, continuing education and corporate training, the university provides a transformative education in a creative, collaborative and supportive learning environment where creativity and innovation thrive. Located in Edmonton, Alberta Canada, MacEwan University offers a unique student experience that opens up diverse pathways for achievement and growth.