

**ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE**

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**COMMENTARY**

# The Silent Crisis

## *First Responder Mental Health in Island Communities — Why the Mainland Safety Net Does Not Reach*

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**RESEARCH INDEPENDENCE STATEMENT**

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In Hawaii and Pacific Island communities, officer suicide rates exceed line-of-duty deaths.<sup>1</sup> The national attention directed at first responder mental health in recent years — expanded EAP programs, peer support training, mental health leave policies — has not translated into meaningfully improved access in island communities. The mainland safety net does not reach.

## The Infrastructure Gap

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Behavioral health providers with law enforcement and first responder trauma specialization are concentrated in continental locations.<sup>2</sup> Telehealth delivery has expanded access in some contexts, but the provider panels available through most law enforcement employee assistance programs do not include providers with Pacific Island community cultural competency. An officer in a rural Hawaii county or a Pacific Island territory agency who reaches out for support is directed to a provider who has never set foot on an island and has no framework for the specific stressors of island law enforcement work.

**ISPI's practitioner analysis identifies a second barrier operating alongside the infrastructure gap: in small island communities where professional and personal social networks overlap substantially, help-seeking behavior by first responders has social visibility that large metropolitan environments do not produce. The rational assessment of this social visibility risk suppresses help-seeking among the first responders who most need support.**

## ISPI Recommendations

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1. Fund behavioral health provider development with Pacific Island and Hawaii community cultural competency through FEMA and DOJ workforce wellness grants.
2. Establish confidential wellness access architecture for island first responders that routes help-seeking entirely outside organizational and community social networks — genuine confidentiality, not nominal confidentiality.
3. Commission research on first responder mental health outcomes in island law enforcement contexts — research that does not currently exist in the published literature.

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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### ABOUT THE ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE

The Island Security Policy Institute (ISPI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in Honolulu, Hawaii. ISPI produces practitioner-led research, policy analysis, training programs, and commissioned research on public safety, emergency preparedness, insider threat, and security policy for island and coastal communities worldwide. ISPI is registered as a federal contractor on SAM.gov under NAICS 541720. Warren Pulley, Founder & Executive Director.

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