



The History of Critical Incident Stress Management, Inc. in Rhode Island

A Legacy of Peer Support for Rhode Island's Public Safety Community

Origins: A National Movement Takes Root

In 1986, an informal peer-support effort began among Rhode Island's fire service responders, sparked by training from the American Critical Incident Stress Foundation (now known as ICISF). This effort was part of a broader shift taking place across the country in the late 1980s, as fire, EMS, and law enforcement professionals increasingly recognized that exposure to critical incidents was an occupational hazard—one that required structured support rather than the traditional expectation that responders simply "tough it out." This national movement toward formalized stress and trauma support began gaining traction in Rhode Island around 1986–1987.

Father Michael Leckie Brings the Concept Home

The catalyst for Rhode Island's program was Father Michael Leckie, a volunteer firefighter and chaplain for the Rhode Island Association of Fire Chiefs. In 1987, Father Leckie attended a Federation of Fire Chaplains conference in Lisle, Illinois, where Dr. Jeffrey Mitchell delivered a two-day training on the emerging science of critical incident stress among first responders. The training introduced a peer-support crisis intervention protocol known as "debriefing", a structured method of providing mental health support to responders in the aftermath of traumatic incidents. Father Leckie brought this model back to Rhode Island, where it was quickly embraced by fire and police departments across the state.

The Rhode Island Fire Chiefs Association Steps In

Recognizing the value of this new approach, the Rhode Island Fire Chiefs Association—under the leadership of then-president Chief Donald Centraccio—began planning in 1988 to expand the number of first responders trained in peer support. With generous funding from the Rhode Island 100 Club, the Association organized additional training focused on recognizing the effects of critical incidents and supporting responders through recovery.

Formal Training Arrives: February 1989

On February 11 and 12, 1989, the American Critical Incident Stress Foundation conducted formal Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) training at St. Joseph's Hospital on Peace Street in Providence. R. Michael Smith, chairman of the Providence Regional EMS Council and senior vice president of the Our Lady of Providence Unit at St. Joseph's Hospital, served as the EMS liaison officer, coordinating this training as part of the Providence Fire Department's and Providence EMS Council's broader EMS curriculum.

Select EMTs, firefighters, police officers, and employee assistance program (EAP) mental health professionals from across the state attended. Following the training, the fire and EMS participants of the newly formed peer-support group designated St. Joseph's Hospital as the central point of contact for fire departments seeking assistance. Father Leckie took on a leadership role in coordinating responses and disseminating information, while Michael Smith managed applications from prospective providers. Peter Leary, (RI Department of Health EMS Chief) also stood ready to help organize responses when needed. At this early stage, "debriefing" remained the group's sole intervention tool.

Expanding Statewide: 1990

Starting in 1990, Michael Smith and the Our Lady of Providence Unit of St. Joseph Hospital were involved in a series of discussions about possible closures, mergers, dissolutions, and restructuring with Fatima Hospital in North Providence. These developments made it increasingly clear that the newly formed team needed to organize independently to remain stable, accessible, and responsive to public safety agencies across Rhode Island.

During this same time frame, Chief Charles Aldrich of the Harmony Fire Department—then president of the Northern Rhode Island EMS Council—recognized the potential to expand this peer-support model statewide. While working through the Northern RI EMS Council's ongoing Basic EMT training programs at the Harmony Fire Department, informal discussions began about establishing a formal statewide response team.

With the support and encouragement of Peter Leary and Primrose Fire Department Chief Richard Keene, Chief Aldrich and Anne Balboni convened a meeting at Roger Williams Hospital in 1990. They brought together the original group of St. Joseph's-trained fire peer supporters. The purpose: to lay the groundwork for a sustainable, statewide peer-support organization.

Anne Balboni was tasked with researching emerging models for such programs, including a fact-finding trip to Delaware to meet with state fire officials and a Delaware State Police representative, whose protocols helped inform Rhode Island's approach. A follow-up meeting later that year reviewed her findings and outlined a strategic plan, with Anne designated to lead the effort to incorporate the group as a formal, tax-exempt organization.

Laying the Institutional Foundation: 1990–1991

Over the following two years, several critical steps were completed to establish the organization on firm legal and operational footing:

- Legal incorporation: Ralph Iannitelli, a Smithfield-based attorney, agreed to incorporate the group as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit at no cost, with the understanding that his fee would be paid if and when the organization secured funding.
- Governing framework: Anne Balboni developed written guidelines establishing the organization's mission statement, internal structure, engagement protocols with public safety agencies, and a formal application process.

These efforts were grounded in a set of founding principles that continue to guide the organization today:

- Critical incidents are recognized as an occupational hazard for public safety responders.
- Stress reactions are a normal and expected response but can become harmful without proper support.
- Peer-based, protocol-driven intervention can help prevent long-term consequences such as burnout, health problems, and performance decline.
- Specialized training, consistent with nationally accepted best practices, is required of all members, given the sensitivity of entering a colleague's life during a moment of crisis. The team adheres to EMS's foundational principle: "Do no harm."
- Trained peers have an ethos that no clinician can develop, and clinical supervision of the team members is mandatory.

Official Recognition: May 1992

- On May 14, 1992, the Rhode Island CISM Team, Inc. was formally granted a 501c3 status as a nonprofit, cementing its place as a permanent resource for the state's public safety community.
- ICISF verification: The team applied for and was accepted as a verified registered response team with the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF), becoming the fifth team nationwide to receive this designation.
- Anne Balboni's ICISF leadership: Anne Balboni was accepted for ICISF membership in 1990 and was trained as Approved Instructor #4 in 1994. She later became both a faculty member and a member of the ICISF Board of Directors.

Securing Long-Term Sustainability: 1994

In 1994, Anne Balboni and Chief Aldrich met with Chief Frank Sylvester, then-president of the Rhode Island Fire Chiefs Association, to address the program's long-term financial stability. The resulting agreement established a sponsorship arrangement in which:

- RI CISM Team members would not engage in fundraising themselves.
- The Rhode Island Fire Chiefs Association would solicit and collect voluntary anonymous donations from fire departments across the state—not as a fee or mandatory assessment—and would pass those unnamed contributions along to the CISM Team without any conditions attached.
- Peer and crisis intervention services would be provided at no cost, and all Rhode Island fire service agencies could request educational opportunities without charge.

This arrangement ensured that any fire department could request assistance without concern for its donation status, preserving the program's core mission of accessible, no-strings-attached support. The agreement also reinforced the confidential nature of the program: the Team would never be required to report the details of its work, preserving trust between responders and those providing support.

A Continuing Legacy of Service

Since its founding, the Rhode Island CISM Team has remained committed to excellence in both member training and response. As the field of peer support and crisis intervention has evolved, the Team's work has expanded beyond the original "debriefing" model to include pre-crisis preparation, acute crisis response, and post-crisis support. Today, the Team provides individual and group assistance to Rhode Island public safety agencies, as well as educational resources for responders and their families.

Today, the CISM model is used as a crisis intervention and peer-support protocol across many Rhode Island hospitals, law enforcement and public safety agencies, and the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth & Families.

Dr. Anne Balboni

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