



EVALUATING WELLNESS PRODUCTS AND SERVICES INTENDED FOR PUBLIC SAFETY PERSONNEL

Created by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police Psychological Services Subcommittee and Adapted with Permission for CIPSRT Dissemination

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Introduction

There has been an increased focus on the health and wellbeing of public safety personnel (PSP) in recent years; “Public safety personnel” (PSP) is a term that encompasses personnel who ensure the safety and security of Canadians. Examples include: tri-services (police – including the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, career and volunteer firefighters, and paramedics), correctional employees, border services personnel, operational and intelligence personnel, search and rescue personnel, Indigenous emergency managers, and public-safety communications officials. The same increase has also brought rapid growth in commercial businesses marketing products and services purporting to improve employee wellness. Many vendors report having a unique approach to enhancing wellness outcomes and aggressively market their products, at times charging high prices for access to their content and services. PSP agencies may view such offerings as a means of accelerating their wellness programming and addressing gaps in their existing services; however, agencies may also be taking on some risk when entering into a contract with vendors who are marketing wellness products or services.

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Product Type

There are many services, programs, and products currently in the marketplace that are intended for use by PSP. Some examples include:

- Employee and family assistance programs
- Web and mobile based health applications
- Online mental health treatment programs
- Health education videos, websites, or trainings programs
- Products that may help members navigate to wellness services
- Subscription-based mindfulness programs

Reasons for Considering Wellness Products and Services

The appeal of working with vendors to support mental health involves tapping into expertise and information to which many PSP may not otherwise have easy access. For example, many PSP organizations do not have the resources to design, develop, and deliver a suicide awareness program to their members; as such, contracting a vendor to provide suicide prevention and awareness training to staff may be appealing or even inevitable. External contracting allows all sizes of PSP agencies opportunities to deliver important information and programming to their members without having to build internal capacities and design completely new programs.

Risks

In partnering with vendors, PSP organizations assume some risks that may not be present for programs that are internal to the organization. PSP organizations may lose aspects of control over the cost, content, and alignment of provided programming when purchasing a pre-existing product, service, or training program, resulting in a “one size fits all” approach that may not be a match for the specific priorities of a given PSP agency, even in cases where vendors claim tailored programming. Vendors may change their products over time, for a variety of reasons, which may create problems for PSP agencies and the possible need to search for different products and vendors. Perhaps most importantly, PSP agencies are trusting that vendors have the appropriate expertise, education, and motivations to provide their members with high quality information, training, and services. In providing programming from a vendor, PSP agencies may be held liable or at least responsible, in whole or in part, for the quality and effectiveness of the programming.

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Questions to ask Vendors

When considering the value of different products and services, PSP organizations can help mitigate risk by very critically examining the claims made by vendors. Doing so can assist in determining the quality and fit of the offering(s). Here are examples of questions PSP leaders can ask a vendor to clarify the value of the product and inform their decision making:

- Who is the product or service designed for? For example, is the product or service designed for the general public, employees in business settings, first responders or other PSP?
- Is the information and content in your product or service publicly available?
- Do you have any data that supports the effectiveness of this product or service that goes beyond satisfaction surveys? Are there any data on how this product or service impacts first responders or other PSP?
- Do you have any high-quality research studies (i.e., scientific, peer-reviewed studies published in academic journals indexed by reputable agencies), that support the effectiveness of this product or service? Are there any published data on how this product or service relates to first responders or other PSP?
- Can you provide a list of the health care professionals who contributed to the content of this product or service, and the qualifications of those professionals?
- Can you provide a list of the independent researchers who have made substantial contributions to the development or evaluation of this product or service along with the qualifications and university/hospital affiliations of those researchers?
- Can you provide a list of other organizations that are using the product or service and a reference within each organization for us to contact so that we can ask questions about the utilization rates, satisfaction scores, and other measurable outcomes linked with the use of the product or service?
- What is your long-term plan for this product or service and how do you see the offering changing over the term of the contract?

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Questions to ask Internally

In addition to considering the value of the product, PSP leaders must carefully consider how the product or service fits within the broader context of their organization's mental health strategy. Here are a few questions PSP leaders could ask to better understand whether or not the product is right for their personnel:

- Does the product or service align well with our current mental health strategy or organizational goals, and would the product or service make a meaningful improvement?
- Who is the target audience for the product (e.g., supervisors, civilians, front-line personnel)?
- What are the costs and expected returns on investment?
- What are the time commitments and constraints for rolling out the product or service?
- Will a request for proposal (RFP) process be required?
- Are there groups of personnel who may not be reached effectively by this product or service? For example, some personnel may not have access to a modern mobile device or may be uncomfortable with technology, and would therefore experience barriers to accessing a mobile app.
- Is using this product or service considered to be mandatory or will it be offered to interested personnel only?
- Are there any problems with the messaging or content of this product or service that could lead to confusion among our personnel?

Conclusions

Partnering with vendors can be an effective way to bolster the programs, training, and services available to PSP when developing a similar product internally is not feasible; however, PSP organizations must critically examine the claims made in the marketing of such products and services to ensure vendors will deliver high quality, evidence-based, or at least evidence-informed, services to their personnel. Doing so can help to substantially mitigate risk and liability.

TOGETHER WE ARE STRONGER

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