The development of a multi-modal stepped-care approach to address alcohol and other drug use in public sector employees

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Background: In recent years, there has been growing recognition of psychological distress among employees of social and emergency services whose professions may expose them to stressful and traumatic events on a regular basis. Unsurprisingly, research has found high rates of psychological distress and indications of problematic alcohol and other drug (AOD) use, which for some, may be a mechanism of coping with these experiences.

Methods: In order to assist these employees in making informed, empowered, and proactive decisions regarding their AOD use and treatment preferences, we developed a multi-modal stepped-care approach to addressing AOD use in this population. The model was developed based on principles of co-design, which included the synthesis of results from an initial scoping survey with the population, two systematic reviews of the workplace intervention and stepped-care literature, as well as consultation with key stakeholders.

Results: The resulting model comprises universal and targeted components that broadly correspond with three levels of intervention – prevention, early intervention, and specialised treatment – to address AOD use among social and emergency services employees, fostering informed decision making and treatment seeking behaviour.

Conclusion: The practical implications of the model for the social and emergency services workforce will be discussed. We will also discuss learnings in designing and implementing interventions for this specialised population with a particular focus on codesign and helping workers overcome the barriers to seeking help.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Social and emergency service workers encounter trauma in their roles on the frontline. The findings of this study provide insight into tailoring interventions for this population and navigating barriers and facilitators to seeking care.