



“Nothing About Us, Without Us”

Wildland Firefighter Partner/Spouse Perspective Survey Data Summary

Out of the 1914 respondents, 1841 were a partner/spouse of a federal Wildland Firefighter. Only those 1841, connected with federal employees, had their responses included in this report.

Background/Methodology

This survey was developed by the Comprehensive Health & Wellbeing Committee of Grassroots Wildland Firefighters (GRWFF), open for 3 weeks in June/July of 2021 and made available to partners/spouses of federal wildland firefighters as an anonymous google survey. A link to the survey was shared on the GRWFF website, over social media and via email.

Purpose

The primary goal of the survey is to measure the impacts that a career as a federal WFF has on both firefighters and their families. Increasing awareness around the stressors and the current stress responses are important considerations. Our wildland firefighting community is asking that the systems of support grow with the demands of our fire seasons.

Information gathered gives the public, agency leadership, and legislators a better understanding of the impacts on both the firefighters and their families. **All data is from the perspective of federal WFF partners/spouses, referred to as “respondents” throughout this summary.**

Acknowledgements

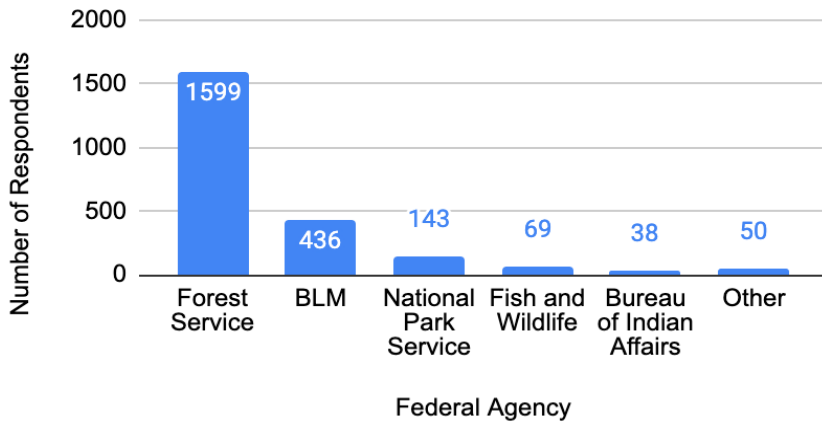
The survey results mirror the trend the wildland firefighting community is experiencing. High rates of burnout, and a number of physical & mental health challenges are disrupting the whole family. Both the WFF and their partner/spouse are left with very little resources to process/deal with these work-related stressors. Together we can make this line of work more sustainable. We want to thank everyone in this wildland firefighting community for doing the work that it takes to keep up with the demands of our fire seasons. We also want to thank everyone who participated in the creation and implementation of this survey. The GRWFF Comprehensive Health & Wellbeing Committee and Kelly McNeil-Rice, PhD (Associate Professor of Health & Human Performance at Eastern Oregon University), worked collaboratively throughout the process.

In this document you will find information on demographics of respondents and some key findings. Following that are notes as well as charts showing a summary of impacts of the work of a WFF and potential areas of support.

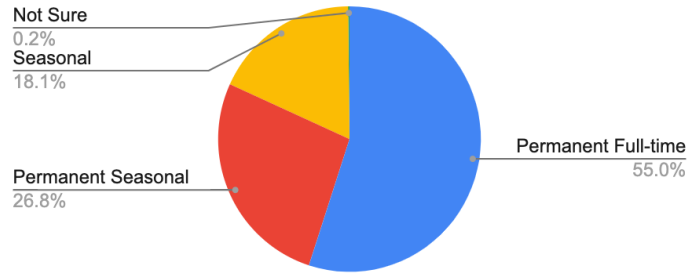
DEMOGRAPHICS

- 86.9% of these WFF's have worked for the Forest Service as a WFF
- 81.8% of these WFF's are currently permanent employees for a federal agency as a WFF
- Over half of the respondents (50.6%) have been with their WFF for 8+ yrs
- Almost half of the respondents (49.3%) have children with WFF
- 69.3% (1275) respondents work full-time while their partner is fighting fire, 15.4% (283) also work for a federal agency and 11.1% (203) are also a WFF

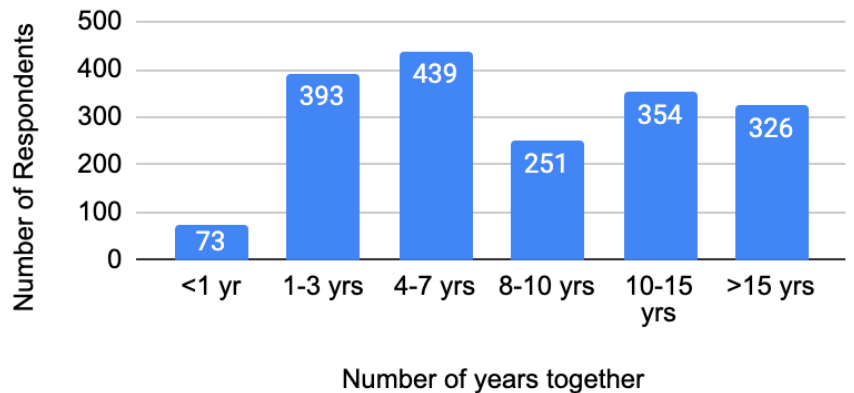
Agency(s) partner has worked for as WFF



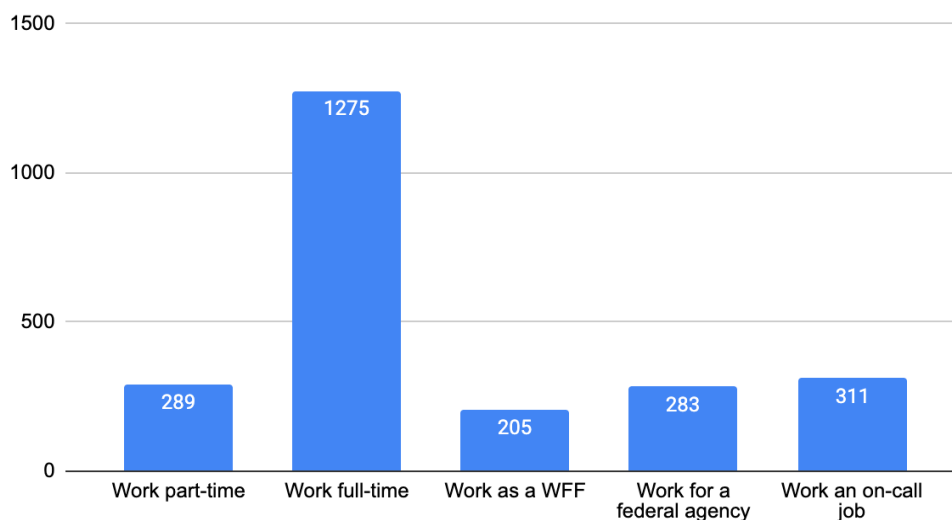
Partner's current employment status?



How long in a relationship with this WFF?



Employment Status of Respondents



KEY FINDINGS

- ★ **59.9% (1084) of respondents feel they are often/regularly secondary to the commitments of their partner's job. Let's consider how the demands of "fire assignments" have turned into deployments leaving those at home to carry the weight of so many responsibilities of managing a household without their partner available to them for support so many months out of the year. 43.4% (795) feel they are left to operate without a partner for 7+ months out of a given year. How can we offer better support? Let's consider the impact this may have on the WFF upon reintegration back into the home.**

- ★ **69.1% (1268) are concerned often/always about the health of their WFF while 60.2% report their WFF has been impacted by an incident at work that resulted in mental health challenges.**

- ★ **When those in a dual fire career relationship were asked if they've left/considered leaving their own fire career due to the difficulty of having children, 70.9% (494) of respondents, the questions applied to, reported yes.**

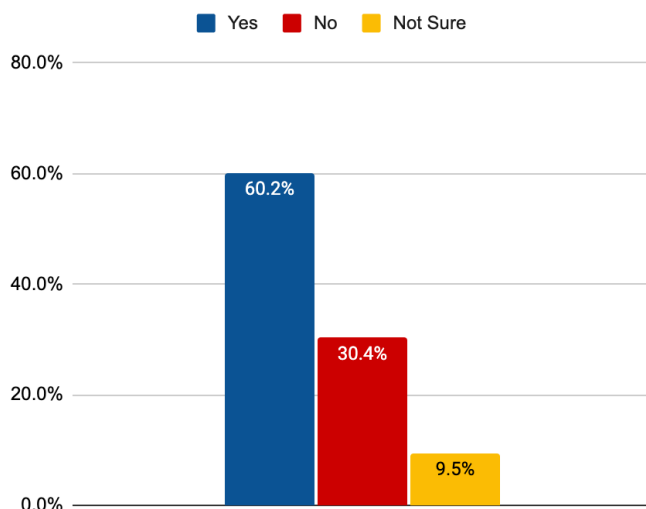
- ★ **There are real concerns for long-term stress impacts on the health of WFF's and their partners/families. 73.1% (1328) of respondents often/regularly worry about the possibility of a tragic accident on the fireline impacting them. Only 11.5% often/regularly feel confident that if/when something were to happen to their partner while on duty, they would be taken care of by the agency and unfortunately 2.8% of those who know their partner utilized EAP, strongly agree they found it helpful.**

- ★ **Results indicate it's not just as easy as being off the clock to rest/recover. 44.9% report their partner will often/regularly retreat/rest/recover when not at work. While off the clock behaviors observed more frequently during fire season include 56.6% (1026) often/regularly answering calls/texts related to work 56.6% (1026), excessive screen time (55.4%), expressing anger/frustration about work (51.3%).**

IMPACTS OF WORK on Employee and Partner/Family:

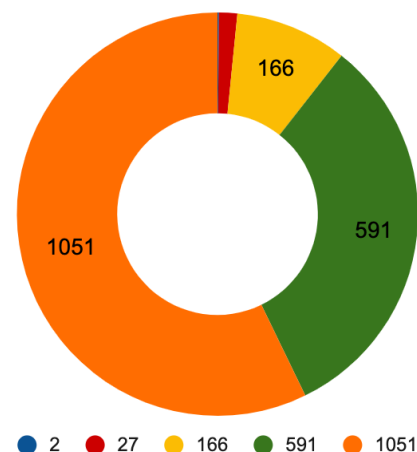
- 60.2% report partners have been impacted by an incident at work that resulted in mental health challenges, while 9.2% were unsure.
- 17.2% report partners have been injured at work resulting in a financial hardship
- 73.1% (1328) often/regularly worry about the possibility of a tragic accident on the fireline impacting them.
- 78.1% (1414) often/regularly feel stress due to their partner's absence during fire season.
- Only 11.5% often/regularly feel confident if something were to happen to their partner, while on duty, they would be taken care of by their federal agency.
- 46.1% (841), report partners experiencing inadequate/poor quality of sleep during fire season. Only 22.3% (407) report sleep as excessive due to disengagement and/or depression during fire season. Do you know what this looks like outside of fire season?
- Off the clock the top 3 behaviors observed often/regularly by respondents, during fire season, include answering work-related calls/texts (56.6%), screen time (55.4%), expressing anger/frustration about work (51.3%). While only 37.8% report WFF exhibiting a sense of calm and ease and less than half (44.9%) are managing to rest & recover when off the clock.
- 43.4% (795) feel like they're operating without a partner 7+ months out of a given year due to physical absence and/or lack of reliability of partner due to their job as a WFF.
- Almost half, 49.3%, of respondents stated maybe/yes they have considered separating from their partner due to strain on the relationship from the demands of the job.
- When those in a dual fire career relationship were asked if they've left/considered leaving their own fire career due to the difficulty of having children, 70.9% (494) of respondents, the questions applied to, reported yes.
- 69.1% (1268) are concerned often/always about the health of their partner while only 23.0% (418) are often/always concerned about their own health. And 42.8% (750) are concerned often/always about the health of their family as a result of their partner's work.
- When asked how impactful the following potential stressors are, respondents reported the following to be extremely impactful; extended absence physically and/or emotionally (1075), inherent risk of job (814), and strain on relationship due to job (662).

Work Incident Impacting Mental Health of WFF



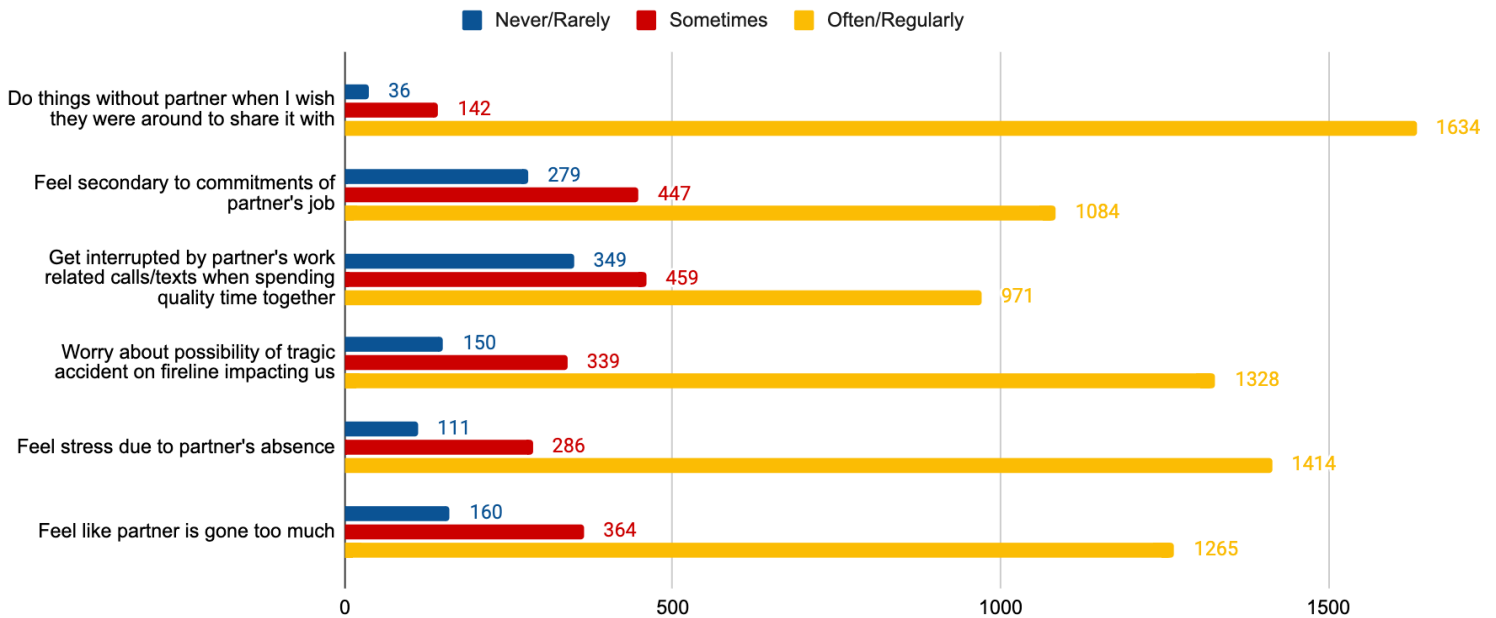
Amount of impact WFF's job has on personal life

SCALE: blue=very little, orange=more than I ever imagined!

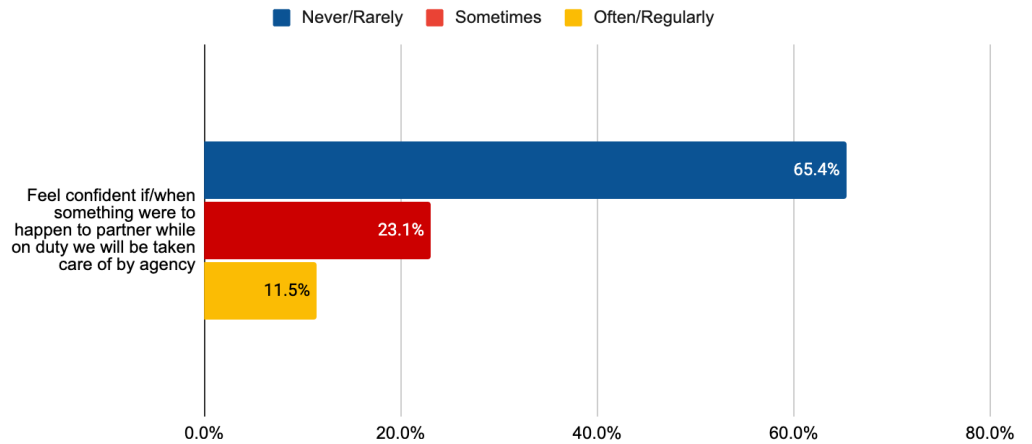


IMPACTS OF WORK (CONT)

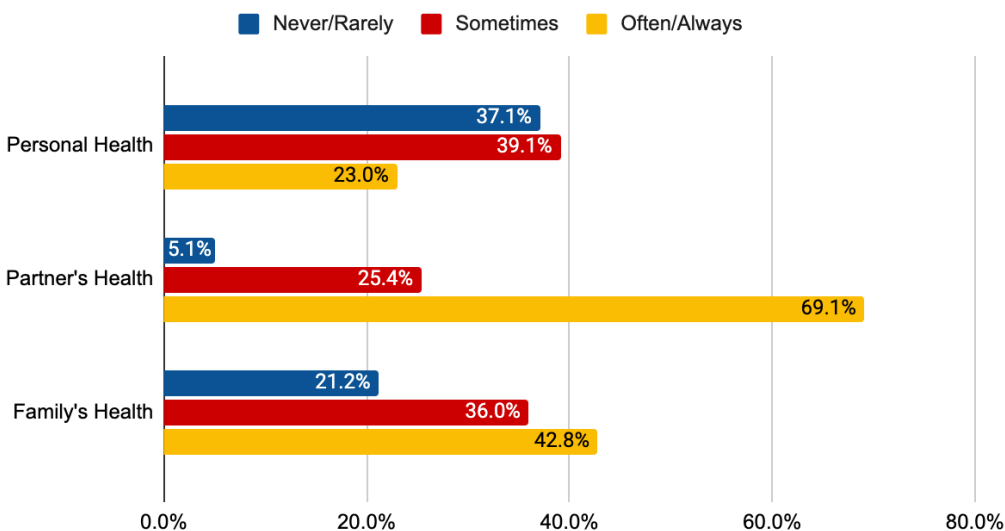
Frequency of Respondent Stressors During a Typical Fire Season



Agency Support

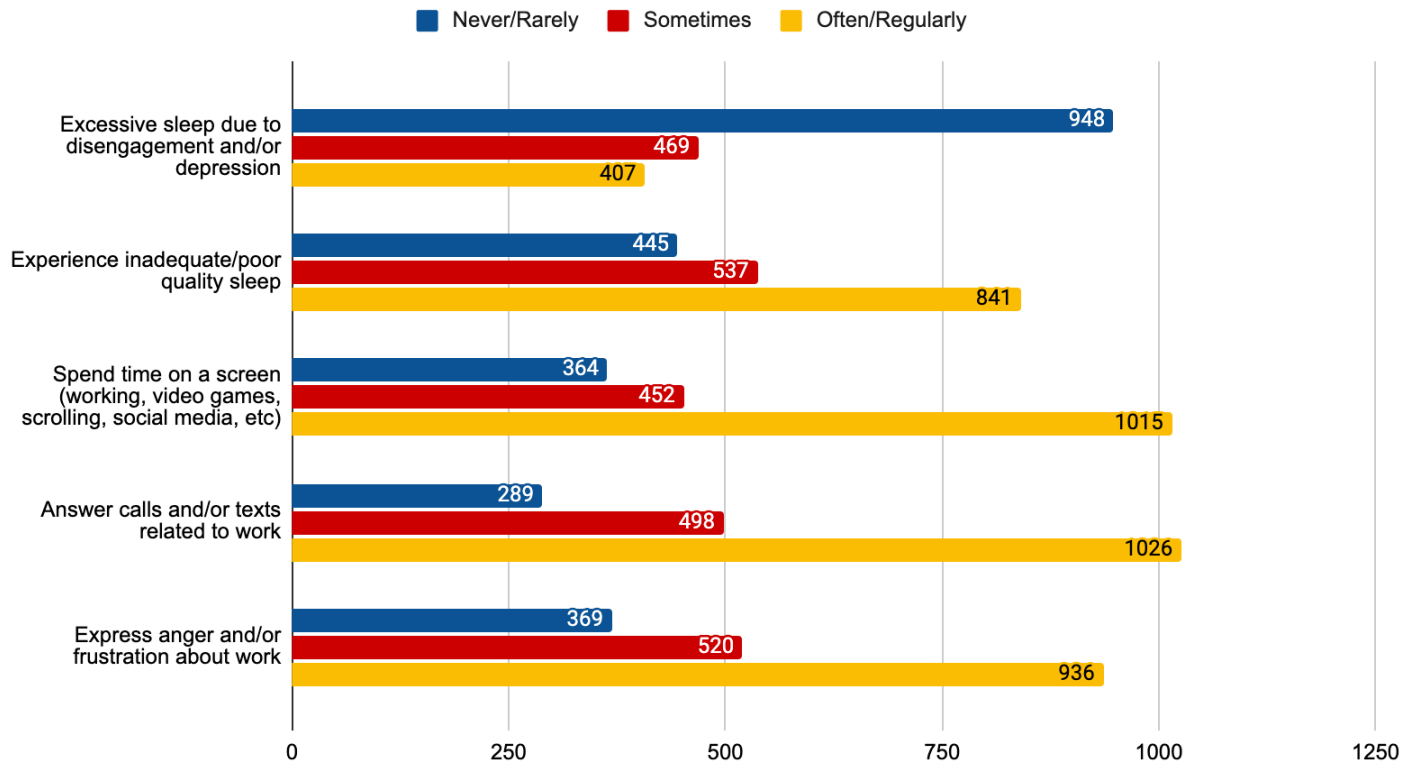


Concerns About Health

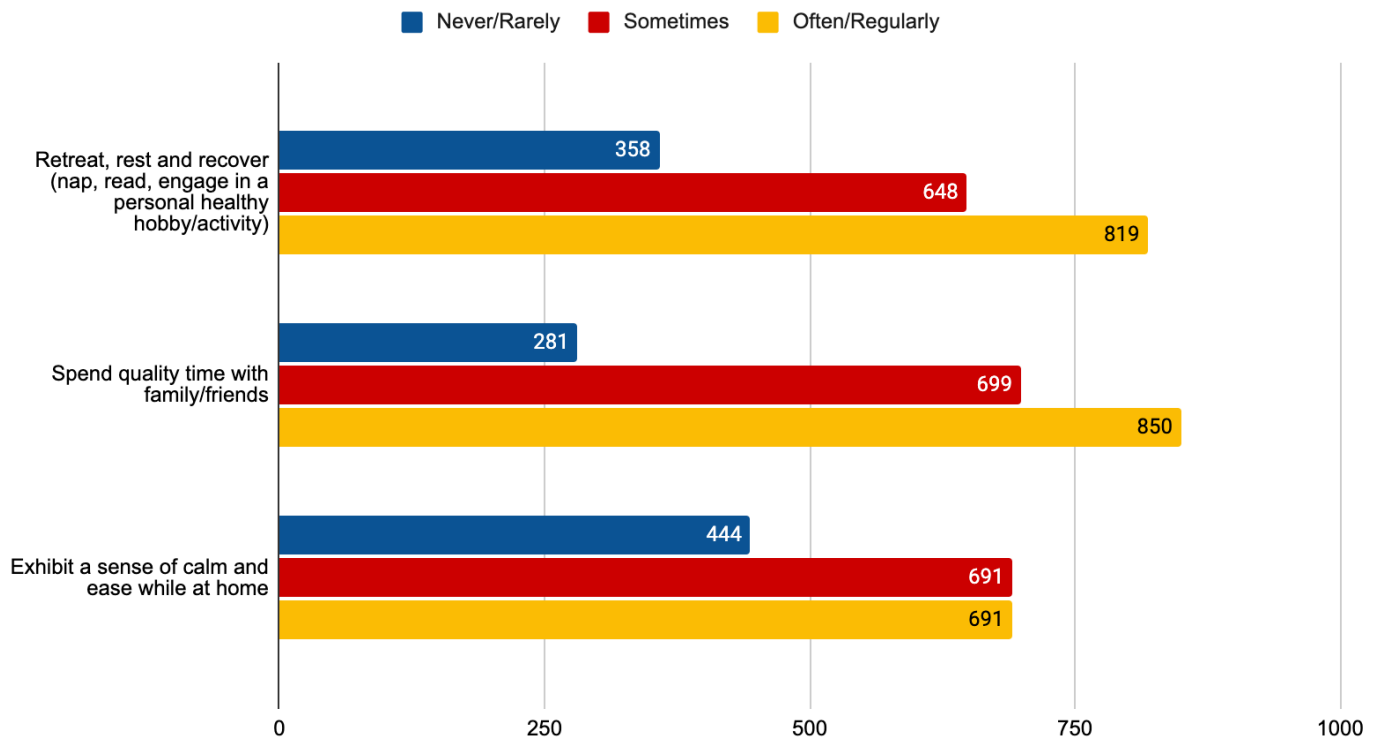


IMPACTS OF WORK (CONT)

Observed behaviors, during fire season, while off the clock

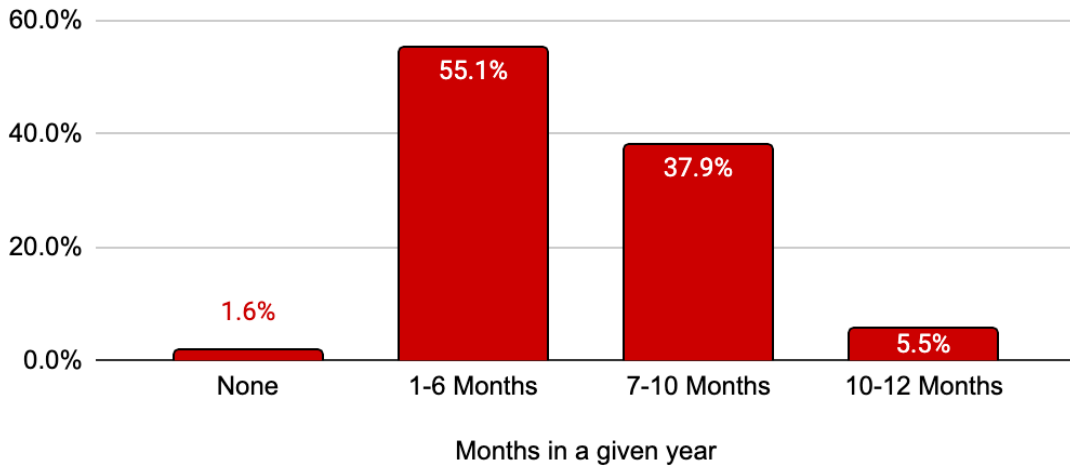


Observed behaviors, during fire season, while off the clock

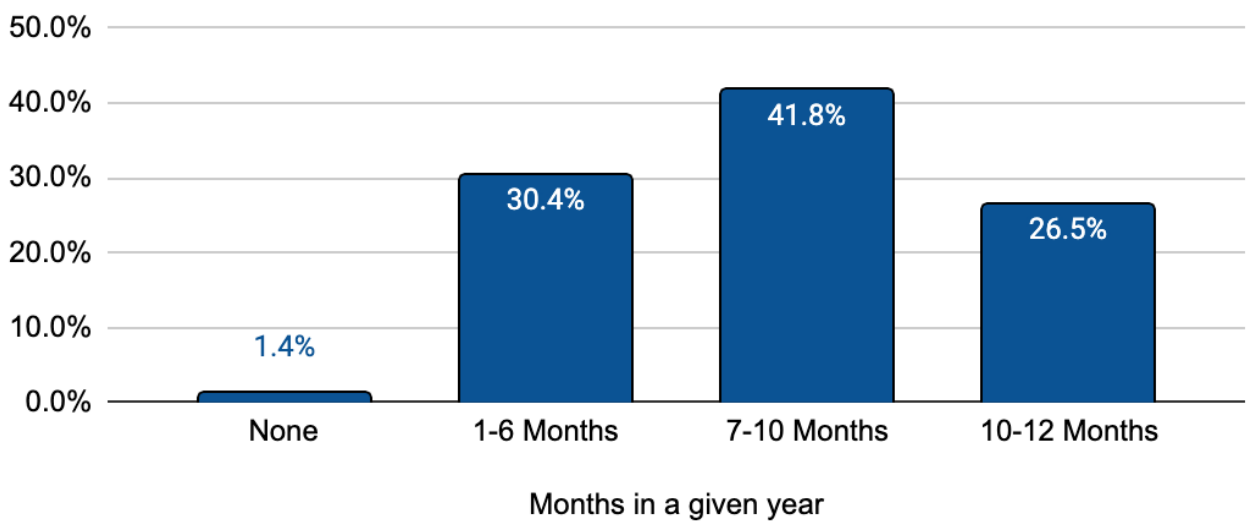


IMPACTS OF WORK (CONT)

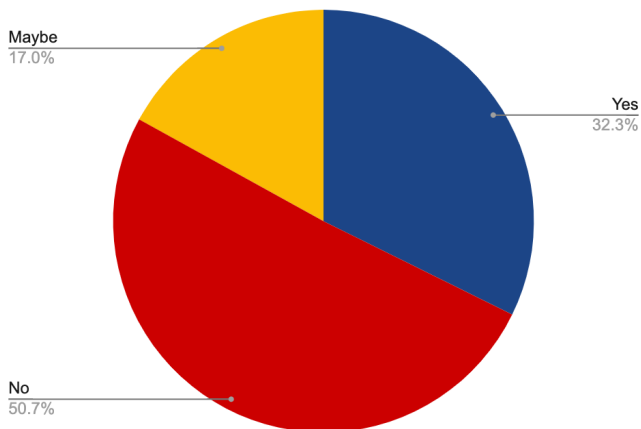
Months operating without a partner



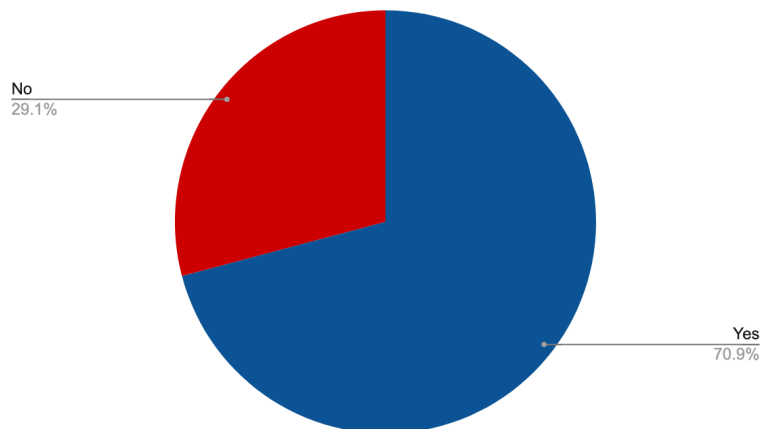
Duration of partner's stress level being impacted by work



Considered separating from partner due to strain on relationship from demands of job

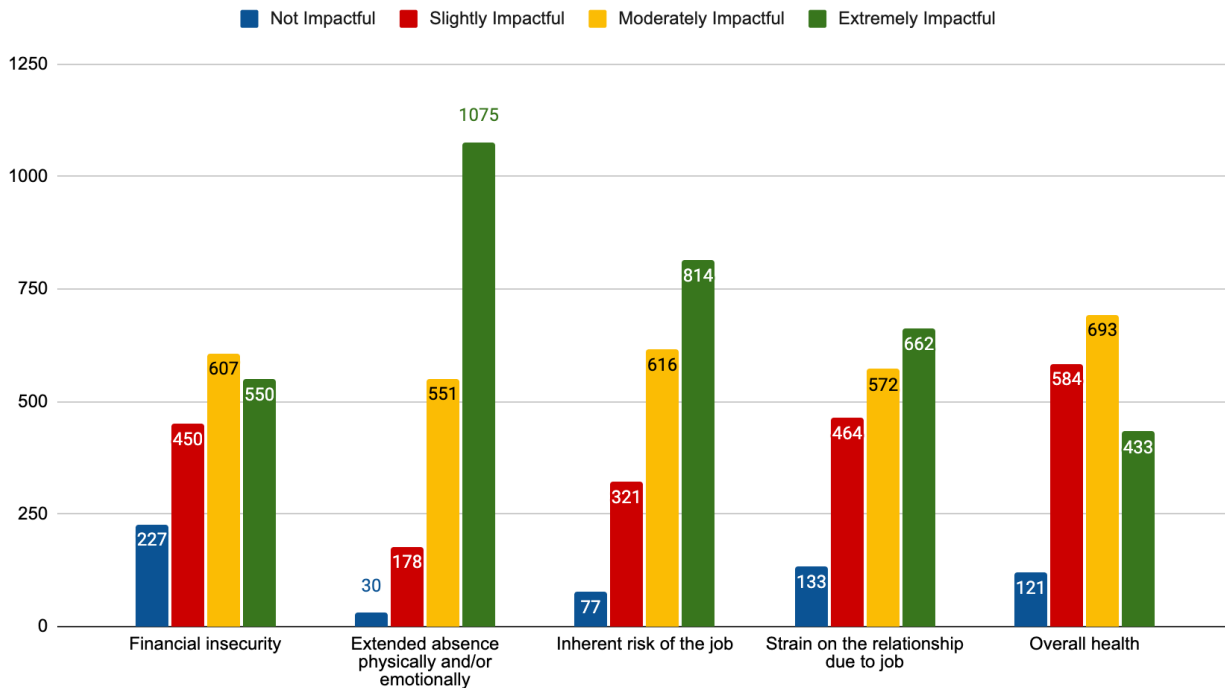


Left or considered leaving fire career due to the difficulty of having children in a dual fire career relationship?



IMPACTS OF WORK (CONT)

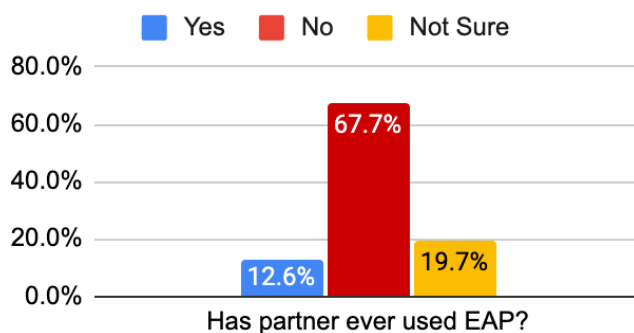
Level of Stress Impacts



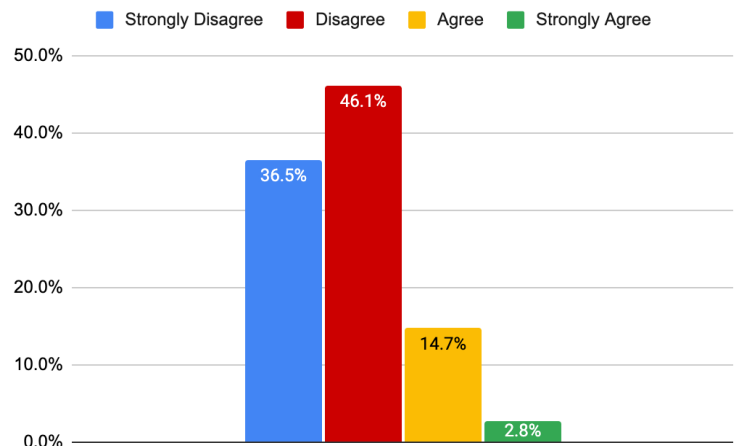
AREAS OF SUPPORT

- Respondents reported 12.6% of partners have used EAP, while 19.7% were unsure if they had.
- Of the 688 who reported using EAP, only 17.5% agree/strongly agree that it was helpful.
- Overall there seems to be a willingness with some undefined barriers to effective utilization of Mental Health Professionals (MHP). 922 out of the 1841 (50.1%) respondents report themselves and/or WFF have utilized a MHP as a result of stressors of this line of work. 71.5% agree/strongly agree they've only considered seeking care, 68% say their partner is willing but work schedule makes it difficult, and 65.3% say they'd like their partner to but WFF is reluctant.
- Ideas were offered on what might make them feel more supported, all of which were noted to feel extremely helpful. The top 3 areas shown to be extremely helpful include; higher pay to reduce financial stress (88.0%), year round access to health insurance for seasonal firefighters (80.2%), and easy access to MHP who understands the fire culture (58.3%)

Partners Utilized EAP

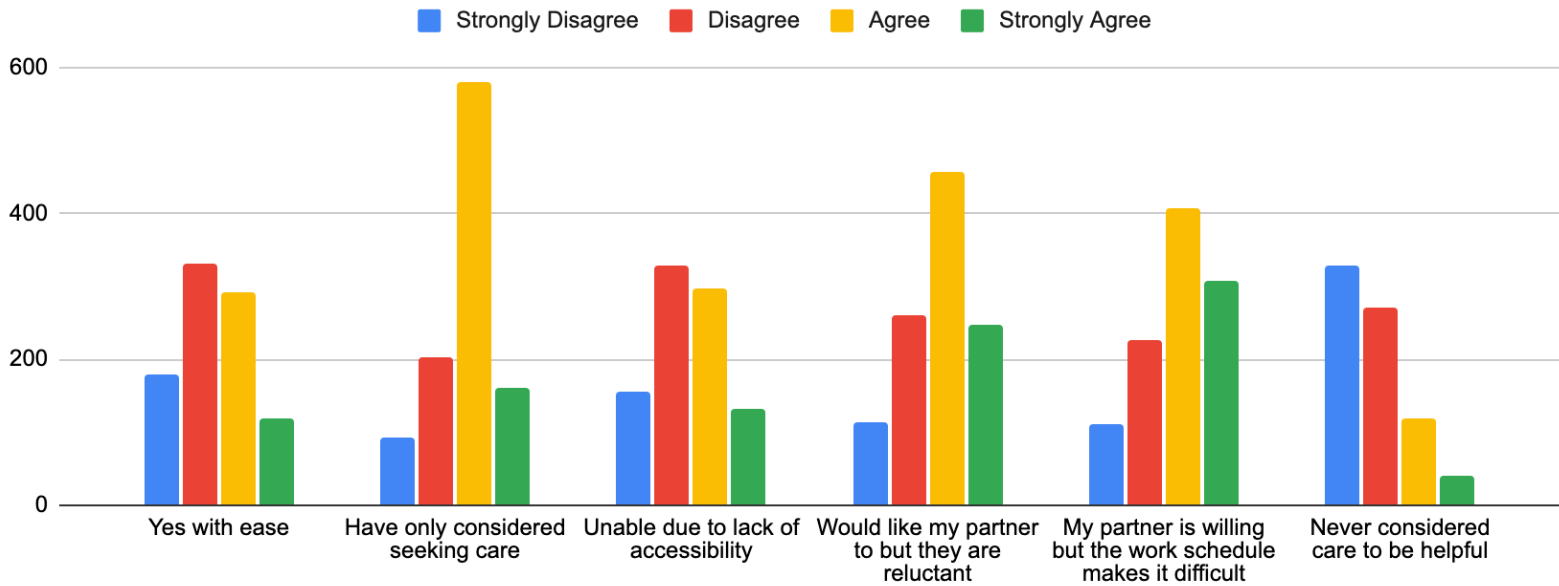


Level of helpfulness for those who utilized EAP

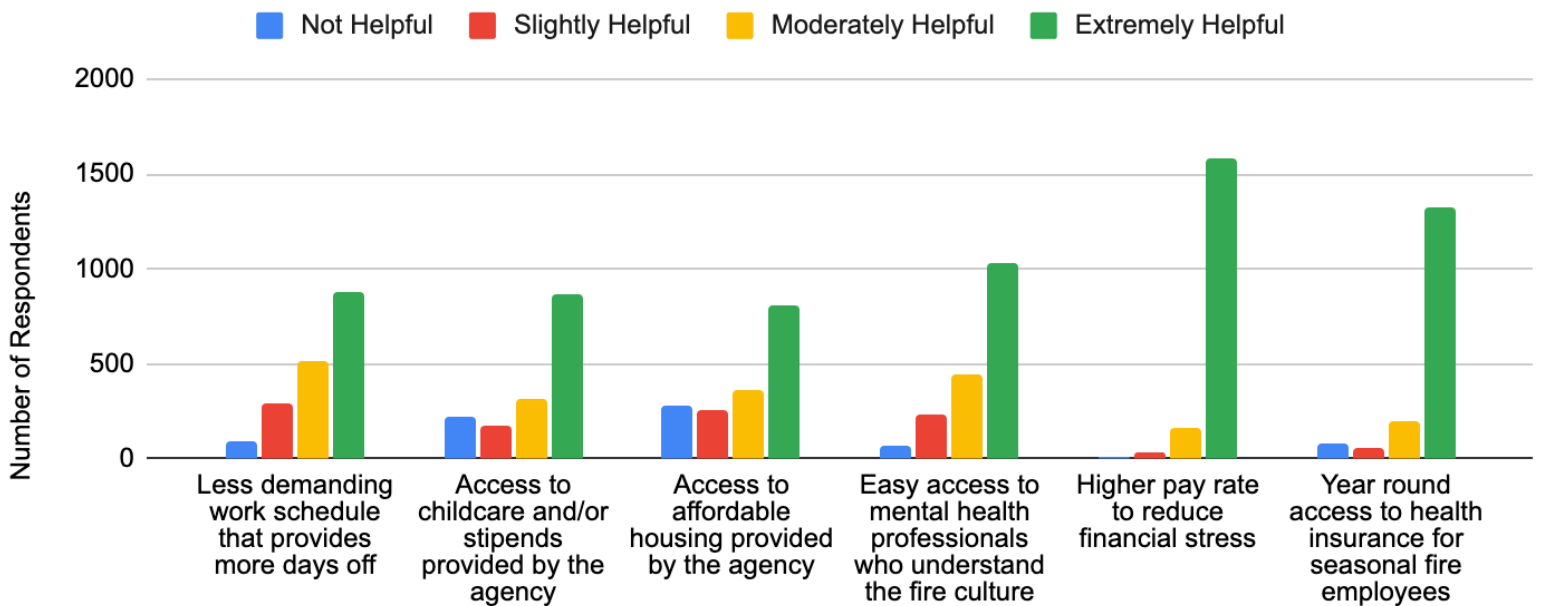


AREAS OF SUPPORT (CONT)

Perspective on Utilizing Mental Health Professional Support



Potential Support



What might help you feel more supported?