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Retreats That Serve Those Who Serve

By Andrea Perchotte

Battling fatigue and mental health challenges is a harsh reality many Canadian paramedics confront while selflessly serving others. Studies show paramedics in Canada often struggle with depression, anxiety (Fischer & MacPhee, 2017, p. 19), and suicidal tendencies (Carleton et al., 2018, p. 226). Brian Forbes, an Advanced Care Paramedic and Peer Support Team Coordinator for the Region of Durham Paramedic Services in Whitby, Ontario notes, “While many of us have developed tools and techniques to function well in our roles; the repeated and prolonged stress inevitably takes a toll on our bodies and our minds...we often don’t have the time we need...to regulate back to a healthy, physiologically “relaxed” state.” (B. Forbes, personal communication, July 29, 2024)

Along with time constraints are other barriers that can hinder paramedics from engaging in self-care, notes Kimberley Lennox, a Registered Occupational Therapist at West Coast Resiliency Centre in Vancouver, which specializes in therapy for first responders and others dealing with trauma and stress-related mental health issues. According to Lennox, paramedics may not prioritize their own well-being due to, “...feeling that they are on duty 24/7, difficulties unwinding after work due to the intensity of their job,...feelings of guilt for engaging in self-care when their colleagues are still working, and they often tend to place the needs of others in front of their own...” (K. Lennox, personal communication, August 8, 2024)

Forbes, a recipient of the 2023 Champions of Mental Health Award from the Canadian Institute of Public Safety Research and Treatment for his work in actively improving the mental health of his colleagues says, “...activities that allow us to slow down, ground ourselves, and bring us back to our window of tolerance are so important to incorporate in our wellness plans...Making time to connect with nature can be a powerful addition...” (B. Forbes, personal communication, July 29, 2024)



Fortunately, an increasing number of non-profit organizations in Canada, funded mainly through donations, provide restorative retreats designed for first responders. The following are havens fostering self-care and resilience, which offer overnight stays in natural settings without formal programs:

Three Oaks Cabin

www.threeoakscabin.com

“It’s been very healing,” says Diane Bergsma about co-founding Three Oaks Cabin, a cozy, wood-scented respite in Florence, Ontario. After Bergsma’s son, Dalles, a farmer and volunteer fire fighter, took his life in 2020, she and her family recognized the need for a quiet refuge for individuals experiencing stress and anxiety in the agricultural and first responder communities. Construction began on a cabin designed to offer a space for recovery and reflection, a connection to nature, and mental health support. “These [first responders] put their lives on the line for us and then stuff down their emotions. The strain on their relationships is a direct result of the trauma they experience,” notes Bergsma. Stays at the contemporary three-bedroom two-bathroom sanctuary, complete with a fully equipped kitchen,

are complimentary and include three days and two nights. Guests at Three Oaks Cabin have access to wooded trails and self-directed mental health video programming to build resilience. After their stay, guests receive a follow-up from a therapist to support their continued well-being.

Rally Point Retreat

www.rallypointretreat.org

Spanning 320 acres on Nova Scotia’s tranquil South Shore in Sable River is the peer support facility, Rally Point Retreat. Since 2015, owner and former Royal Canadian Air Force

serviceman Bob Grundy and his wife, Johan, have welcomed into their 6,700 square foot bungalow first responders, veterans and journalists struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “We don’t care what shape our guests arrive in. We don’t ask them to tell us their story. We just want them to know they don’t have to suffer in silence. We’ll figure out a way to turn their life around if they want to,” says Grundy. Rally Point Retreat has two guest suites, a library as a back-up bedroom, and a trailer. On offer are home-cooked meals and an opportunity to recharge in nature through access to walking trails, ponds and bicycles. Other amenities include a hot tub, art studio, pool table, ping pong table, darts, plastic model kits and board games. “Pen turning”, which uses a lathe to craft artful pens, is a popular activity. Guests are neither given a check-out date nor charged, and the retreat is partially funded by Grundy’s pension. When asked about the challenging role of providing year-round support to strangers in his own home, he cheerfully responds, “It’s been a real blessing to us. We have the heroes of the country coming through our door. It’s an honor for us to help these folks.”

Le Monastère des Augustines

www.monastere.ca

Paramedics can immerse themselves in the wellness environment of Québec City’s historic Le Monastère des Augustines, a monastery where a tradition of self-care and serenity prevails. With a mission to care for the sick, the Augustinian Sisters arrived from France in

1639 and later established the first hospital in North America north of Mexico. Next door, they constructed Le Monastère, a residence for the Sisters that includes a church still in use today. However, at the turn of the 21st century, as the number of members declined, the Sisters decided to bequeath their heritage to the province. Employing a non-denominational approach to promote healthy living, this retreat is welcome to all, with a particular focus on supporting healthcare workers and caregivers. Assistant Executive Director Isabelle Houde tells Canadian Paramedicine, “We deeply value the crucial work that paramedics do and are committed to supporting them through our services and programs.” The absence of in-room televisions



and telephones, combined with minimalist décor, fosters an atmosphere of rest and contemplation. Room rates vary based on the choice of authentic and contemporary rooms, which include shared or private baths. Nutrient-dense, eco-conscious meals await at Le Vivoir restaurant, with mindful eating encouraged through silent breakfasts. For guests who prefer dining outside, a take-out counter is available for enjoying meals on the spacious leafy grounds surrounding the property. A selection of massages, a NeuroBed, designed to soothe the nervous system, daily yoga classes, and year-round wellness programs enable guests to recharge their batteries. Rounding out the unique experience at Le Monastère is access to a museum featuring a rich collection of artifacts from the twelve Augustinian monasteries in Québec, highlighting the Sisters’ enduring values of health, service, and community. Special rates apply to Québec-based paramedics.

River Valley Resilience Retreat

www.rvrsk.ca

“This is exactly what I would have wanted when I was injured,” says River Valley Resilience Retreat’s co-founder and a former correctional officer and social worker Michelle McKeaveney,

reflecting on her own experience with PTSD. Together with fire fighter Jeff Reeder, they established the peaceful, secluded retreat on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River near the city of Prince Albert. “Our guests have been through a lot. They deserve to be served because they serve others. We don’t want to see them imploding and retiring

with unresolved trauma,” explains McKeaveney. The haven, complete with a Mississippi mud boat, features five cabins, a smaller, rustic cabin, trailer and main house where meals are served – although guests are welcome to bring their own food. Visitors can either drop by the River Valley Resilience Retreat for a few hours or stay up to five days, with a suggested donation to support this healing oasis. Guests receive encouragement to take proactive steps during their stay to reclaim and enhance their lives. Activities they offer to foster personal growth and healing include meditation, breathwork, journalling, woodworking, canoeing, fishing, cycling and nature walks.

Camp Cassidy

www.campcassidy.ca

Although it's open for day use only, a special mention goes to Camp Cassidy, a rejuvenating, nature-based recreational and wellness centre. Set on 150-acres with views of Cassidy Lake, in southern New Brunswick, the privately owned facility is reserved for and provided at no cost to current or former first responder and military personnel in the Atlantic provinces. "We believe it is important for [these] families to have a safe, quiet, and family-oriented environment to experience the benefits of interacting with each other in nature," says Paul Cassidy, one of the facility's directors. Cassidy's grandfathers served in the military, and his relatives were in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Guests can unwind through such watersports as paddleboarding, canoeing, kayaking, swimming and fishing. On land, there is a 3.2 km trail meandering through a serene forest offering scenic vistas, as well as a historic apple orchard, and a labyrinth for a relaxing, meditative experience. "...unlike a public park, our users can expect that anyone they may meet at the Camp is likely a member of a Military or First Responder family, with similar life experiences and an understanding of their circumstances," says Cassidy. A one-room church built in 1883 has been restored and serves as a non-denominational space for wellness sessions and camp administration. Adjacent to the building is a grassy area for picnickers. Camp Cassidy is open between the Victoria Day and Thanksgiving weekends, during daylight hours. Their goal is to build individual family-style cabins as well as a gathering place for programs.

"Self-care is very important for first responders to engage in on a regular basis... [as it can] lead to improvements in their resiliency, their ability to quell restlessness and a constant state of hyperarousal, as well as aid them in best handling the difficult demands of their job and help them best support others in need," explains Lennox. It's time for more paramedics to go

on well-deserved breaks to take care of themselves, ensuring they can continue in their vital work of serving others. (K. Lennox, personal communication, August 8, 2024)

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About the author

Andrea Perchotte is an adult integrative sleep consultant, wellness interior designer, health coach, nutritionist, speaker, writer, and founder of Exploring Wellness. Using evidence-based strategies, she helps individuals in emergency services, health care, public safety, and aviation to cultivate optimal sleep and sleep environments. Andrea holds a Bachelor of Education and a diploma in interior design with a focus on trauma-informed design, which fosters feelings of safety, healing and well-being.

