

Can Your Organization Support Distributed Staff During and After a Critical Incident?

Wilderness Risk Management Conference

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What (and where) is AIARE?

American Institute for Avalanche Research + Education

MISSION: “Saving Lives Through Avalanche Education”

Founded by avalanche educators in 1998

We offer avalanche education for everyone from recreational backcountry users to seasoned professionals. AIARE builds recreational curriculum which is delivered to the public via our network of providers, and we deliver professional and instructor training courses directly



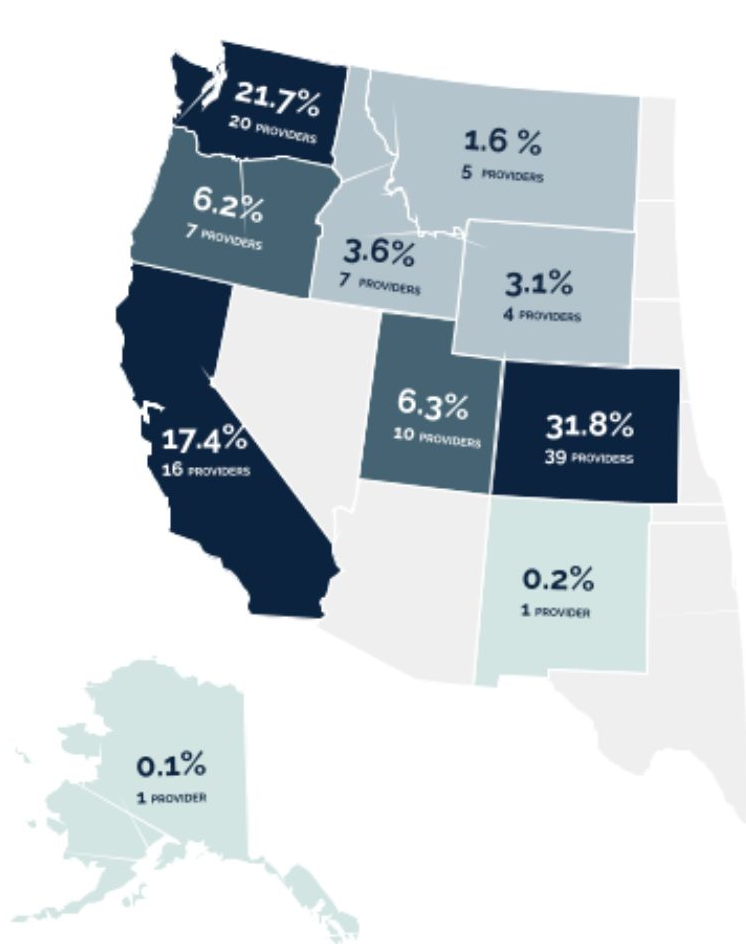
Organizational Values

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP • AIARE acknowledges that students' skills and knowledge are dynamic. We honor this approach by meeting students where they are and working collaboratively to support the individual in their educational journey.

EXCELLENCE • AIARE is committed to creating and delivering the highest quality programming to ensure that we support and develop those that work and recreate in the winter mountains. We are committed to institutional excellence by ensuring that we are a high-functioning organization that supports and develops our staff, community and industry.

COLLABORATION • A founding tenet of AIARE. We value the merging of many perspectives and diversity of experience as we work to support our team and stakeholders.





Percentage of total AIARE students taught in the US.

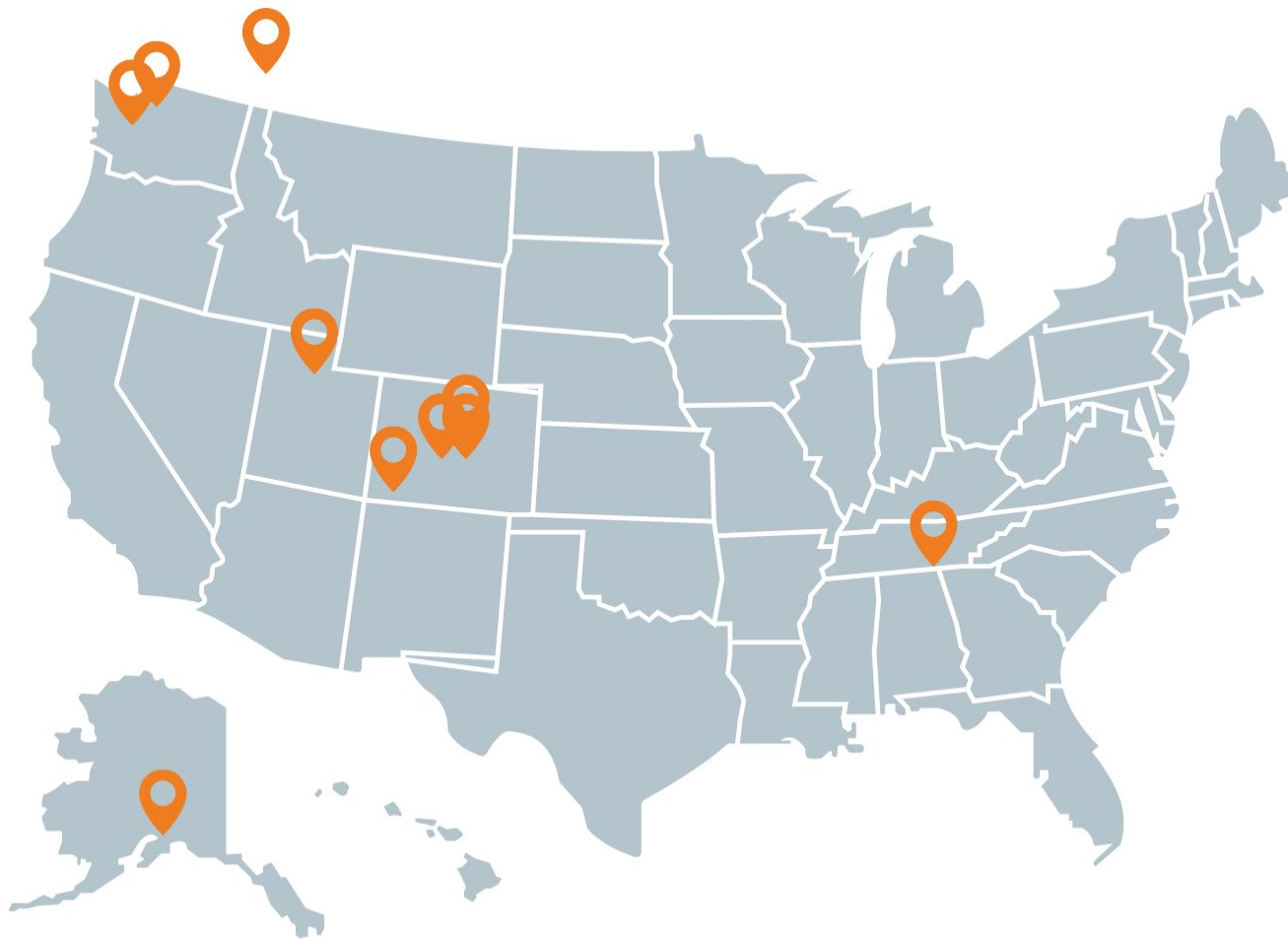
Some Providers teach in multiple states.

11,410
STUDENTS

1,362
COURSES

114
PROVIDERS

650+
INSTRUCTORS



AIARE Staff Structure

“Permanently remote”

Year-round office staff

7 full-time

3 part-time

Spread across the U.S.
and Canada; in 4
different time zones

40+ Instructor Staff



AIARE Direct Programming Offered in 2022–23 Winter

8 Instructor Training
Courses

5 days

3 Course Leader
Trainings

5 days

7 PRO 1 courses

5 days

3 PRO 2 courses

6 days



Course Leader Training

5-day course for experienced AIARE instructors

Participants have at least 7 years' experience as outdoor educators

Combination of classroom & frontcountry settings

6:1 participant-to-instructor ratio

Who's in the room?



Do you...

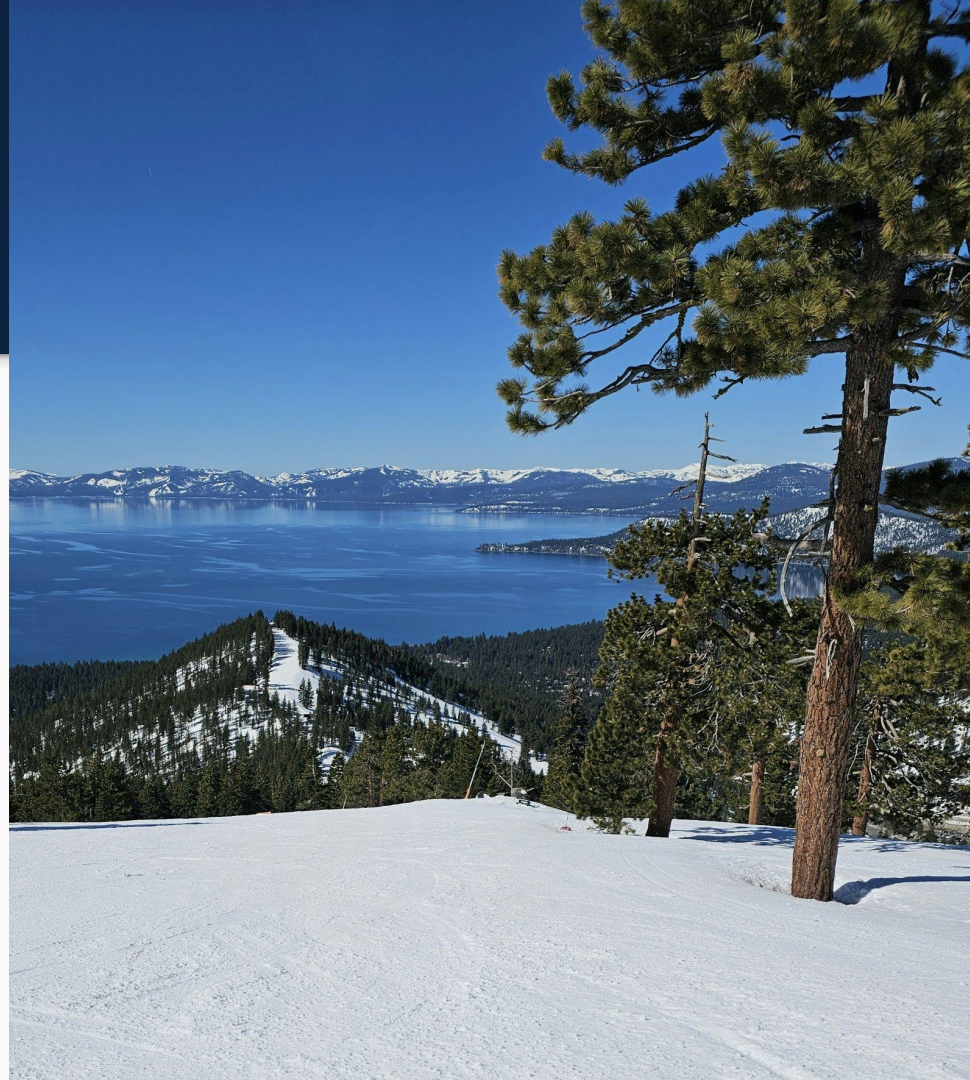
- Work for an organization whose administrative staff is distributed?
 - Multiple offices, hybrid office, fully remote, etc.?
- Work for an organization with complex staffing?
 - Administrative/office staff & field staff, mix of employees (full- and part-time) & contractors, etc.
- Turn to your nearest neighbor and introduce yourself
 - Name, role, where you're based
 - Answers to the questions above

Case Study

CLT in Lake Tahoe

Incident

- In January 2023, an AIARE staff member suffered a medical emergency while in the field with a group of Course Leader candidates
- Despite excellent care from participants who immediately began CPR, he passed away and was not able to be resuscitated when EMT personnel arrived on scene

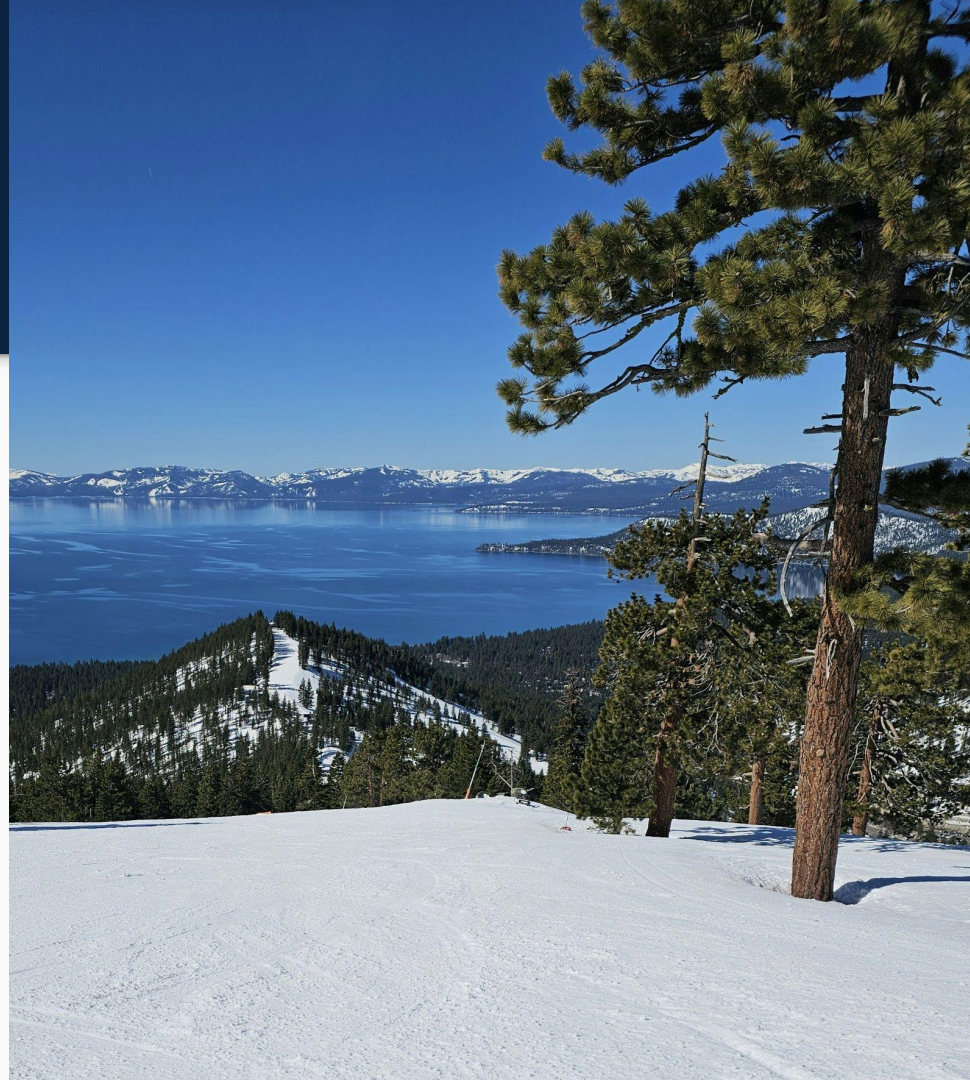


Case Study

CLT in Lake Tahoe

Response

- AIARE's ERP activated
- In the days, weeks, and months after the incident, used McGladrey's Incident Support Tool and 3-3-3 Traumatic Exposure Protocol to address needs of course participants and co-instructor
- In weeks and months after incident, investigation process led by our Technical Director using HOWIE consensus-based tool



Post Incident Review; Why Howie?

AIARE believes that a workplace must be planned, created, used and maintained to protect from danger any person working at the workplace either in the field, office, or other setting.

Dr. Laura Maguire, Nora Jones, & Vanessa Huerta Granda's "how we got here" process ("Howie") – is a post-incident framework.

Customizable for different sizes of organizations, skills of investigators, levels of incident severity along with iterative

Aligns with AIARE's framework as a consensus-based approach

Underscores our internal cultural values of being lifelong learners & collaborating



Does your organization have a post-incident review framework?



What does your organization use for post-incident analysis? Is it...

- Aligned with your organizational values and culture?
- Repeatable and accessible to the staff who need to understand it and its implications?
- Scalable and flexible?

From Anomaly to Incident Response as a Distributed Organization

anomaly • something that deviates from what is standard, normal, or expected

Bottom Line: As a distributed organization, we quickly realized we didn't have a complete roadmap for addressing psychological response to all who needed it when they needed it.



Learnings

Through our post incident Howie review, we uncovered that being a distributed organizations means:

1. Separate realities that create parallel story lines
2. Not an ideal physical and virtual environment to manage a crisis response due to "home offices"
3. Logistics are complicated and more difficult to pool resources
4. With AIARE's complex staffing, we were unsure if there was adequate acknowledgement of chronic stress and we may well have had staff members operating outside the "green" for months after the incident

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Separate realities create parallel story lines

What this looked like:

- Multiple tasks being done simultaneously in separate locations
- Individual staff members isolated
 - Inability to have face-to-face conversations with colleagues
 - Not having the full picture of coworkers' perspective/ability to respond
 - Some staff members also isolated from their own families; home life not necessarily accounted for
 - Individual's lived experience resulted vastly different psychological responses
- A greater reliance on personal assumptions

Separate realities create parallel story lines

Factors that contributed:

- An inability to know what is going on with one another – virtual environment requires individuals to communicate their personal needs
 - E.g. ability to turn off camera when having an emotional reaction means coworkers may not be aware
- Every individual has their own lens and lived experience; in this case those were further deepened by not having a shared physical space or shared community post incident

Separate realities create parallel story lines

Solutions*:

- *More about recognizing and aligning than “fixing”
- Organizational and interpersonal culture shift
- Seek professional guidance
- Utilizing "Howie" as a reflective practice incident review

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Not an ideal crisis management environment

The shift from administrative day-to-day duties to crisis response is complex in a "home office"

Workspace typical of AIARE's office staff is inappropriate for conducting crisis operations that could include traumatic events. It further complicates work/life balance for employees both short and long term.

What this looked like:

- An inability to manage a communal office environment to support the incident response
- Barking dogs
- Kids present, getting home from school, needing to head to activities
- Partners attempting to work or away and unable to offer support like meals, childcare

Not an ideal crisis management environment

Factors that contributed:

- **Overall not enough bandwidth or “slack in the system”**
 - Lack of home-office resources to support training for critical response, as well as for in-person response to support course staff
 - Our human resource structure is limited, requiring staff to serve both goals and activities of a non-profit educational organization as well as front-line incident response. This left us vulnerable in terms of staff’s bandwidth to do “all the things.”
- Home offices are typically multifunctional by nature, shared spaces in a household. They may be cluttered or not have all of the tools needed for a response readily accessible for conducting crisis operations that could include traumatic events
- The person responding to the crisis, could be thousands of miles away from the incident

Not an ideal crisis management environment

Solutions:

- Development of a virtual operations base the course ERP and associated supporting documents
 - Regular alignment of staff and the ERP to ensure office staff has clarity around roles and responsibilities
 - ERP audit by third-party consultant
- Identifying structures and tools to collaborate during and after a crisis.
 - Utilizing zoom in addition to other shared project management tools
- Preseason, proactive staff planning of resources available to them locally in the event of an work related incident

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Complicated logistics; difficult to pool resources

What this looked like:

- Staff members unsure if they could or when they were expected to travel to the incident site
 - Lack of clarity around what their role and responsibilities are when they arrive
 - An inability to remove homelife responsibilities to travel to the incident site
- Staff members scrambling to cover home responsibilities (child/pet care, travel logistics, etc.)

Complicated logistics; difficult to pool resources

Factors that contributed:

- Lack of bandwidth; lack of “slack in the system”
- Unclear decision-making points
 - E.g. How much time do we have to get a staff member to the incident site?
- By nature, remote workplaces are highly autonomous.

Complicated logistics; difficult to pool resources

Solutions:

- Identify and allocate resources proactively
 - E.g. funds to cover child or pet care costs, allowing staff to travel to incident site
- Know your HR benefits, both private and state. Filed a stress injury workers comp claim on behalf of office staff member
 - It took a year for a claim to be filed simply because we didn't see it as an option
- Seeking grants and other resources for critical stress response
 - E.g. therapy sessions, group debriefs with trained facilitators
- Proactively build in systems of teamwork and work community

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Complex staffing; lack of acknowledgement for staff members operating outside “green”

What this looked like:

- Shortcomings in psychological first-aid delivery
 - Organic/ad hoc implementation of PsyFA; lack of knowledge as to how staff member(s) are psychological prepared to deal with emergency medical issues
 - Course staff alone without support immediately following the incident
 - Wound continually reopened over the winter as avalanche deaths occurred (a challenging season)

INDIVIDUAL STRESS CONTINUUM			
GREEN READY	YELLOW REACTING	ORANGE INJURED	RED CRITICAL
Healthy Sleep	Sleep Loss	Sleep Issues/ Nightmares	Insomnia
Healthy Personal Relationships	Distance From Others	Disengaged Relationships	Broken Relationships
Spiritual & Emotional Health	Change In Attitude	Feeling Trapped	Intrusive Thoughts
Physical Health	Fatigue	Exhausted	Anxiety & Panic
Emotionally Available	Avoidance	Physical Symptoms	Depression
Gratitude	Short Fuse	Emotional Numbness	Feeling Lost or Out of Control
Vitality	Criticism	Suffering	Thoughts Of Suicide
Room For Complexity	Lack of Motivation	Isolation	Blame
Sense of Mission	Cutting Corners	Burnout	Hopelessness
	Loss of Creativity		
	Loss of Interest		

ADAPTED FROM COMBAT AND OPERATIONAL STRESS FIRST AID BY LAURA MCGLADREY | RESPONDERALLIANCE.COM

Complex staffing; lack of acknowledgement for staff members operating outside “green”

Factors that contributed:

- Not sharing physical space made it more difficult for coworkers to check in with one another
- Feeling that if you weren't physically in the field or onsite; an incident “shouldn't” be affecting you so deeply
- An assumption that staff were psychologically able to respond to a crisis and would communicate otherwise

Complex staffing; lack of acknowledgement for staff members operating outside “green”

Solutions:

- Build in structures to identify who is capable to be part of the crisis response team
 - This may shift throughout an operating season
- Work towards organizational culture that allows for adequate acknowledgement & addressing chronic stress with our complex staffing
 - Develop ways to identify when staff members are operating outside of the green in a virtual work environment
 - This is a change—requires systems that fit the dynamic of the remote working team
 - We tried to use a system for this, but had interpersonal & cultural resistance



Think – Pair – Share

Who are the crisis responders or “dispatchers” in your organization?

Why are they dispatchers?

How does your organization support them in that work?

How does your organization attend to psychological first aid?

Next Steps

Based on our HOWIE findings to improve support for remote office staff in the wake of a critical incident

- Preseason virtual Sandbox crisis response with all of our staff
- Field communication line guidance for individuals to assess where they fall on the stress continuum and communicate it to their team
- Clear guidance in our emergency response plan to support when to show up face to face
- Dispatcher resource toolkit
- Financial resources allocated to increase staff support

Next Steps



Your to-do list

- How can your organization create more "slack in the system" to support staff in home offices?
 - Create list of resources to increase individual response capacity
- How does your current virtual communications support a crisis?
 - Identify your communication tools and how you will build transparency between your staff reduce reliance on assumptions
- How will you know when you need to show-up in person and be face-to-face?
 - Include decision making guidance in your ERP
 - Building office culture with in person meetings

Thank you!

Questions?