

Mental Wellbeing Task Force

Presented by Marija Savikj

SUMMARY

The Mental Wellbeing Task Force continued the work initiated in 2025, focusing primarily on the Healthcare Avoidance Study for ATCOs, which was conducted in collaboration with the University of Washington, and on promoting the importance of mental health and wellbeing within the IFATCA community, as well as raising awareness of the task force's existence.

During the past year, the Task Force concentrated on increasing its visibility, mostly increasing its presence on social media, articles for the Controller, and contributions to IFATCA circulars. We are actively working on updating and maintaining the digital library and helping organizations and regions in their efforts to establish CISM and peer support programs.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Wellbeing Task Force was established in October 2023 with four members and subsequently expanded following a decision at the Singapore conference to better reflect the global nature and scope of the work. Today, the Task Force consists of the following members:

- **Marija Savikj**, North Macedonia – Chair
- **Andrew LeBovidge**, USA
- **Bunmy Balogun**, Nigeria
- **Christian Radu**, Romania
- **Jaco van der Westhuizen**, South Africa
- **Janet Taylor**, New Zealand
- **Maicol Parreno**, Dominican Republic
- **Marc Baumgartner**, Switzerland
- **Marco Méndez**, Mexico
- **Saif-ul-lah**, India
- **Zeljko Oreski**, Croatia

In December 2025, Jaco van der Westhuizen stepped down from his leadership position due to increased work obligations and a new role at his company, and internal voting resulted in the decision for Marija Savikj to take over. Jaco's prior work laid the foundation for the current activities and direction of the group by establishing the well-being framework, defining the four original streams, and initiating the Healthcare Avoidance Study. In August 2025, Janet Taylor (New Zealand) joined as a new member, bringing operational peer support experience from a context where such programmes are already well established, while in February 2026, Bron Sanderson (Australia) stepped down from the Task Force due to time constraints; we are very grateful for her contribution, particularly in shaping the awareness and promotion stream. Thank you, Bron.

Since December, the structure of the Task Force has been refined into three thematic streams to align activities more closely with the needs of Member Associations and to clarify responsibilities:

- CISM practice and criteria
- Peer support practice and criteria
- Mental well-being promotion

In addition, specific Task Force members have been nominated as liaison points to other IFATCA bodies to ensure alignment and avoid duplication of work:

- **Bunmy Balogun** – Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
- **Marc Baumgartner** – ILO
- **Maicol Parreno** – Training Task Force
- **Marija Savikj**—Professional & Legal Committee
- **Marco Méndez** – Communications team

2. DISCUSSION

2.1 Streams within the Task Force

2.1.1 CISM criteria and practice

This stream is led by **Zeljko Oreski**, an experienced CISM coordinator and instructor with long-standing involvement in European and international CISM initiatives. The stream is being organised into regional sub-streams in order to respond more effectively to regional differences in regulatory frameworks, resources, and organisational culture:

- Overall coordination: **Zeljko Oreski**
- **Europe (EUR)** region – led by **Zeljko Oreski**
- **AFM** region – led by **Bunmy Balogun**

- **AMA** region – led by **Maicol Parreno**
- **ASP** region – led by **Saif**

Marc Baumgartner supports all regional teams, providing additional expertise on regulatory aspects, social dialogue, and the interface with other IFATCA policy areas. By structuring the work in this way, the stream aims to develop region-appropriate guidance on CISM criteria and practice, support existing programmes in aligning with international good practice, and assist regions where CISM is still emerging or absent.

Some of the ongoing regional initiatives include:

- **AMA:** Chile is working with its ANSP to develop a CISM programme; the USA is in the process of establishing a peer support programme.
- **ASP:** A long-term project aims to incorporate peer support in every MA of the region by 2030, with support available online or in person to all.
- **AFM:** Work is underway to establish an African regional peer support programme. Here is the report by Bunmy Balogun:

THE AFM REGION PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM

The IFATCA Africa and Middle East Region is characterized by a high number of developing MAs (or countries) and high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity. Unlike other parts of the world, such as Europe, America, and possibly Asia, the promotion of mental well-being is just beginning to take root, which highlights the urgent need for initiatives like the AFM Region Peer Support Program to address mental health challenges in these developing MAs.

The consideration for the AFM Regional program was particularly considered relevant because of the peculiar ATC structures in the region, some of which include:

- Fewer numbers of ATCOs per Member Association, and country
- Most MAs in this region fall within countries classified as developing countries.

IFATCA AFM Peer Support Programme (PSP) Governance Framework (Version 1.0, November 2025)

The **International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations (IFATCA)** Africa & Middle East Region (AFM) has approved the establishment of a **Regional Peer Support Programme (PSP)**. It is intended to be a confidential, independent, and non-punitive

system to promote mental well-being, resilience, and Just Culture among air traffic controllers in the region.

The proposal was adopted in **November 2025 in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe**, during the regional meeting. The framework aligns with international best practices, including **European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA)** guidance and **International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) Annex 19 on Safety Management**.

Governance Structure

The AFM Regional PSP has proposed to operate under a **three-tier structure** to ensure independence, accountability, and efficiency:

1. **AFM PSP Governing Board (Strategic Level): This level will**
 - Provide policy direction and ethical oversight.
 - Approve policies and safeguard confidentiality and Just Culture.
 - Review anonymised reports and promote regional advocacy.
 - Appoint the Clinical Lead and Programme Manager.
2. **AFM PSP Group (Operational Level) will be required to:**
 - Manage daily programme activities.
 - Handle case intake, coordination, training, supervision, and reporting.
3. **PSP Country Peer Leads (National Level): who will be required to**
 - Coordinate local peer teams and intake processes.
 - Promote awareness and Just Culture nationally.
 - Provide anonymised summaries and recommend peers for training.

Accountability & Reporting

Reporting will flow from:

Peers → Country Peer Leads → AFM PSP Group → Governing Board →

AFM Executive Council

All case data will remain confidential and de-identified, with only aggregated trends being shared for safety learning.

Review & Approval

The framework will be reviewed every two years or as required. It was formally adopted at the 36th IFATCA AFM Regional Meeting (3–

7 November 2025) and signed by Ahmad Abba, Executive Vice President, AFM Region, and Chair of the AFM PSP Governing Board.

Overall Purpose:

To provide structured, ethical, and confidential peer support intended to strengthen mental health, operational resilience, and safety culture among air traffic controllers in the Africa & Middle East region.

Challenges

1. Training of initial personnel
2. Scarce aviation Psychologists within the sector
3. Promotion and holistic acceptance of the program (Overcoming Inertia)
4. Finances.

2.1.2 Peer support criteria and practice

The two previous streams, “Peer Support for Wellbeing & Life Stressors” and “Peer Support Programme Management,” have been merged into a single stream on **peer support criteria and practice** in order to provide a more integrated approach to programme design, implementation, and oversight. This stream is led by **Janet Taylor**, an ATCO from New Zealand with over 35 years of experience as a controller and 10 years of experience as a peer support volunteer. Janet’s expertise is very valuable for this stream since she comes from a country where peer support programmes for aviation professionals are well established and integrated into organisational practice.

The stream is currently in its start-up phase, focusing on mapping existing ATCO peer support programmes globally and identifying transferable elements from more mature systems. Within Europe, there are ongoing efforts from the task force towards EASA to encourage an extension of a peer support program beyond flight crew to include ATCOs, building on the experience gained after the Germanwings accident, where peer support programmes for pilots became a regulation. Elsewhere, robust peer support programmes for aviation professionals are currently developed in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand; the Task Force considers these systems to be useful benchmarks for what IFATCA Member Associations might aim to develop in their own contexts, taking into account local legal and cultural constraints.

2.1.3 Raising awareness, destigmatization, and mental wellbeing promotion

This stream is led by **Marco Antonio Méndez López**, an ATCO and aviation psychologist from Mexico. Drawing on his expertise in mental health and technology, he contributes to the development of Task Force materials for social media and other communication channels. He also works closely with the IFATCA Communications Team to coordinate publication of Task Force content and acts as a liaison to ensure timely and coherent messaging across the Federation.

The core objective of this stream is to enhance mental health awareness across MAs and to promote the use of peer support and CISM programmes. It also works actively to de-stigmatise the use of professional psychological support within the air traffic control community.

Healthcare Avoidance Study

A primary focus of this stream and of this task force overall has been the Healthcare Avoidance Study and the analysis of its findings. In 2025, building upon a previous investigation conducted for pilots, IFATCA collaborated with the University of Washington to execute a dedicated study of air traffic controllers. This study focused on help-seeking behaviors, self-reporting, and trust within peer support systems.

Launched at the Abu Dhabi conference in April 2025, the survey remained open until the end of May 2025 and was disseminated extensively via social media, newsletters, and internal communication channels between the MAs. The survey gathered anonymous responses regarding trust in aviation medical authorities, the confidentiality of peers involved in CISM or PSP, and perceptions of regulatory bodies. Furthermore, it highlighted the critical importance of awareness regarding mental wellbeing and the factors leading to the avoidance or delay of mental health support.

With the participation of 1,167 ATCOs from all regions, the Healthcare Avoidance Study results confirm that while mental health is recognised as a significant concern within the profession, a substantial gap remains between awareness and formal support utilisation. Respondents indicated that hesitation to seek professional help often stems from a poor perception of existing services and a persistent paradigm that controllers should manage psychological challenges independently.

This study identifies key factors for healthcare avoidance, such as the fear of losing a medical certificate, licensing consequences, limited trust in aviation medical authorities, and concerns over the confidentiality of peer support frameworks. Furthermore, the findings reveal that employer-led peer support programmes are under-utilised, primarily due to a lack of awareness and low levels of confidence in their effectiveness.

The lessons learned from this research highlight a pressing need to shift the focus of peer support from mere regulatory compliance to genuine, care-based intervention. Ultimately, these results suggest that healthcare avoidance is not a reflection of individual indifference, but rather a systemic issue rooted in organisational culture, trust deficits, and the absence of a robust Just Culture.

The results of the Healthcare Avoidance Study were published across IFATCA's social media platforms from 1st February to 2nd March 2026. The data was presented in a series of five dedicated posts, allowing MAs and individual ATCOs to engage with the key findings and insights.

In November 2025, the IPAAC Conference (International Peer Assist in Aviation Coalition) took place in Montreal, Canada. IPAAC is an organisation consisting of pilots, flight crew, mechanic personnel, scientists, psychologists, and MDs working in the aviation industry.

IFATCA was represented by Task Force member Marija Savikj, who delivered a joint presentation with Dr Kimberly Perkins, a United Airlines pilot and University of Washington researcher. The presentation, titled "ATCO Healthcare Avoidance: A Safety and Wellbeing Challenge", was received with great interest; many of the participants in the conference offered help, advice, and information on previous experiences and how they are dealing with their similar problems.

Furthermore, as a direct result of this conference, the ICAO Mental Health Working Group invited the Task Force to deliver an online briefing. In February 2026, Marija Savikj and Marco Méndez shared the study's findings, highlighting the critical implications of healthcare avoidance for operational safety and individual wellbeing.

Other projects:

Following the Abu Dhabi conference, this stream remained very active, not only in promoting the Healthcare Avoidance Study but also in addressing broader wellbeing topics. These included stress and sleep management during the busy summer period, suicide awareness, World Mental Health Day, and men's mental health during November. These were distributed via social media or in the form of articles published in The Controller and in the monthly circulars.

Beyond stream-specific work, the chair of the Task Force participates in regular monthly meetings with ICAO's Mental Health Working Group and CAPSCA, as well as coordination meetings with other IFATCA Task Forces under the EVPP umbrella to align strategies and avoid duplication. The chair also serves on the advisory board of IPAAC.

2.2 Future initiatives of the task force

- The Mental Wellbeing Task Force plans to host a dedicated stand at the forthcoming Annual Conference in Bucharest. The aim is to be more accessible to colleagues, present the findings of the Healthcare Avoidance Study, and explain the Task Force's work.
- The Task Force is preparing to conduct interviews with delegates at the conference to better understand how colleagues manage everyday stress, how they perceive existing peer support programmes, and what their main concerns are regarding mental health. These interviews will be edited into short video collages for social media, showing different perspectives from different regions.
- The Task Force also plans to record interviews with MAs that have recently established peer support programmes, focusing on the challenges faced during implementation. By collecting first-hand accounts of perceived barriers, the Task Force hopes to refine its strategy for promoting more accessible and trusted support networks.
- A team of postgraduate students from the University of Washington's College of Engineering is developing an online platform to visualise the survey results in an accessible and interactive way for researchers and practitioners. The study results will be used as:
 - Evidence for dialogue with regulators (including EASA and national authorities) on medical confidentiality, reporting requirements, and protection of help-seeking behaviour.
 - A basis for concise guidance to MAs on addressing healthcare avoidance and building trust in peer support and CISM programmes.
- Recognising a significant gap in current scientific literature regarding our profession, the Task Force intends to initiate a follow-up study on occupational stressors. This research will be guided by the primary inquiry: "What are the underlying drivers of stress among ATCOs?" Furthermore, we aim to conduct a deeper analysis of the regional and economic factors that influence healthcare avoidance, ensuring that future interventions are both culturally sensitive and operationally effective.
- The Task Force has approached Dr Kimberly Perkins and Dr Fabio Mattioli to participate in testing their project on the use of AI for emotional regulation and self-help in times of crisis. They are currently developing an application for flight crew and mechanics, and the Task Force is seeking inclusion for ATCOs. This tool could be especially useful in countries where no peer support is available, such as those with limited mental health resources or where cultural stigma prevents individuals from seeking help, as it can provide an accessible alternative for emotional support and coping strategies in crisis situations.

3. CONCLUSION

With the new regional structures and thematic streams, the Mental Wellbeing Task Force is planning to strengthen its ability to support Member Associations and regions. We have made significant progress in advancing the Healthcare Avoidance Study and interpreting its results for operational and policy purposes. The survey shows that mental health is seen as a major concern among ATCOs, yet formal support remains under-used because of fear of licensing consequences, limited trust in medical and organisational systems, and an enduring culture of “coping alone.” At the same time, important steps have been taken to build practical support structures, including the AFM regional peer support framework, renewed efforts to expand CISM implementation, and a more systematic communication and awareness strategy. The Task Force remains available to provide support and advice to any MA that requires it.

A key focus of the Task Force has been to become more visible and approachable to ATCOs through sustained promotion work, including social media campaigns, articles in The Controller and IFATCA circulars, and direct engagement at regional and global events. Through these activities and its external collaborations with the University of Washington, IPAAC, and ICAO working groups, the Task Force has positioned IFATCA as an active participant in international discussions on aviation mental health and safety. The work carried out in 2025–2026 provides a strong foundation for further regional development of peer support programs, as well as additional research and awareness-raising on mental health and well-being.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Encourage Member Associations to engage proactively with the Mental Wellbeing Task Force, including the regional CISM and peer support leads, when establishing or strengthening CISM and peer support structures, so that experience and good practices can be shared.
2. Support the use of the Healthcare Avoidance Study results in dialogue with regulators, aeromedical authorities, and ANSPs on medical confidentiality, reporting obligations, and Just Culture protections for help-seeking ATCOs.
3. Invite Member Associations to contribute national materials, case studies, and lessons learned to the MWTF digital library, thereby enriching the shared global resource base on peer support, CISM, and mental wellbeing promotion. Please find us at the conference to share contact information.
4. Encourage participation of ATCOs involved in CISM and peer support to participate in relevant international forums, such as IPAAC and support the Task Force’s planned follow-up research on occupational stressors and innovative tools (including digital self-help solutions) to address gaps in support, especially in regions without established programmes.

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