



## Frontline Workers Experience Mental Health Struggles

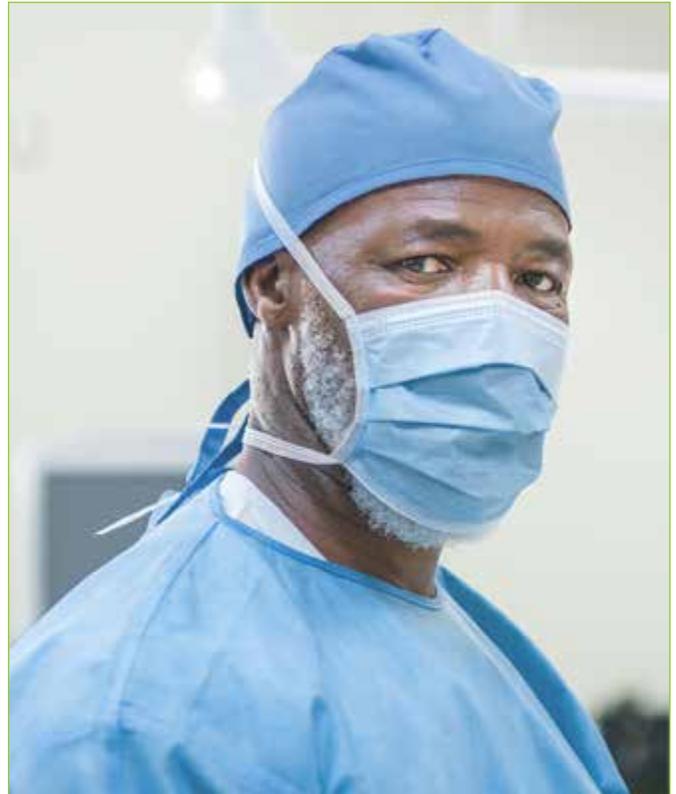
Medical staff, first responders and frontline workers quickly became the heroes of the coronavirus pandemic. While caring for patients with COVID-19 and providing necessary services in the community, many essential workers have experienced mental health challenges.

*"During this time, our typical self-care activities have been impacted, we can no longer de-stress at the gym, movie theatre, or on a night out with loved ones," Jackie Crane, LMHC, program supervisor for the mobile Transitional Support Team, Crisis Services, said. "For many, hours are longer and the crisis does not end with our shift, as this pandemic carries into our personal lives as well."*

Local mental health providers recognized the needs of this specific population and have stepped up to provide assistance. Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County (JFS) recently received a \$75,000 grant from the [Western New York COVID-19 Community Response Fund](#), to provide free and confidential telemedicine health services and other resources to people on the frontlines of the pandemic.

*"On the healthcare front, these workers may be having traumatic experiences and experiencing burn out," Jennifer Levesque, MA, LMHC, director of clinical services, JFS. "They may be reluctant to reach out for help because they think they should be taking care of their patients rather than themselves."*

"Medical and essential workers may be facing financial stresses, depression or PTSD," Levesque said. "We are flexible with delivering services through telemedicine and working with their busy schedules."



According to Crane, essential workers are experiencing similar mental health challenges that everyone is facing during this time – heightened anxiety, grief, depression, and trauma. In light of the pandemic, our worlds very rapidly shifted in terms of how we are working and the extra precautions being used during our day in order to remain safe.

"Responding to others who are in a crisis, while we ourselves are also learning how to cope, can place an extra emotional toll on frontline workers," Crane said.

Stigma prevents people from asking for help and those who are in the medical field may be hesitant to reach out for help due to more limited options in terms of maintaining privacy.

"Typically, those who work in the field are not going to go to a community based agency where colleagues work; and this makes options more difficult to come by. Private practitioners may have lengthy waiting lists even after someone has reached out for help.

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In addition to JFS, other community initiatives are offering free services to first responders, both individual sessions and through support groups. Another free resource that many employers have is their EAP provider.

Crane notes that there are a lot of people experiencing heightened anxiety and depression right now, so there may be some dismissing of these emotions or thoughts that “everyone is experiencing this so I shouldn’t need any extra support.”

*“As we know, it is important to put on your oxygen mask before helping others, so pay attention to your emotions and seek help if needed,” Crane said.*

Essential workers seeking support are encouraged to call JFS at 716-883-1914 or email [generalinfo@jfsbuffalo.org](mailto:generalinfo@jfsbuffalo.org) to set up individualized counseling plans.

*Crisis Services* operates a 24-hour, seven day a week hotline at 716-834-3131, *The National Suicide Hotline* number is 1-800-273-8255. Help is available.

Mental Health Advocates offers a *resource guide*. ■

## Events & Resources

JUNE 4 | Foundations in Working with LGBTQ Persons

JUNE 6, 13, 20, 27 | FUN ZOOM GAMES WITH ACE - Come and Join Us for an Hour of Fun and Games!

JUNE 25 | Mindfulness: Introduction to Core Concepts & Clinical Applications

JUNE 30 | Talk Saves Lives – Erie County Healthcare Workers

MUSEUM OF DISABILITY HISTORY, A PROJECT OF PEOPLE INC.  
Online Educational Resources & Lesson Plans

LOTHLORIEN THERAPEUTIC RIDING CENTER,  
AN AFFILIATE OF PEOPLE INC.

Fun Horse Videos, Activities, Pictures and Facts

During these unpredictable times, visit our events page at  
**LETSTALKSTIGMA.ORG/EVENTS**  
for information about mental wellness, stigma and self-care.

## FACEBOOK LIVE: BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS & LEARNING TO BE COMFORTABLE ASKING FOR HELP

More than 900 people joined the Facebook Live event on Wednesday, May 27. A panel of mental health professionals talked about **Breaking Down Barriers & Learning To Be Comfortable Asking For Help**.

One in five Western New Yorkers have a mental illness, yet stigma can prevent people from seeking help. In our current environment, frontline workers and individuals who have never struggled with mental health issues are experiencing symptoms and may be hesitant to reach out for help.

Featured speakers included Karl Shallowhorn, Chair of the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition and President of Shallowhorn Consulting, LLC; Jackie Crane, Program Supervisor for the Mobile Transitional Support Team at Crisis Services; Lindsay Herndon, Director of Outpatient Services for Mental Health and Substance Use at BryLin Behavioral Health System; Jennifer Levesque, Director of Clinical Services at Jewish Family Service.

Jackie Crane shared that mental wellness is a marathon, not a sprint.

“Stressors might not be going away. Don’t wait for things to get really bad. Build up your coping skills to turn to de-stress,” Crane said.

If you missed the event live, you can view it *on our website* or visit the *Coalition’s Facebook Page*.



# Grief and Loss During COVID-19

Steve Biegner, mission pastor at Main Street Ministries: St. Paul's Campus and executive director of the WNY Impact Foundation, works with individuals who are struggling with grief and loss.

According to Biegner, the traditional ways to grieve are unavailable. People don't know what to do because they can't interact as they normally would.

"Even though we have to be socially distant, we don't have to isolate. People are yearning for contact," he said.

He shares a recent encounter with a frontline worker:

Grief and anxiety are real and normal. And they might just sneak up on you and catch you off guard.

I recently checked in with one of our frontline workers who is also a first responder in the fire service, just to see how he was doing. He's a pro and has seen some serious battles in the hospital, through the fire service and even great loss in his own family life. Our conversation started normally as I asked him how he was hanging in there. The normal answers came: "Good. Ok. Doing all right." So when I asked him what "good and all right" looked like, that's when the walls came down. That's when the flood gates opened. That's when grief got real.

First, anxiety came as he recounted stories of the stress of finding and wearing PPE for EVERYTHING now. Tears came

next as he recounted losses he experienced that should have/could have been prevented and didn't seem "normal." Questions followed about if he was doing enough, responding enough, to match all this COVID stuff. And then came the anger. "I'm pissed," he said. "This shouldn't be affecting me like this! I've seen this before but somehow this one's different."

That's the piece I remember the most. His anger that "grief" was actually affecting him! The training, the classes, the experience, maybe even the PPE...it all should have protected him. Right?

*But grief is tricky. It's real and unexpected. It demands to be dealt with...walked through instead of run...or it'll pack itself away to come out at a later date. His recognition of grief's power and existence was beautiful and an import first step.*

We had a really powerful conversation. The first of several. And several that will be followed up with support from family, friends, colleagues and counselors. Now he's on the path to the needed emotional and mental health training that we often neglect. And that's a wonderful thing!

## **Steve Biegner**

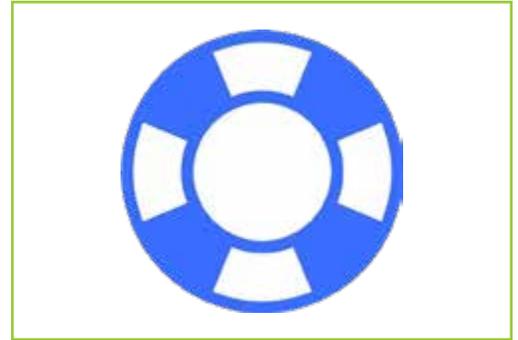
Mission Pastor at Main Street Ministries: St. Paul's Campus  
Executive Director of the WNY Impact Foundation

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*Steve Biegner*

## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

# A Q&A with American Foundation for Suicide Prevention



We recently spoke with **Missy Stolfi, Area Director, Western & Central New York Chapters of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention** about stigma and how the community has embraced the message of the Join the Conversation Campaign.

### Why did your organization become a member of The Anti-Stigma coalition?

*AFSP believes in having a "Real Convo" about mental health, in order to help change our overall culture to be smart about mental health and, in turn, suicide prevention. A key protective factor when it comes to prevention is to have good mental health care, in addition to supportive people around you. Busting through stigma and educating about mental health is essential for people to access mental health care and for those who care about them to better understand the challenges. As the Western NY Chapter, we are thrilled to be a part of the coalition's efforts to bring together so many amazing organizations in this common effort.*

### How are people with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

*Stigma prevents those of us with mental health challenges from sharing this key information with our loved ones, from accessing mental health care, and from living our full potential. We all have a role to play in breaking down stigma internally and externally.*

### What impact is the Campaign having in the community?

*Visibility is key to changing hearts and minds about mental health, and it's awesome to see the Coalition appear in so many areas of Erie County, leading the way. We all have mental health, as we do physical health, and we need to start thinking of it and treating it that way. At AFSP, we see the impact of this visibility in the growth of our annual Buffalo Out of the Darkness Walk, requests for our free prevention education programs and materials, and the sharing of our loss and healing resources as a way to reach out, not shy away, when someone in our community experiences a suicide loss. ■*

## BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

Does your organization, church, temple, or community group want to combine forces with our organization? Do you individually want to engage with us to stop the stigma of mental illness? Please consider becoming a member of our Coalition by completing our membership form at [letstalkstigma.org/support/pledge](http://letstalkstigma.org/support/pledge).

It is going to take a massive community effort to move the needle on stigma, please become a part of the solution. Questions? Please contact Karl Shallowhorn, Chairperson, at [kshallowhorn@chcb.net](mailto:kshallowhorn@chcb.net).

### Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition Founding Members:

BryLin Behavioral Health System • Children's Mental Health Coalition of Western New York, Inc.  
Community Partners of Western New York • Compeer • Crisis Services of Erie County  
Erie County Department of Mental Health • Erie County Office for People with Disabilities  
Fellows Action Network • Fuerst Consulting Corporation • Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County  
The Mental Health Advocates of WNY • Millennium Collaborative Care • Patrick P. Lee Foundation  
Preventionfocus, Inc. • Telesco Creative Group • The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation

ERIE COUNTY  
**ANTI-STIGMA**  
COALITION

