



First Responders: Trauma, Stigma and Mental Health

Day after day, hour after hour, first responders witness trauma, violence, and other stressful situations.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), roughly one in three first responders develop PTSD, compared to one in five people in the general population. The CDC reports that law enforcement officers and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty.

A recent [Facebook Live](#) focused on stress, trauma, and mental health among first responders.



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Panelists included:

- Steve Biegner, fire chaplain,
Erie County Emergency Services
- Sarah Bonk, special assistant to Department
of Homeland Security & Emergency Services
Erie County Emergency Services
- Lt. Jeffrey Schmidt, Cheektowaga Police Department
- And Daniel Neaverth, commissioner,
Erie County Emergency Services

Matt Smith, executive director of Preventionfocus, was the moderator. They discussed challenges faced by firefighters, police officers, EMTs and dispatchers and the stigma about seeking help for mental health issues.

According to Commissioner Neaverth, first responders experience various stages of stress and trauma. New first responders may need support after responding to their first catastrophic event. Then individuals with 10, 15, or 20 years of experience can be impacted by events that cause mental health challenges.

“As we advance in our careers, we take more training, we become more qualified,” he said. “As incidents happen around our world and in our own backyard, even if we’re not directly involved in the incident, we can be emotionally involved.”

According to Chaplain Biegner, many first responders may react to the stress and trauma of a recent call that reminds them of an event from many years ago.

He describes a “backpack” of calls. “When you go out on a call, you throw it in the backpack and go on the next call, perhaps five or seven times a day. So, you might end up carrying around a lot of stress for years.”

Lt. Schmidt talked about his own struggle with mental health.

“Very early on, I struggled with doing my job but was smart enough to reach out to my supervisor who took care of me,” he said. “I worked with a group called Catch a Falling Star—they get you in, get you talking and get you the help you need,” he said.

Bonk said that while stigma continues to be an issue among first responders, there has been a steady step toward advancement making it more culturally acceptable to talk about mental health and share stories.

Schmidt also said more resources are available to law enforcement. Many peer helplines are staffed by former or current first responders.

While things have improved greatly in the last ten years and there is less stigma, a challenge remains when individuals need level two help, Lt. Schmidt said. “When you’re not able to work, it impacts your identity. But seeking help doesn’t make you weaker, it makes you stronger.”

Common resources for first responders may include mental health counselors on site, stress debriefings and continued follow up from colleagues and chaplains.

WNY LAW ENFORCEMENT HELP LINE (716) 858-2677

Provides 24/7 confidential assistance, information, and referrals by trained Law Enforcement Peers and Family Member Peers to working and retired law enforcement officers, dispatchers, and their families. The helpline assists with any issues that may impact work and family life.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

24-Hour Crisis Hotline

716-834-3131

Copline

24-hour hotline for law enforcement only answered by retired officers trained to be peer listeners and provide support for law enforcement officers and their families at 800-267-5463.

Crisis Text Line

24/7 counseling support for first responders who are struggling with a mental health crisis and who text "BADGE" to 741741.

Frontline Helpline

Staff of former first responders who offer support for first responders and their family members affected by their traumatic experiences at 866-676-7500.

988

988 is the new 3-digit national lifeline to improve access to support for those in suicidal or mental health crisis.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Network of local crisis centers that provides emotional support to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24/7 at 800-273-8255.

SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline

Those experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters can call or text the 24/7, 365-day-a-year support line at 800-985-5990.

UPCOMING EVENTS

DISABILITY PRIDE DAY

Sunday July 24 | 11 AM – 2 PM, Canalside

HIDING IN PLAIN SITE SCREENING EVENT

August 24, 6 PM - 8 PM | WNEC Studios, Buffalo, N.Y.

NOT ONE MORE...STAND TOGETHER

TO END OVERDOSE

August 31 | 4 PM – 7 PM

Veterans Memorial Park, West Seneca

Presented by Spectrum Health and Human Services

Visit letstalkstigma.org/events for more

NEWEST MEMBERS



Visit letstalkstigma.org/current-members for more information on our current members.



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.

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.

A Q&A with Anchoring Hope

Anchoring Hope of NY provides opportunities for success and hope for those affected by mental illness and/or addiction and their families through the support and use of unique and unconventional equipment and services.

Unconventional treatment and items not covered by insurance are a focus for our organization. Anchoring Hope offers quality of life grants for expenses such as tamper-proof med boxes, emotional support/service animals, treatments, recreational activities, tablet-based monitoring programs that assist with managing medications, and items for daily living. Through these means, Anchoring Hope helps individuals, families, and other stakeholders in New York address the mental health crisis and its devastating effects on our friends, neighbors, and loved ones.

We recently spoke with **Kim Hubert-Bickel**, president, about stigma and mental health.

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

We joined the Anti Stigma Coalition as we believe in the Coalition's mission of stopping stigma. Through collaboration, awareness and education people living with mental illness will feel supported by their community—eliminating feelings of isolation and shame. Together—change is possible!

How are people with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

Stigma can result in less likelihood in seeking or remaining in treatment. Relationships are often affected resulting in feelings of shame, feeling of being alone and a sense of hopelessness.

Does your organization provide mental health support/programming for your clients, volunteers, and employees?

'Thinking Differently'—a not-for-profit dedicated to providing opportunities for success for those affected by mental illness and/or addiction and their loved ones through

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



the use of unique and /unconventional equipment and services. Anchoring Hope offers quality of life scholarships (including, but not limited to)—medication boxes (including tamperproof), tablet-based monitoring tablets, service/emotional support animals, recreational activities and memberships, etc. We focus on advocacy and collaboration striving to ensure the right supports and services are available while also providing Narcan training and kits to anyone in need.

“Whether it be finding the right support to overcome for yourself or a loved one, Anchoring Hope serves as a means to heal.”

What impact is the Anti-Stigma Campaign having in the community?

We believe the Anti-Stigma Coalition and the Lets Talk Stigma campaign is leading the way for change.

ERIE COUNTY
ANTI-STIGMA
COALITION

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