RESPONDING TO OUR FIRST RESPONDERS

Tom Gussie
Mesa Police Department
CODE 9
OFFICER NEEDS ASSISTANCE
Cop Suicide

105 Officers killed in the line of duty last year
(Officer Down, 2014)

Currently 69 officers killed as of October 2014

Approximately 144 Officers committed suicide last year
(www.policesuicidestudy.com)

Approximately 450 Officers commit suicide a year
(National Police Suicide Foundation)

75% of those suicides alcohol was involved
Fire Fighter/Paramedic Suicide

101 Firefighters died in the line of duty last year (Firefighter Closecalls, 2014).

Currently 57 LODD as of October 2014 (Firefighter Closecalls, 2014).

33 Firefighter suicides in 2011 (Counseling Services for Firefighters 2014).

63 suicides in both 2012 and 2013 (Counseling Services for Firefighters 2014).

49 Firefighter suicides as of October 2014 (Counseling Services for Firefighters 2014).
Contributing Factors

- Chronic exposure to tragedy and human misery. High stress work environment.
- **Alcohol abuse** is universally cited as a major significant factor.
- Bureaucracy, overbearing regulations, shift work, etc.
- Ready access to their duty weapon-95% of officer suicides were committed with their duty weapon.
- Shift work/Sleep Deprivation/Never off duty.
- Public’s attitude and perception of police/fire.
Stand back, copper! I got a video-cam, and I know how to use it!
It's 10 o'clock. Do you know where the perp you caught in the act and arrested earlier today is?
Oh, brother! It's the ACLU, requesting I undergo sensitivity training, because I frisked a perp with cold hands, instead of warming them up first.
Contributing Factors

- Depression, paranoia, work problems, and other personal motives
- Substance abuse
- Facing trouble at work, suspension, jail, demotion, reassignment, etc.
- Isolation or separation
- Financial difficulties
- Illness
- Loss of self image secondary to illegal activities
- Coming to the end of their career
Officer Suicide

- **Survey**
  - 500 officers
  - Over 9 major cities
- **Would you ever consider suicide an option and why?**
- 98% said they would consider suicide.
Seriousness of Police Suicide

- Thought to be 3 to 4 times more prevalent in police officers than the general public.

- D.V. is twice as much and severe in an officers marriage compared to the general population.

- Second highest rate of divorce in a profession, (75%).
Divorce

- National Rate – 52%
- Police – 60 to 75%
- 80% of LEO suicides are linked to divorce or break-up of a relationship
- Fire – 50 to 65%
- Many relationship break-ups are linked to 24 hour shifts, over time, and stress
- The other partner/spouse
RISK

Hypervigilance

A learned social perceptual set of elevated alertness that is necessary for safety

(Gilmartin)
RISK for First Responders

• Real or Potential?
• How do we process presenting information?
  ❖ Hypervigilance
    ─ Alive
    ─ Alert
    ─ Energy
    ─ Involved
    ─ Humorous
    ─ Decision Making/Problem Solving
• We deal in a world of questions?
  ❖ The World has some Lethality

(Gilmartin)
Normal Range of Potential Risk

(Gilmartin)
Mental Rollercoaster
First Responders

- Alive, Alert, Energetic, Involved, Humorous

Street Survival Skills
Mental Rollercoaster
First Responders

- Tired, Detached, Isolated, Apathy, Unmotivated
- Blunted/Flat Affect, Catatonic State, Brief Psychotic Disorder

(Gilmartin)
## Fire Agency Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Total Suicides</th>
<th>Recent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>New York</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>California</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
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*(Last 21 months)*
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Top 10 Rank</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<td>2.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Indiana</td>
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<td>Rhode Island</td>
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<td>11.</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>Kentucky</td>
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<td>Nebraska</td>
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</table>

Police suicide ranked by state 1984 – 1998
Violanti (2010)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Suicide</th>
<th>Duty Deaths</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FBI</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHP</td>
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<td>New York</td>
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<td>Mesa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tucson</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Mean number suicides per year:
Military = 116
Police = 77
Fire-fighters = 17

Note: CDC NOMS Data 1984-1998
Reasons

• Death of a child or spouse
• Loss of a child or spouse through divorce
• Terminal Illness
• Responsibility for a partners death
• Killed someone out of anger
• Indictment
• Feeling alone
• Sexual accusations
• Loss of job due to a conviction of a crime
• Being locked-up
Warning Signs

• A first responder who is having a high number of off-duty accidents.
• A rise in citizen complaints about aggressiveness.
• A sudden change in personality in which a sullen person suddenly becomes talkative or vice-versa.
• No longer concerned about their physical fitness or physical appearance.
• Starts giving away prized possessions or telling friends they will be missed.
Warning Signs

- Begins playing with their gun, points jokingly at self or others for no reason.
- Is Disillusioned
- Has tried to commit suicide before
- Lost love for the profession and withdraws from the people they are closest to.
- The first responder suddenly writes a will
First Responder Subculture

• 18 to 24 months to become fully indoctrinated into the culture.
• After four to five years, many first responders begin to experience difficulty separating their personal and professional lives, creating a conflict inside.
• See themselves as their profession first and everything else second.
First Responder Subculture

- 10 to 12 years, may begin to experience some form of “BURN OUT” and exhibit forms of depression, personality, or behavioral changes.
- Trained to maintain control of ourselves and the environment around us.
- Sometimes classified as “Control Freaks.”
First Responder Subculture

• We don’t need help, we can work it out ourselves.

• In most cases, First Responder’s are the last to seek any type of mental health or Peer support services that are available.
Profile of Law Enforcement Officer who commits suicide

- White male
- Age 36 years 9 months
- 12.2 years of service
- 1st line supervisor
- Method – Service weapon to the head – 95% of the time.
- Where – Home
- When – Off Duty
- Reason – Relationship Issues
- Where an officer kills themselves is usually where the problem lies.
Male Officer vs. Female Officer

suicide

• Female Officer
  – Same profile as the male officer.
  – Accounts for 12% of total LEO suicides.
  – As dedicated to suicide as the male officer.
  – Authority challenge – some incident has caused her to re-establish her role of authority in peer’s eyes.
  – Disregard the general population standard on vanity.
Profile of Fire Fighter who Commits Suicide

- Gender: Males.
- Age: 18-24 and 40-55.
- Race: Caucasian.
- Effects of acute and chronic stress.
- Impact of trauma.
- Substance or alcohol abuse.
- Childhood trauma.
- Relationship issues.
- Predisposing personality traits such as aggression and impulsivity
Undercover Officer

- Lose their identity – “It’s not what I do, it’s what I am.”
- Type A personality.
- Role they play takes over their psyche and conflicts arise inside them.
- Family appearances/public outings – “grunge.”
First Responders who are Veterans

- Veteran Administration February 2013 report stated “22 Veterans a day are committing suicide.”
- Suicides out numbered combat deaths as of June 2011 (DoD)
- **52,224** wounded as of September 9, 2014 (DoD)
- **6834** deaths as of September 9, 2014 (DoD)
“For the first time in American history, 90% of wounded (soldiers) survive their injuries.”

“A greater percentage of men and women are coming home with a TBI and/or severe Posttraumatic Stress.”
Trauma related brain changes

- Affects the way the brain copes with stress
- May result in suicidal ideation/attempts (tend to use highly lethal means)
- Result in self destructive behaviors
- Increased risk for depression, anxiety, and borderline personality disorder
- Increased risk for paranoia, hallucinations, impulsivity, anger problems, poor attention
- Physical Confrontations - Can be triggered into “combat mode” easily (approaching too fast, approaching from behind)
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse
Talking to a Suicidal First Responder

**Advantages**

- Rapport is usually already built.
- We have a common bond between us.
- Easy to empathize with what they may be going through because of us or knowing others who are experiencing the same thing.
Disadvantages

• Afraid of being seen as weak.
• Afraid of losing their job.
• Afraid of what Peers will think of them, (Embarrassed).
• Afraid of being reassigned to a lesser duty.
BE PREPARED!

• First Responders may become subjected to personal feelings and emotions that will require them to deal with their own during or immediately after helping the Peer.

• If this occurs, they immediately will need to get help for themselves.
Police Officer Suicide Rates

- General Population: 12 per 100,000
- Officer: 17 per 100,000
- Retired Officer: 20 per 100,000
  - First five years of retirement are the most dangerous.
- Disabled Officer: 35 per 100,000
- National Police Suicide Foundation: 50 per 100,000
Stress Relievers

Positive

• Exercise
• Walking/Running
• Any kind of sports
• Martial Arts
• Meditation
• Etc.

Negative

• Drinking
• Drugs
• Smoking
• Steroids
• High Risk Behaviors
• Etc.
Stress Relievers/Coping Mechanisms

- Talk about your problems
- Journal your feelings
- Establish priorities
- Establish a social life outside of work
- Religious beliefs
- Awareness training
- Vacation
- Hobby
Help for First Responders

- Peer Support
- Critical Incident Support Team
- Professional Counseling
- Religious Counseling
- National Police Suicide Foundation (psf.org)
- Tears of a Cop
- Counseling Services for Firefighters (csff.info)
The World Without Police:

What do you feel like doing tonight? Getting mugged downtown or staying home and waiting for a burglar?