

# SHIFT: First Responder Mental Wellness Conference



**Tuesday, April 7, 2026**

7:00 am – 7:45 am	Conference Check-in and Continental Breakfast
7:45 am – 8:00 am	Welcome and Opening Remarks
8:00 am – 9:00 am	<b>Humble or Hero? The Dangers of Cognitive Dissonance in Emergency Services, Kolby Miller</b> This session explores the psychological clash between the “hero” identity often associated with public safety personnel and the realities of everyday service. Dive into cognitive dissonance, ego, and emotional burnout; as well as identity conflict on and off the job and the resulting mental health and suicide risks. Participants will come away with tools for building healthy professional identities based on humility and service for the good of service. Blending psychology, real-world stories, and practical strategies, Kolby challenges attendees to reflect on their self-image, support one another, and embrace the work performed rather than the image that is often portrayed.
9:00 am – 9:15 am	Break
9:15 am – 10:15 am	<b>Invisible Wounds: The Mental Health Impact of Poor Leadership in First Responders, Justin Templeton</b> This session examines how poor leadership practices within first responder agencies - such as organizational betrayal, unclear expectations, punitive management, favoritism, and loss of mission - contribute to cumulative stress, moral injury, and long-term mental health decline. Justin challenges the dominant narrative that trauma only stems from critical incidents and instead introduces the concept that many providers suffer from daily organizational trauma. Supported by real-world experience and emerging clinical concepts (e.g., Sanctuary Trauma, Reactive Devaluation, and Moral Injury), Justin seeks to educate leadership about their critical role in shaping wellness-based culture.
10:15 am – 10:30 am	Break
10:30 am – 12:30 pm	<b>A First Responder's Reaction to Hypervigilance &amp; Bringing it Home, Mike &amp; Anna Wierenga</b> A 31-year first responder and spouse duo will share raw, boots-on-the-ground insight into how misunderstanding the job's hypervigilance impacts health, relationships at home, and mental resilience — and what you can do about it. Mike and Anna's goal is to raise awareness about the common challenges faced by first responder marriages and relationships. Anna shares the struggles she and Mike experienced throughout their marriage, explaining the reasons behind their difficulties and how she nearly walked away from the love of her life.
12:30 pm – 1:30 pm	Lunch

**Day One Agenda continued on opposite side**

## Tuesday, April 7, 2026, cont'd

1:30 pm – 2:30 pm	<b>Hidden Messages: The Unconscious Psychology of Crisis Communication, Dr. Alexandra Jabr</b> Every word counts in a crisis, but so does everything left unsaid. This session explores the subconscious layers of crisis communication, where tone, timing, and nonverbal cues often convey more than the words we speak. Drawing from depth psychology and experience in emergency medical services, we'll unpack how hidden messages shape perception, escalate or defuse tension, and impact rapport between parties. Attendees will gain a deeper understanding of the psychological forces at play when people are under pressure, and how to communicate in ways that foster clarity, connection, and trust.
2:30 pm – 2:45 pm	<b>Break</b>
2:45 pm – 3:45 pm	<b>Psychological Readiness and Trauma-Informed Culture: Preparing First Responders for Critical Incidents, Larry Gambotto &amp; Susan Styf</b> First responders regularly encounter high-intensity situations that can leave lasting psychological impacts. While post-incident interventions are essential, preparing individuals and organizations before traumatic events occur is a powerful way to protect mental health and strengthen resilience. The importance of fostering a trauma-informed culture was put to the test on June 15, 2024, when the Rochester Hills Fire Department responded to the Brooklands Plaza Splash Pad after a gunman opened fire. The chaotic scene included nine people who were randomly shot, including two children, and confusing reports on whether the scene was actually secure while the first responders were providing care. This presentation will explore how to build psychological readiness while fostering a trauma-informed organizational culture that supports first responders at every level. Psychological readiness focuses on equipping personnel with mental and emotional strategies to face traumatic events. A trauma-informed culture ensures that the entire system—leadership, peers, and structures—understands, anticipates, and responds compassionately to the effects of trauma.
3:45 pm – 4:00 pm	<b>Break</b>
4:00 pm – 5:00 pm	<b>Embrace Boredom: The Power of Living in the Moment, Daniel Sundahl</b> In a world that rewards constant stimulation and productivity, boredom has become something we rush to escape. But what if boredom isn't a problem to solve, but an opportunity to slow down, reflect, and reconnect? This session explores the surprising benefits of embracing boredom as a pathway to creativity, mindfulness, and emotional balance. Participants will learn how being fully present—even in moments of stillness—can improve focus, resilience, and overall well-being. Through discussion and practical strategies, you'll discover how to transform idle moments into powerful opportunities for growth and connection.
7:00 pm	<b>Social/Networking Gathering:</b> Join our speakers and sponsors in the Lower Lounge overlooking beautiful East Bay, just off the lobby of the Delamar Hotel. Network with presenters and your peers, and win door prizes!

**Wednesday, April 8, 2026**

<b>7:00 am – 8:00 am</b>	<b>Continental Breakfast</b>
<b>8:00 am – 9:00 am</b>	<p><b>Navigating the Impact of Trauma: Strengthening Connections Amidst the Stressors of Emergency Work, Daniel Sundahl</b></p> <p>This session is specifically tailored for individuals working in emergency services. The demands of emergency work and its associated stressors create unique challenges in connections with friends, family and partners. This session is designed to help attendees navigate these difficulties, fostering empathetic connection, unified detachment from trauma-related symptoms, and deeper reconnection through acceptance and commitment. Attendees will gain a better understanding of trauma symptoms, how they impact connections and learn practical communication techniques to address these challenges effectively. This session is grounded in both professional expertise and lived experience. As a former first responder, and now a professional counseling therapist, Daniel brings a unique perspective. His training includes certified training from the Gottman Institute and credentials as a Clinical Trauma Specialist in Trauma and Addiction through Trauma Institute International.</p>
<b>9:00 am – 9:15 am</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>9:15 am – 10:15 am</b>	<p><b>Your Mental Health Matters: Compassion Fatigue and Burnout, Leslie Schutte</b></p> <p>This session explores the critical mental health challenges faced by EMS providers, focusing on Compassion Fatigue and Burnout. Participants will gain insight into the emotional toll of high-stress environments, learn to identify early warning signs, and discover practical strategies for prevention and recovery. The presentation emphasizes the importance of self-care, professional support, and organizational culture in fostering resilience and well-being among emergency medical professionals.</p>
<b>10:15 am – 10:30 am</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>10:30 am – 12:30 pm</b>	<p><b>This Job Changes You. Make it for the Better: Understanding the Science of Trauma, The Readiness Group</b></p> <p>First responder work is both deeply meaningful and uniquely demanding—and it inevitably changes the people who do it. For many, those changes accumulate silently over years of service, shaped by chronic exposure to stress, critical incidents, organizational pressures, and the high stake demands of caring for others. This session equips participants with knowledge and tools to understand why these changes occur and how to influence them in a positive, health-sustaining direction. Grounded in clinical research, neuroscience, and frontline experience, this presentation helps attendees recognize the biological, emotional, and behavioral responses that arise from both chronic and acute trauma exposure. Presenters guide participants in identifying their own signs of stress accumulation and understanding how trauma is processed and stored in the body and brain. With this foundation, the session emphasizes practical, evidence-based strategies that strengthen resilience, improve recovery, and promote long-term well-being throughout a first responder career. Through personalized resiliency strategies—such as regulating the nervous system, establishing healthy habits, clearing cognitive overload, and cultivating supportive peer networks—attendees learn how to create conditions for healthier teams, stronger relationships, and more sustainable service.</p>
<b>12:30 pm – 1:30 pm</b>	<b>Lunch</b>

**Day Two Agenda continued on opposite side**

## Wednesday, April 8, 2026, cont'd

1:30 pm – 2:30 pm	<b>Identity Interrupted: The Cost of Life Transitions in First Responders, Kathryn Dunklow</b> First responders are trained to handle chaos yet often struggle when the chaos turns inward. This session explores how identity shifts, isolation, and neglected self-care, including chronic sleep deprivation, impact mental wellness and suicide risk in the fire and EMS culture. Through lived experience and discussion, participants will learn to recognize the subtle warning signs of identity loss, depression, and burnout, while developing actionable strategies for self-care, reconnection, and resilience. Includes personal reflection, peer discussion, and practical wellness tools tailored for the first responder lifestyle.
2:30 pm – 2:45 pm	<b>Break</b>
2:45 pm – 3:45 pm	<b>It's Not Just Business, It's Personal, Scott Lail</b> This session will encourage first responders to reconnect with a patient-centered, service-driven mindset - one that places professionalism, compassion, and excellence at the heart of every call. Attendees will explore the importance of first impressions, how they are formed, and why they shape patient trust and outcomes. Scott will guide participants in reflecting on their personal "why", the deeper purpose behind choosing this line of work—and how that purpose can be strengthened through ongoing training, education, mentorship, and intentional development. First responders play a vital role in the health and safety of their communities. With that comes the responsibility to uphold the highest standards and take genuine pride in the delivery of service. This session will challenge participants to move beyond viewing public safety as simply a job and instead embrace it as a true profession where exceptional patient care is not only expected but is deeply personal.
3:45 pm – 4:00 pm	<b>Break</b>
4:00 pm – 5:00 pm	<b>Leveraging Stress to Enhance Performance: Building our Capacity for Professional Longevity and Success, Michael Loerger</b> This session will teach participants how to leverage stress to enhance performance more efficiently and effectively. Drawing on physiological principles used in training elite athletes and high-performance professionals; first responders will learn strategies to expand their capacity for professional longevity and success. They will also learn how to utilize these principles to better support their personal well-being and resilience.
5:00 pm – 5:15 pm	<b>Conference Wrap Up &amp; Evaluations</b>

*Thank you for joining us!*