Testimony of Captain Joseph Coffey
Warwick Police Department
Warwick, Rhode Island

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Congressional Briefing
Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety
Captain Joseph Coffey

Thank you for the opportunity to offer remarks in support of Mental Health First Aid training for public safety officers. Although I represent the small state of Rhode Island, I can certainly validate the mental health training needs of officers nationwide, as we are all committed first responders to crisis. It is with this unique and vital role in mind, I impress upon you the meaningful impact Mental Health First Aid training has toward improving outcomes between public safety officers and persons experiencing mental health challenges.

If through this crucial training, a single officer can prevent today’s depressed person from becoming tomorrow’s barricaded subject, much has been accomplished early and safely. The public deserves and demands that officers respond to persons in crisis appropriately, with an emphasis on training. Public safety officers sought and proudly accept their vital role as community care-takers, to include responding to persons experiencing mental health challenges; yet, many lack the basic knowledge and skills enabling them to proficiently perform this important function.

I was introduced to Mental Health First Aid back in 2006, with skepticism. But it was not long before I realized the benefits of this training, as do behavioral health and public safety practitioners alike. Many of us recognized the potential for this basic course to help officers defuse crisis, promote mental health literacy, enable early intervention, combat stigma, and connect people to care.

The standard adult MHFA course was adapted to suit paramount law enforcement safety, legal, and operational considerations. The resulting public safety model was first offered at the Rhode Island Municipal Police Academy, followed by versions presented in Philadelphia, NYC, and the District of Columbia.

To date, over eleven-hundred Rhode Island Public Safety Officers are certified Mental Health First Aid-Public Safety first-aiders, representing numerous agencies, ranks, and positions. The public safety version remains in high demand, with attendees arriving from neighboring states. Courses are planned in the near future for Brown University Police, Corrections Officers at the local Federal prison, and several RI public safety academies.

There is no denying Public Safety First-aiders communicate more frequently and effectively with community mental health center and hospital medical staff. Such improved dialogue assists healthcare professionals in their assessment and treatment efforts. I am often reminded by clinical staff, how much they rely on and appreciate behavioral observations accurately shared by police mental health first-aiders.

Public safety officers, regardless of rank or role, may find themselves confronted with a mental health crisis. Such was the case with Providence, RI, Police Lieutenant Dan Gannon, whose officers were faced with a distressed young man brandishing a knife. Lieutenant Gannon
quickly sought to calm the boy down and end the standoff safely. When interviewed by the media on-scene, Lieutenant Gannon credited the Mental Health First Aid-Public Safety training, he had recently completed, as a primary factor in his success at defusing the potentially violent incident. This is one of several testimonials, to include my own life-saving actions, which further demonstrate the absolute need for continued mental health training for public safety officers. Incidents such as these serve to remind us all that public safety officers fall back on their training in times of crisis, to include mental health related encounters.

I point out that professionally accredited law enforcement agencies must comply with standards governing mental illness response. Mental Health First for Public safety satisfies the entry-level and refresher training required by the standards. Providing such training further exemplifies an agency’s commitment to its community, fair, and impartial policing philosophy. I mention also, public safety agencies’ legal interests in fulfilling an overt training need and preventing wrongful action litigation. Prudent public safety heads can mitigate risk of training indifference by providing their officers with consistent, current, and practical training offered with Mental Health First Aid-Public Safety.

Many officers lack confidence in their ability to adequately respond to persons experiencing mental health challenges. No doubt, the more they learn, the greater their proficiency and likelihood of producing a safe and effective crisis outcome. The impact of good training is greatest when officers can apply what they have learned in a situation and do what they do best – help people. Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety provides a basic action plan officers can use to perform this ultimate purpose.

Absent basic training such as Mental Health First Aid-Public Safety, officers are left to rely on either the availability of fewer officers with specialized training or apply uncertain abilities with hopes of a safe and beneficial outcome.

I respectfully ask that you consider not only the benefits of Mental Health First Aid training for public safety officers, but also the countless persons in mental health treatment resulting from that initial encounter with an effective Public Safety First-aider. In my community, these include our veterans, fellow officers, my neighbors, prisoners re-entering our communities, family and friends.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak on such a matter of importance to the whole community.
Captain Joe Coffey is an eighteen year veteran of the Warwick, Rhode Island, Police Department where he currently serves as a Patrol Division Shift Commander. Over this period, Captain Coffey has held positions to include: Field Training Officer, Prosecution Officer, Patrol Sergeant, Executive Lieutenant, Accreditation Manager, Training Supervisor, and Recruitment Manager. Captain Coffey’s has held temporary assignments at the Rhode Island Police Academy where he continues to present behavioral health response topics. Captain Coffey serves on several State and local committees and workgroups focusing on behavioral health response and treatment. He serves as the Mental Health Crisis Response Team (MHCRT) leader as well as his department’s liaison with several community mental health and criminal justice stakeholders/partners. Captain Coffey is a co-author of the current Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety module and National Trainer of the course. He is also a Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) certified and course presenter. Prior to his police career, Captain Coffey worked ten years in the Corrections field. He is a graduate of the FBI National Academy, Roger Williams University, and the University of Virginia. He is an Army Veteran. Captain Coffey is married with three children.