Testimony of Retired Sergeant Jim Kirk
Tucson Police Department
Tucson, Arizona

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Congressional Briefing
Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety
Ret. Sergeant Jim Kirk

Good afternoon, and thank you for allowing me to be here with you today. I especially thank Congressman Ron Barber and his hardworking staff for everything they have done to support Mental Health First Aid.

In 1988, I began as a patrol officer with the Tucson Police Department. The area that I worked at that time had the highest concentration of individuals with a mental illness in the City of Tucson. The 2 hour block of instruction I received at the police academy on mental illness gave me little direction on how to recognize signs and symptoms of mental illness, how to successfully defuse and deescalate situations, or how to find available resources, outside of involuntary committal, when someone was in crisis. Our approach at the time was simple; you break the law, you go to jail … and we were to use whatever means necessary to effect the arrest. Behavioral health at that time was more of a thorn in our flesh than a partner in our community. I saw those in crisis, and at times I felt compassion for them, but as beat cop I had little at my disposal other than the county jail.

In 2006, after 20 years with Tucson Police and numerous assignments, I became a sergeant in the behavioral sciences unit. One of my responsibilities was to supervise Crisis Intervention Team training. For the first time, I met with individuals diagnosed with a mental illness, I met their families, I heard their stories and I knew we had to do better. In short, we needed to make significant changes. We needed updated training and we needed community engagement in order to successfully implement that training. Studies in Tucson showed that those diagnosed with a serious mental illness spent more than twice as long in the county jail for the same crime as those who did not suffer with a mental illness. It was costing the city an exorbitant amount of money in jail costs to house these individuals, and when they were released it unfortunately became little more than a revolving door back to jail. We realized that three entities needed to work together: law enforcement, behavioral health providers, and the criminal justice system. We needed to come together to examine the daily challenges faced by individuals with behavioral health disorders and to determine how all of us could promote system change.

One of the significant and relevant changes came in the way of Mental Health First Aid training especially for law enforcement. Our regional behavioral health agency, Community Partnership of Southern Arizona, was key to bringing Mental Health First Aid to Tucson and Pima County and partnering with law enforcement. I am sure you are aware that Mental Health First Aid is akin to providing CPR to someone who may be in a behavioral crisis as opposed to a physical crisis. While much is accomplished in the 8 hour class itself, the real meaning goes beyond the classroom. We are bringing communities together like never before to talk about proactive action plans to help our students, our friends, our congregations, our parents, and our children. We are saying it is okay to talk about bi-polar disorder, anxiety, and depression. It’s as acceptable to speak of those illnesses as it is to speak about heart disease and cancer. We have a
responsibility to intervene and encourage resources for treatment and recovery. And there have been surprising benefits to Mental Health First Aid in the community.

During a break in a Mental Health First Aid class I recently taught, a gentleman in his 50’s, looking quite like a biker, came up to speak to me. He asked if I remembered him and I responded that I did not. He then went on to tell me that when I was a detective sergeant, I had served a search warrant at his house, looking for and recovering stolen property. He went on to tell me that he has now been clean and sober for more than 6 years and works as a peer counselor encouraging others to do the same. For the first time in my career, someone I had investigated for criminal activity was now partnering with me to help those who may be in crisis.

I recently taught MHFA for law enforcement to The Pima County Regional Hostage Team. The reviews said the training was precise, to the point, and contained very little “fluff”. The class also responded well to the focus on officer safety, without detailing tactics, which vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. And just in case you didn’t know, cops don’t just give good reviews, it’s not in our DNA.

Mental Health First Aid for law enforcement fills a huge gap that we have had in training. In the past, we have had some training on signs and symptoms, we have had some training on barricaded/suicidal subjects, we have had some training on communication, but MHFA for law enforcement goes much deeper and its impact lasts much longer. It addresses the gap, not only providing real strategies of what officers need to do in a crisis situation, but also how to move that individual toward help. It’s not only a law enforcement issue, not only a behavioral issue, but it is indeed a community wide issue.

It is no longer acceptable to only have reactive plans to crisis situations, we have to work together to create new models that focus on proactive education, training and implementation. Mental Health First Aid brings everyone to the table for successful outcomes. It helps officers see that although a crime may have been perpetrated, the motivation behind the act may be due to a behavioral issue; therefore, we are responsible to seek long term solutions for all involved. It is by far the most effective teaching tool for academies and for those in the field. It complements Crisis Intervention Team training while de-stigmatizing and bringing compassionate focus to the person in crisis. Finally, it provides peer training to first responders, addressing the unfortunate reality of police suicide and substance abuse. This is crucial training available in a very crucial time.

Thank you for allowing me to share with all of you my experiences working with Mental Health First Aid. I hope that Congress will continue its investment in this important program by working to pass the Mental Health First Aid Act.
Biography

Recently retired Sgt. James Kirk has been a career public safety professional. In his 25-year tenure with the Tucson Police Department, Jim has served as Detective Sergeant of the Burglary Unit, Major Offenders Surveillance Unit, and many other investigative and covert assignments.

Prior to retiring from TPD Jim was assigned to the Behavioral Sciences Unit. In that role, Jim has taken leadership during multiple critical incidents involving officers.

Jim has facilitated the Southern Arizona Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training for seven years and has trained over 500 public safety officers from across Arizona. Jim is an active law enforcement instructor, consultant, and liaison within the behavioral health community. Jim is a licensed Adult, Youth, and First Responder Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) instructor. He is also adjunct faculty for Pima Community College. Jim is a Certified Trauma Services Specialist and Certified Trauma Responder Through the Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists.

Jim has received multiple awards and commendations over his career, including the Medal of Merit, Medal of Distinguished Service, and the Chief's Citation of Excellence from the police department. In 2006, Jim received the community's first Unsung Hero award in 2006 and again in 2009.

As of March 2014, Jim was asked to be the Southern Arizona Representative for the 100 Club of Arizona. The 100 Club serves more than 50,000 public safety professionals throughout the state of Arizona, standing behind the men and women who stand behind the badge. Jim is currently on the Board of Directors for the Community Partnership of Southern Arizona, the regional behavioral health board for Pima County.