

Michael Allora

May 24, 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety and the Mental Health First Aid Act.

My name is Michael Allora and I am a Deputy Fire Chief in Clifton, NJ. I have served the last 20 years with the Clifton Fire Department. I've also served in the U.S. Navy. I am proud to be a representative of the fire service on this most important and relevant topic.

I've completed the Mental Health First Aid as well as the Crisis Intervention Team training programs. I am scheduled to become a Mental Health First Aid instructor in July.

The United States fire service has a unique culture rooted in 280 years of history. It's been written that there are six genes of a firefighter's DNA: FAST, CLOSE, WET, RISK, INJURY, DEATH. The first gene, FAST, is derived from the fact that firefighters are taught from day one in our business to be fast. We measure turnout times and response times, how quickly we can stretch the initial hose line, conduct the search, and put water on the fire.

In today's fire service, when we are dispatched to a call, more often than not, we are responding to a request for emergency medical services. And we are seeing an increase in the number of mental and behavioral health related calls. When faced with a person in a mental health crisis, fast is not always best. Allow me to give you an example.

We were dispatched to a middle-aged man who was in crisis. His marriage was falling apart and he was threatening suicide. You could see the frustration on the faces of the family members on scene. The police officers on scene were trying to gain compliance from the man. The goal of the police officers was correct – to help this man without harming him or themselves in the process. But these police officers were not trained to deal with this type of crisis situation. Their actions were based upon a compliance model. If the man was not compliant, the situation would eventually escalate and he might very well end up in handcuffs. It was apparent to me that the situation was heading down the wrong path. So I intervened. I explained that I'd been trained to deal with these situations, and all I needed was a little time and a little space.

My Mental Health First Aid training provided me with a new set of skills. In this situation, I needed to slow down, take my time. I needed to establish some trust and build a rapport with this man. After almost an hour, he willingly agreed to go to the hospital for treatment. No struggle, no handcuffs, no injuries. Most importantly, no stigma.

40 hours of instruction in Crisis Intervention may not be possible, or appropriate, for all personnel in any public safety agency. We felt that this 8-hour program was perfectly suited to deliver to our entire department. I am proud to say that as of January of this year, we trained 125 individuals of our Fire Department, as well as members from several departments in City Hall, in Mental Health First Aid.

The feedback from our personnel has been overwhelmingly positive. But there's been an additional benefit, one that I didn't expect. Some of the firefighters started talking about how the training was beneficial for them personally. There was an awareness, an openness after the training that wouldn't have been there otherwise. The training emphasized that it is okay to talk about issues like stress, depression, and substance abuse. Since the training, I've had conversations with two colleagues who each confided in me that they were considering or had seriously considered suicide. Fortunately, because of my training, I knew how to approach the subject, without stigma, and make them feel like it was okay to talk about their struggles. There is growing research that indicates we may lose more firefighters and first responders to suicide than to line of duty deaths.

Mental Health First Aid literally saves lives. The Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety program represents the best practices for our profession on this most important issue. I believe that every firefighter, every first responder, every public safety professional should be trained in Mental Health First Aid. If you are providing services to people, you need this training. Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety should not be optional.

Thank you.