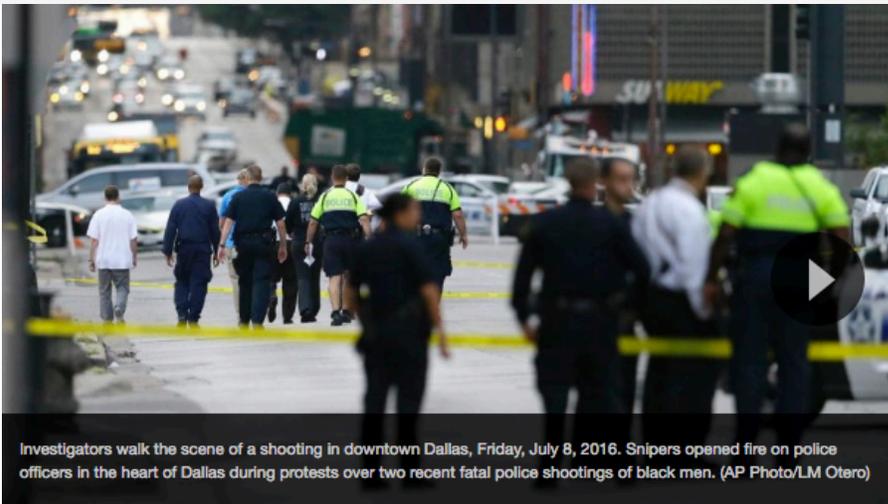


POLICE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

After Dallas, Baton Rouge we can't turn away from invisible wounds of cops, other first responders

By Rob Michaels · Published July 22, 2016 · FoxNews.com



Investigators walk the scene of a shooting in downtown Dallas, Friday, July 8, 2016. Snipers opened fire on police officers in the heart of Dallas during protests over two recent fatal police shootings of black men. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

America's law enforcement family is under attack. Just this month five of our brothers died and 7 were wounded in Dallas. In the same 24-hour period, 3 officers were ambushed in Bristol, Tenn., Valdosta, Georgia, and outside of St.

Louis. Then three more died in Baton Rouge. And on Tuesday, another died in Kansas City, Kansas.

That makes 19 officers shot in six communities. Police line-of-duty death by gunfire is up 70 percent over last year.

The physically wounded are now recovering, but we must not forget the INVISIBLE wounds these horrific attacks have wrought on all law enforcement officers and first responders. Emotional wounds cut deeply and can lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

When the call from the officers on-the-scene in Dallas and Baton Rouge went out -- "shots fired: officers down!" -- none could have imagined the horror ahead. Emotions instantly transformed into a knife's edge because no one knew what was to come as shots continued. They saw officers fall to the ground. Imagine if that was your family member.

Law enforcement did what they do best: there were many stories of heroism told by citizens who were saved by the sacrificial actions of police.

Medical personnel responded to care for the wounded as police cornered the murderer. The evidence recovery team, whose task is to create a video and photographic inventory of the crime scene, would arrive last. Every victim. Multiple pictures. Recovery of physical evidence, then the removal of the victims – their colleagues, their family; it is too horrifying and graphic to fully depict here, but what these responders saw on the streets of Dallas will haunt them for a long time.

Forget the Hollywood persona of law enforcement. These real men and women mask their emotions well because the job demands it. Over time, an impenetrable shield develops over their hearts that protect their emotions, desensitizes them from what they see, and helps to bring needed emotional numbness. On the scene in the heat of action they are focused. But after the adrenaline stops and memories flow, this incident will wreak havoc on their emotional wellbeing for months, perhaps years to come.

As the founder of a charity that helps emergency personnel deal with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), we are all too familiar with the stats: 85 percent of first responders experience elements of PTSD, and every 17 hours a law enforcement officer commits suicide.

Like a physical wound left untreated, an emotional wound can be equally deadly. Unresolved trauma can be expressed in anger, rage, sleeplessness, nightmares, recurring thoughts. Some turn to self-medication to stop the emotional whirlwind. Sadly, many turn to suicide. A specialized trauma therapist should automatically be called to meet with responders, take an emotional inventory and help them maintain a positive perspective on the trauma the results from serving their communities. From that first assessment, a protocol of follow-up should be mandated.

Therapists specifically trained in trauma are needed because those who treat the emotional wounds of law enforcement and emergency services, especially following such a tragedy as last month's in Orlando and now Dallas, need to understand that the trauma experienced by these professions not only deeply affect them, but is also compounded by negative perceptions and misunderstanding of PTSD within their own places of work. Sadly, it is a double-edged sword: they are told to ask for help if needed, but conversely, they are in fear of being labeled unstable or unfit. They suffer in silence.

But we must not forget them. With trained therapists, a good support group, and a strong family system, the good news is that PTSD brought about by tragic events such as Dallas and Baton Rouge can be addressed, treated and healed.

Rob Michaels is a former police detective who founded Serve & Protect in 2011 to facilitate trauma services for public safety professionals with PTSD symptoms, addictions, or thoughts of suicide. Whether through residential care, trauma therapists, chaplains, or related services including service dogs, equine therapy or other means, Serve & Protect has helped more than 2,500 public safety professionals to date in the United States and internationally. The Serve & Protect hotline will accept calls 24/7 at 615-373-8000.