

## **Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 3, Episode 8, “Protecting the Mental Health of First Responders”**

### **Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Hey everyone. Just a quick heads-up before we start the show. In this episode, we'll be talking about PTSD and mental health for first responders. And, I wanted to let you know that the League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust recently launched a PTSD and Mental Health Toolkit that can help public safety departments begin the work of addressing mental health among first responders. You can check it out on the League's website at [www.lmc.org/mentalhealth20](http://www.lmc.org/mentalhealth20). Also, a quick note that while our guest today will discuss some treatment options, the League is not endorsing any treatments or programs discussed in this episode. You should always check with a mental health professional to determine best treatment options.

[Podcast theme music begins]

### **Adriana Temali-Smith:**

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is City Speak. I'm your host, Adriana Temali-Smith. Serving as a city police officer, firefighter, or EMT, [podcast theme music fades out] is important and challenging work. Community members rely on first responders to be there when help is needed. In the course of their duties, first responders oftentimes witness human suffering that can result in emotional trauma, putting them at greater risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. This condition affects not only the mental and physical health of the individual, but can also take its toll on the performance and morale of an entire public safety department.

The League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust believes that a comprehensive approach to dealing with PTSD requires several actions. Among them, de-stigmatizing mental health conditions; improving access to healthcare; treating co-occurring or independent disorders (things that could be insomnia, addiction); and conducting further research into prevention and treatment.

City officials, elected and appointed, have an essential role to play in supporting their first responders through this approach and there is help and guidance available for cities along the way. The Insurance Trust addresses PTSD and other mental health conditions through web resources, online training, and at safety and loss control workshops.

In this podcast, we will hear from a noted expert in the field of PTSD prevention and treatment. We're joined today by Police Captain Dan Willis, who is an instructor for the National Command College. He has provided training on trauma, PTSD, and the process of healing, to over 5,000 peace officers in the United States and Canada. Captain Willis is a graduate of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Academy, and is author of the emotional survival and wellness guidebook, *Bulletproof Spirit, The First Responder's Essential Resource for Protecting and Healing Mind and Heart*. The book is required reading at the FBI National Academy.

[Podcast theme music plays briefly and fades out]

Well, welcome to you, Dan, and thank you for chatting to us at the City Speak. I was looking forward to meeting you in person at the League's Annual Conference which was supposed to be held in June this year, and you were scheduled to speak to our members in person. And while we were disappointed not to have the opportunity to gather together at our conference, I'm grateful that you have time to share with us today. So, thanks for being here.

**Dan Willis:**

Well, thank you, Adriana. It's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

So, Dan, can you tell us a little bit more about yourself and what prompted you to write the book, *Bulletproof Spirit*?

**Dan Willis:**

Well I served as a police officer for nearly 30 years, the La Mesa Police Department just outside of San Diego. Retired as a captain four or five years ago when my book *Bulletproof Spirit* came out. And, uh, over the course of my career, especially when I went to the FBI National Academy back in, uh, 2010, where I studied emotional survival and wellness strategies for law enforcement. Uh, I, I really came to, um, not only suffering, uh, significantly from the traumatic experiences in my career, but seeing so many of my colleagues, uh, suffer with post-traumatic stress, or drank themselves out of a job, or, uh, had to leave for other reasons and things.

**Dan Willis:**

Uh, uh, it just came to a point where I realized, w- we have to do something, uh, to give our people, um, a path toward wellness, um, instead of just hoping for the best, you know, which isn't working. With, uh, suicide being our number one cause of death every year, and 20 to 25% suffering from post-traumatic stress, and when that happens, not only do our officers, uh, firefighters, dispatchers, every first responder suffers, but especially the community. 'Cause communities are only as safe as the health and wellbeing of the first responders serving it.

**Dan Willis:**

So that all culminating in me writing, uh, *Bulletproof Spirit* to provide proactive wellness strategies so we can take control over our health and wellness. You know, being able to make it and serve through these careers, um, by being compassionate, by being, um, uh, merciful, thoughtful, purposeful, and doing as much good as we can, being the greatest good we can amidst all the bad.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

I liked that you used the phrase, proactive wellness, and then you also used a phrase that I, I don't think I've heard before which was, emotional survival. Um, can you say a little bit more about that?

**Dan Willis:**

Well, uh, traditional training in, uh, any first responder profession i- is, uh, primarily just on physically surviving and training us how to, uh, use force reasonably when we, uh, have to. Uh, how, how to go home safely every night. But, uh, if you're physically safe, but you're suffering from the daily traumas that we see and deal with day in and day out to where we can't sleep, or drinking way too much, we become addicted to things to try to cope and to heal, only become a distant, reclusive, isolated. Um, the traumas of our work can make us become disengaged with life. You know, uninvolved and uncaring, and when that happens, we're no good to anyone. So, it's not enough to merely think of surviving physically. We have to survive and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Those are the four components that make us human. And if we're not addressing all four in our training and our support as, uh, agency management and city officials, then our people are gonna suffer and, and therefore, the communities are gonna suffer.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

So, what are some of the dynamics of the role of public safety that can lead to poor mental health and could we see similar dynamics as a result of the COVID-19 response tactics?

**Dan Willis:**

Yes, absolutely. I mean, uh, first responders are, uh, placed in, in just, uh, often impossible situations. I mean, you know, we're just not law enforcement or firefighters, paramedics. Uh, we're often marriage counselors, mental health, uh, professionals, uh, child welfare people, uh, psychologists. I mean, just on and on and on. And we're put in these situations to try to somehow make sense and bring to order things that are in complete chaos often. And, uh, we're, we're really not prepared for that. When I went to the Academy back in 1985, I was 21 years old and I had all this idealism of, of wanting to go out and save the world, protect life, and just serve people, to make a difference.

**Dan Willis:**

And, you know, every bad call, every death, every suicide, every dangerous situation, every fight I got in, uh, involved in or assaulted, uh, every fatal car collision, every act of violence, they just eat away at our ability to be human, to care, to want to be compassionate, to be able to serve and to do good and be professional and ethical. Um, and, uh, you know, these, these things just eat away at our ability, as I say, to, uh, uh, to be human, and, and everyone becomes affected by that.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

It's interesting to be in this time dealing with a pandemic and thinking about the added pressure that that must play to the role of first responders.

**Dan Willis:**

Well, with a, with a pandemic, the, uh, on top of the just the normal daily traumas that we, we, uh, deal with, we are completely in a situation that has often seemed out-of-control. A- and, we deal with that often, but just not so overwhelmingly as, as, this has never happened before. You know, the, the lockdown, but, uh, officers still have to go in and, and, and to face, you know, potentials of becoming a infected or, or having conflicting demands placed upon us by management, by, uh, the community, by an agency or a supervisor. I mean, it's like we're constantly, especially in a, a crisis like, uh, the Coronavirus, placed in situations that are really impossible to really, uh, deal with and walk away and be, uh, healthy and well. We get the sense of being out of control which leads to feeling helpless. We can't function and we can't do what we're meant to do, what the community needs and demands of us, and the kind of constraints and things that go on in such a, a traumatic crisis is what we've been dealing with in the last few months with the virus.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dan Willis:**

So, it's just an added traumatic pressure that's placed upon us when we're already, you know, up to our necks with it day in and day out.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

One of the priorities of the League and the League Insurance Trust is around supporting PTSD, uh, for officer wellness within our cities and our members. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about PTSD? Describe it and, and can it be healed is a question that we get a lot.

**Dan Willis:**

Sure. Uh, first of all, it absolutely can be healed. A- and people are healing from post-traumatic stress, uh, all the time. The, the real tragedy is that, um, in my experience as I go around the country providing emotional survival training to first responders, well over 90%, um, have never heard of probably the most effective and powerful treatment for post-traumatic stress that's out there, which is EMDR. Eye

Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. EMDR's been around for over 30 years. They've been doing it, the military, with our men and women coming home from the Middle East. And the World Health Organization, the International Association of Chiefs and Police have all endorsed it, and, and nobody knows about it. And, um, supervisors don't know about it, city officials, risk managers, uh, most of them have never heard about it. And, uh, if your brain has been injured by trauma, and that's what post-traumatic stress is. I don't know why they ever called it a disorder. When you think about a mental disorder, you think that you're, uh, mentally ill, that something's wrong with you.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dan Willis:**

You just have this and you can't ever get better. That's absolutely not true. It, post-traumatic stress is an injury. It's an injury from trauma that causes your brain, the part of your brain that processes events in life, just kinda shut down, not be able to function normally. When that happens, we can become despondent, we can become very, very angry, agitated, um, frustrated, depressed, sense of hopelessness and dread, um, have anxiety disorders. Uh, all kinds of, of issues and problems. And, that processing part of our brain has, becomes injured by trauma can heal and can recover and restore optimal, uh, functioning of our brain. Uh, and there's other treatments for post-traumatic stress, there's several treatments. But, uh, I have had EMDR done myself ...

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dan Willis:**

... and it cured me of an issue I had for over 25 years.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Wow.

**Dan Willis:**

And it, I mean, it's, it's really incredible. I, I hear stories like that all the time. Um, people will say, it might not be once, I only went one time, but, uh, some people said, uh, "Well I had to go two or three times," or "I went half a dozen times." You know, it's not like talk therapy. You're not gonna be going talking about the traumas every week for five years. It's not how it works. It's a very concentrated, focused effort to get in there and to heal that part of your brain that's been injured. In the, and, uh, just a real quick example.

One officer who was involved in a fatal shooting, he, for months and months and months, saw blood everywhere. Uh, he, he would see his hands just covered in blood and he said, "I could even feel the stickiness of it and I'd wash my hands a dozen times. I could still see them covered in blood and I could still feel it." You know, and every time he looked at his kid, he would see blood pouring down his face with this traumatic head injury. You, you thought he was losing his mind, and he was getting more and more depressed so actually, uh, thinking ... 'cause you can lose hope really fast.

Trauma can change who we are, it can change us into someone our loved ones no longer recognize, someone we don't recognize anymore. And, uh, when you lose the ability to control your life, your thoughts, your emotions, just to function normally, you can lose hope really, really fast. And that's why suicide is our number one cause, cause of death. But this officer confided in a peer support colleague and, uh, who told him about EMDR. He said, "Hey, it's not gonna make your symptoms worse. Just commit to going three times and evaluate it after that." This officer said, "I stopped going after twice 'cause I've never seen phantom blood again."

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Wow.

**Dan Willis:**

A couple years had passed since that incident. And that, that's how powerful EMDR is. But, uh, I mean, it's, it's no good if administrators, city officials, risk managers, officers, don't know about it.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

So, emotional and psychological injuries are often stigmatized by our society. What can city leaders do to de-stigmatize PTSD among those who might be reluctant to self-report, or among those who become aware when a colleague is diagnosed?

**Dan Willis:**

In my experience, most efforts from a- cities, agencies, um, tend to be a promotion of some program. You know, here, here's a new program. Here's a new wellness program. I think we need to change our thinking about that and, and be thinking of this more as a, uh, philosophy. Because, um, wellness and the, uh, potential brain trauma injuries that are, are work traumas can cause, uh, it, it needs to be thought of and embraced as a philosophy of wholeness, of wellness, not, and not just a, a new program.

And, uh, and what I mean by that is, that our interactions, uh, with the community, our interactions with each other, with the agency, that are, uh, supervisors, the command supervisors with our people, it all has to be within the context of wellness and promoting wellness and, and showing that, uh, our people actually matter to us, that we take a personal interest in their health and their wellbeing, not just on if they did their job or not, but how they did their job. And in order to do that, they've got to be healthy and well. And, and just, uh, changing the whole conversation within this, uh, philosophical, um, culture change, that you're being changed with every bad call. We, as an agency, recognize that. You know, here are the resources for you. You know, how can we help? If you ever do have a, a, a, some issues or problems, or, uh, uh, someone close to you says you're, you're not yourself, those are perfectly normal reactions from people who do your job. And we're here to help you.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dan Willis:**

You know, if we can embrace that and everyone does that from the chief on down, then, uh, the more that people are gonna think that, "Hey, it's, it's normal that I had to go talk to a trauma therapist. You know, it's, it's basically part of the job." All first responders fear, suffer and bleed like every other human being.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dan Willis:**

When we try to pretend we're not supposed to, the more vulnerable we're gonna be and to suffer and die from these traumas.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

You mentioned culture change there and you were mentioned the idea of wellness as a philosophy. Um, you also mentioned this, you know, being something that could be rolled out top down. You're in touch

with a number of chiefs, uh, across various different areas within the nation. How ready for this culture change do you think law enforcement, fire, EMS, how ready are they for this culture change?

**Dan Willis:**

Well, they're, they're more ready for it now than at any time in my, uh, career or history. When you look at all the un- civil unrest and the riots and everything else that's, that's been going on. Um, uh, uh, in my opinion — and not always, but often — the uses of excessive force behind that is, is often, um, a first responder whose been injured from their various traumas and experience on the job. Because part of the effect of trauma is becoming less and less resilient and developing a shorter and shorter fuse to where something just happens and, and you can snap. Right? You're kinda, your brain and your thinking process gets hijacked and you can become overly aggressive. You can, you can be more likely to use force that maybe was not reasonable from the years of built up, up, of traumas. 'Cause we all came into these professions to help people.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dan Willis:**

Pretty much every, every single one of them. So why, often, do we become callous, jaded, indifferent, uncaring, uh, aggressive? It, it's not who we were. And as I said earlier, the job, the traumas can change us into someone we don't recognize anymore.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Absolutely.

**Dan Willis:**

So, um, everyone needs to to understand that that is part of the job, is being affected. So then we can turn it around. We can support the wholeness and wellness and change.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

So, oftentimes we'll be asked questions about where the money's coming from. I'm wondering if we flip that question, sometimes services will cost cities money to implement, but what are the financial costs and the service consequences for cities when first responders don't have access to wellness and they are suffering from work traumas?

**Dan Willis:**

Uh, they are everywhere and they are not good. Because not only does the agency suffer in its impact, in its effectiveness, and in the efficiency, the community will suffer because of the, uh, less professional and effective service, and, uh, we lose people. You know, half the people who start these first responder professions will never make it to a full retirement. And think of the cost of that to constantly be training and replacing people. Um, my, my risk manager at La Mesa, uh, told us once that if, if we lose one officer to post-traumatic stress, it'll cost the city at least a quarter of a million dollars beyond what it would've cost to have kept paying that person if he was healthy and fulfilled his full career.

**Dan Willis:**

Um, so just think of, for example, the cost of sending our people to a trauma EMDR therapist once a year as a form of prevention. Yeah, that's gonna cost some money. But if it just saves one person, that's gonna more than p- — which it will — that's gonna more than pay for those costs. And, uh, often, uh, um, city officials in my experience we can become very, very short-sighted. Not just look at the overall picture.

Uh, if, if we're gonna stay in business, we need our people to be healthy and well. And in order to do that, we just can't tell them, "Hey, keep yourself healthy." We, we've got to provide them the, uh, paths toward healing and peace and, and how to survive this job, uh, more than just physically. And, uh, when we do that, everyone's gonna benefit. Um, it, it's, uh, it's pennies on the dollar when you're talking about prevention.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Absolutely. I wanna transition now just a little bit to talk about your book. In your book, *Bulletproof Spirit*, you mention spirituality as a key to PTSD prevention and recovery. Can you describe what spirituality means in this context?

**Dan Willis:**

Yes. Uh, in, in my experience it's absolutely essential. Um, and by spirituality, I mean being driven by your heart every single day with every single call for service, to make a meaningful difference. To have everything we do be both the most compassionate and the most life affirming that we can. To have every single contact matter as far as promoting positive relationships. It's being kind, respectful. It's, um, developing good, positive relationships, connecting with people, connecting with the community. Uh, being heart-centered in our service. It, it's all an expression of love and spirituality. And that's what we need to promote in training, and do, if these professions are gonna survive and be well.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

I love that line, be a, a heart-centered in our service. I think that should be perhaps (laughs) a new motto that, uh, law enforcement could adopt and that describes what you mean by spirituality perfectly to me. I, I must admit I, some people maybe feel a certain pre-notion about what spirituality could mean and I certainly had that. And in hearing you talk and hearing that line in particular, it described to a T of what I would hope my local law enforcement officers carry with them when they're out engaging with the community.

**Dan Willis:**

It's what kept me well for, for 30 years, despite all the horrible, terrible things I experienced and suffered from. What I just explained to you was the one thing that made me love coming to work every single day for 30 years. Because, uh, being aware of all the tremendous good that we can do, each and every day, positively affecting people's lives and preventing people from, uh, uh, victimizing others. I mean, it, it, it's, it's what kept me motivated, inspired, and, uh, connected to the true nobility of what it really means to be an officer and be a first responder and to serve with our heart and do the most good.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

We talked a little bit about the fact that financial aspects are always uh important role within cities, and cities right now are also facing shrinking resources. I'm wondering, why should this focus on PTSD remain a priority, And I wonder if you have any tips on how to keep it a priority in this difficult financial time?

**Dan Willis:**

Uh, when we're talking about finances, um, there, there are other ways to get resources. The best work that I've seen that helps to, uh, save careers, to help save people, is the positive engagement and activity of peer support teams. Absolutely every first responder agency should have a effective, trusted, active peer support team. Um, and that's not just reactive, waiting for someone to need help, but is also proactive. Proactive in developing resources and training or emotional survival, um, and wellness. And, uh, to have an active peer support team, that doesn't cost anything. It's just, uh, people who are volunteered to give themselves to help their fellow brothers and sisters that they serve with, and to be reaching out to them and en- engaging with them and being there to listen to them and, and to support them.

And, uh, there, there are resources out there, such as the big corporations, uh, Target, uh, Home Depot, Walmart. Uh, for example, Walmart has a, uh, community foundation where you can go online, it takes about 20 minutes to apply, anywhere from \$250 to \$5,000, saying, "Hey, we need this money for a peer support team, for resources for books, or training, or whatever, 'cause suicide's the number one cause of death and the community suffers when officers are suffering from trauma," and they'd love to get money for that. It's gonna help, not just officers, but help the, uh, safety and wellbeing of communities. So, uh, there are things out there that we can, but basic- the basic effective peer support team which I write about in, in the book, how to create and maintain one, uh, does the most good.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Those resources that you mention are extremely helpful and we've heard a lot about the effectiveness of peer support teams. Uh, even here in the state of Minnesota, I know that they're happening all over the place. You mentioned your book there and I wanna make sure that we have a chance to talk a little bit about it. You talk about peer support teams, uh, spirituality, uh, culture change around the philosophy of wellness. Tell us a little bit more about the book, um, and also maybe where people can find it.

**Dan Willis:**

Sure. They can find the book, uh, either at Amazon or, uh, my website is [firstresponderwellness.com](http://firstresponderwellness.com). It will tell them more about it and, uh, have links to, uh, to where to get the book. Uh, the FBI National Academy actually uses it, um, and is a required reading there at the Academy in Quantico, Virginia. But, uh, the main thrust of the book is that it offers over 40 proactive, practical wellness strategies for your mind, body, for your heart, for your soul, for you to be healthy and well. Just easy things, even if you can just take one or two of them and start practicing them and it will become a natural part of your life and your service. You're increasing your percentages of making it to retirement and being healthy and well. Uh, besides those 40, uh, practical strategies, there's also a whole chapter specifically towards your life partner or your spouse, how, how they can most effectively help you as a first responder and how you can help each other get through your unique career. Um, there, there's just a ton of, of information that I really wish I had when I started in 1985 'cause it would've saved me a lot of heartache.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Absolutely. I hope that our members go and check that book out. Well, Dan, I wanted to thank you again for taking time to speak with us today. I know that, um, people will be disappointed that they didn't get a chance to see you in person at our Annual Conference and so I'm just so pleased that we were able to have you on the City Speak podcast.

**Dan Willis:**

I really enjoyed and it was my pleasure, Adriana. Thank you.

[Podcast theme music plays briefly and fades out]

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

Here at City Speak we like to wrap up by reflecting on the important lessons that our guests bring us. Today in speaking with Captain Willis, I heard a number of things. The first of which I'm gonna comment on was the need for emotional survival being as important as physical survival. And when we train peace officers, we put an emphasis on that physical survival, but we need to increase the emphasis on emotional survival.

The second thing I heard was surrounding the need for proactive wellness to be a philosophy within our organizations which should be driven top-down with culture change support from the leaders within our cities.



The third thing that I heard was around the notion of spiritual wellness. I liked the fact that Captain Willis talked about spiritual leadership and spiritual being as being heart-centered in your work as a peace officer, and how putting that heart-centered approach first will make us better colleagues, better community members, and better able to do our jobs putting people first.

Listeners, that is the end of our City Speak show for today. Thank you for tuning in. A big thank you to Captain Dan Willis for joining us and discussing PTSD. Again, the title of Dan's book is *Bulletproof Spirit, The First Responder's Essential Resource for Protecting and Healing Mind and Heart*. [Podcast theme music begins] It can be purchased through Amazon.com. If you have any questions that didn't get specifically get addressed during our interview, please send them along to [podcast@lmc.org](mailto:podcast@lmc.org) and we will forward them to Dan Willis for response.

As always, I want to thank you for listening. Remember you can find us wherever all fine podcasts are listed including iTunes, Stitcher, and Pocketcast. Until next time, take care.

[Podcast theme music ends]