

On the *Front* Lines

An in-depth look into the lives and sacrifices of First Responders

The shrill ring of smoke alarms pierces the silence of the night, startling families out of their slumber. Smoke seeps through cracks and pours into bedrooms, causing a panic to settle in as people scramble for slippers and jackets. What now? Where's the fire? Has anyone called 911? The chaos that ensues in the wake of emergencies is precisely what first responders work to control.

First responders, including police officers, emergency medical personnel and fire service members, are highly trained professionals who assist in emergencies such as natural disasters and shootings. To develop the expertise needed for these critical situations, they undergo rigorous training which Captain James Reifschneider, a police officer in the Administrative Services division of the Palo Alto Police Department, has experienced firsthand.

"The majority of that six to seven months [at the police academy] is spent in a classroom getting lectures on constitutional law, search and seizure, different laws, penal codes, vehi-

cle codes and how to write police and traffic accident reports," Reifschneider said. "Then, there's what we call defensive tactics, which are the physical techniques for controlling people, whether that's strikes, holds, learning how to handcuff somebody in a way that's effective but not unduly painful or how to protect yourself."

After training, police officers must fulfill many duties, including protecting public safety, enforcing laws and assisting those in need. The recent wildfires in Los Angeles are an example of police involvement in larger community issues.

"No matter if you're the LA Fire Department or some large agency, you get really overwhelmed really fast by a big emergency like that [wildfires], and so the police role in that is really to help maintain order and facilitate evacuations," Reifschneider said.

During the recent Pacific Palisades and Easton fires, first responders had to navigate the challenge of citizens being reluctant to evacuate their homes.

"The goal of any [evacuation] directive is

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Palo Alto Police
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to evacuate civilians who might be in the area and have them be out of danger," Reifschneider said. "But the second part of that is you're also then limiting the risk to firemen who might have to go in and try to evacuate an occupied home that should be vacant."

According to Geoffrey Blackshire, Chief of Fire at the Palo Alto Fire Department, having a pre-planned strategy during rapid evacuations is essential for civilian safety and survival, as it promotes public cooperation and helps streamline the safety process.

"By preparing effectively and planning escape routes, making sure your smoke detectors are working, even medically, if someone has a medical emergency and a bystander knows hands-only CPR, this is all a huge benefit for us," Blackshire said. "That way, we can focus on suppression and putting the fire out, as opposed to having to go into rescue mode and enter an environment that we aren't familiar with. ... Our success is directly tied to the engagement of the public."

Civilians are key to the process of organizing, rebuilding and cooperating with first responders after emergencies. Many civilians may believe that the job of a firefighter is limited to battling fires, but according to Fire Captain of the Suisun City Fire Department Aaron Leming, this assumption is inaccurate.

"It's not always just about fighting fires," Leming said. "Firefighting is probably eighty percent medical calls, and the rest is fires, traffic collisions and things like that."

In times of crisis and panic, the coordination of different first responders is key to successfully handling both medical needs and threats.

"The fire and police departments have to be able to work collaboratively together because if there is a situation where people have been injured and need to be extracted, the best way to do that is to have trained medical people who can get in and help ex-

tract and provide treatment," Reifschneider said.

The synergy within a team is crucial for effectively assisting civilians under demanding time constraints. John McCann, Lieutenant of Rescue 1 located in Manhattan, believes that difficult situations make teamwork, camaraderie and adaptability even more essential.

"The most valuable thing on our truck is the six brains of the firefighters and officers working," McCann said. "The split-second problem solving is what makes us so successful."

Being a first responder appeals to those who thrive under pressure while assisting others and embracing dynamic

environments. For Palo Alto High School senior Lucy Kristofferson, the work ethic, quick thinking and compassion that being a first responder entails piqued her interest in becoming an Emergency Medical Technician.

"I like that I can directly help patients and that the situations you'll encounter are so different depending on where you get dispatched," Kristofferson said.

There is often a lack of in-depth understanding regarding the work of EMTs and paramedics. Michael Cabano, Assistant Chief of the Emergency Medical Services Agency, believes that this unfamiliarity reduces their versatile job to a constrained role.

"Many people think that we just put the patient in the back of the ambulance and get them to the hospital," Cabano said. "It's a lot more than just that. It's interact-

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ing with the patient, making sure they are transported in a safe and effective manner”

The gravity of the situations fluctuates, all depending on the different situations they encounter through the job.

“Our EMTs or paramedics have delivered babies in the back of the ambulances and also deal with very tragic situations on a daily basis, whether that be somebody going into cardiac arrest or being in a severe accident where they possibly lose their life,” Cabano said.

Some of these experiences can cause lasting trauma for first responders, a risk that they take on with their job.

“The one [situation] that seems to be the most impactful for any first responder... is any situation that involves a child that you know either leads to death or another tragic situation...” Cabano said. “A child has so much life to live, and when we deal with them in these emergency situations, it’s very impactful.”

Along with these mental impacts, the job also takes a toll physically. Most first responders, like Greg Larsen, a retired paramedic localized in Los Angeles, have busy schedules and regularly lose hours of sleep.

“In my department, you were sometimes running 18 to 21 a shift,” Larsen said. “You never went to bed, so you’re up for maybe 30 hours straight.”

Different cities and locations have various levels of busyness regarding the number of calls they receive, affecting how much time a call could take.

“Depending on how busy the system is, each of those calls usually takes about an hour to an hour and a half from start to finish,” Cabano said.

Since these calls take a different amount of time depending on the situation at hand, it makes for an unpredictable schedule.

The difficulties of this type of job may be overwhelming for prospective first responders, but McCann believes they are a part of the learning experience which helps to encourage growth.

“I would have to say the challenges that my team encounters are the best part,” McCann said. “We constantly train both mentally and physically for the disciplines we are responsible for.”

Many positives

come with the hardships of the job. This career can develop one’s compassion towards others, as Benjamin Slaughter, a firefighter from the Palo Alto Fire Department, exemplifies.

“Especially as a firefighter, we see people on some of the worst days of their lives, and we want to be able to show them compassion while also trying to help them the best we can,” Slaughter said. “It opened my eyes to realizing that we don’t always know what’s going on in everybody else’s life, and we need to show compassion for everybody, whether I’m at work being a firefighter or if I’m at home.”

Alongside the empathy needed in a selfless and community-minded occupation, it is necessary to take preemptive action to reduce the effects of potential dangers.

“[W]e’ll go out within our district that we serve, and we’ll pre-plan different things,” Slaughter said. “If it’s a high-rise building in our district, we will have an idea of how we’re going to handle that emergency; if something was on fire or if there was a gas leak, we’ll be able to note or identify where everything is.”

As they become more experienced, first responders encounter a greater variety of emergencies. The impact of these events varies from person to person. For some, it can be important to consider how the job would match their needs and wants.

“Make sure that you’re aware of what you’re going to be going through, doing or seeing in order to figure out if it’s a good fit for you,” Leming said.

Recently, the first responder community has seen an increase in the prioritization of mental health, a significant improvement for emergency personnel.

“We have not for many years done a good job of addressing mental health within the first responder community,” Cabano said. “That’s been an initiative over the last five years to increase the awareness due to the number of suicides within EMS, fire and law enforcement because of what they see daily.”

As suicides have risen among first responders, medical professionals have increasingly been brainstorming ways to effectively support their mental health.

“We are increasing awareness on actually reaching out, maybe having regular visits with a counselor to help walk through some of the tragedies that you see, because the tragedies you see at work might then carry on into your personal life,” Cabano said.



As the traumas of work seep into their personal lives, these communities have developed ways to confront and manage the stress that comes with their work.

“The wellness programs are big right now in the first responder community,” Cabano said. “We have peer counselors at our organization, as well as all the fire departments and law enforcement agencies, so they can meet with one of their co-workers, decompress and determine whether or not that individual needs to be placed on some time off.”



outwardly express their feelings,” Cabano said. “Over the last 15 years, we’ve really done a better job — I won’t say we’re perfect yet, and I don’t know that we’ll ever get perfect, but we’re increasing awareness.”

One way to cope with the feelings and emotions associated with trauma is to find activities that separate work and time off.

“I enjoy being with my family,” Reifschneider said. “I enjoy being with my kids. I enjoy running. I like doing things away from work and really being able to check out because the job can be all-consuming.”

There are many qualities needed to enter this type of job, such as being able to distance yourself from the job or being brave enough to show up every day. Cabano believes some values are necessary to start a career in this line of work.

“You have to be compassionate, you have to be empathetic, you have to be driven,” Cabano said. “You have to know that the reason why you’re getting into this

profession is not to make hundreds of thousands of dollars. You really, truly have to be in this profession for the right reason, and that’s to serve the community and to treat people in their times of need.”

While the struggles make the job difficult, ultimately, the satisfaction and privilege of serving others is what makes being a first responder worth it.

“I’ve been the fire chief since 2019, and it’s been one of the greatest honors of my life to be able to serve this community and to work with

such a dedicated team,” Blackshire said. “[N]ot just the fire department, but also the city.”

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**Geoffrey Blackshire,
Palo Alto Chief of Fire**

Text, design and art by ESTELLE DUFOUR, DISHA MANAYILAKATH and SOPHIA ZHANG