



Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services – Office of First Responder Wellness

2026 FIRST RESPONDER WELLNESS CONFERENCE

SEPTEMBER 2-4, 2026

HAMPTON ROADS CONVENTION CENTER
HAMPTON, VIRGINIA



www.dcjs.virginia.gov



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Department of Criminal Justice Services

Ashaki McNeil
Director

Harvey Powers
Chief Deputy Director

Washington Building
1100 Bank Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219
(804) 786-4000
www.dcjs.virginia.gov

September 2, 2026

Dear Colleague:

On behalf of the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), it is my pleasure to welcome you to the *2026 First Responder Wellness Conference*. The goal of this conference is to provide training and resources to law enforcement, fire, EMS, corrections, and 911 dispatchers, thus improving the effectiveness of first responders and the safety of the community.

First responders spend much of their careers supporting and assisting others in need. It can be difficult to recognize the impact of their careers on their daily lives. We realize that, as first responders, you are often exposed to harrowing events and the detrimental effects of witnessing human suffering. The daily accumulation of stress, anxiety, and trauma in your profession is rarely addressed.

DCJS is pleased to offer this two-and-a-half-day conference to provide information, resources, and training to the first responder community. Our goal is for first responder professionals to learn from experts in the field about resources and best practices while developing comprehensive health and wellness strategies.

It is my hope that the information offered here will help you focus on your own health and wellness so that you can continue improving the quality of life of the communities you serve.

DCJS appreciates your dedication to keeping the Commonwealth of Virginia safe. We hope you enjoy the conference.

With much gratitude,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ashaki McNeil".

Director

8:30 AM–9:00 AM

Welcome and Opening Ceremony

Presentation of Colors and National Anthem

Hampton Police Honor Guard

Lynsey Strohming, *Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services*

Opening Remarks

Division Director Lindsay Burton, *Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services*

Chief Jimmie Wideman, *Hampton Police Department*

9:00 AM–10:30 AM

Dropping the Shield — *Grand Ballroom ABCD*

Kenny Mitchell, Jr., *Operation Yellow Tape*

Dropping the Shield is a presentation focused on first responder mental health and the importance of proactive practices that support long-term wellness. Through my personal experiences in the fire service and the realities of trauma inside and outside the yellow tape, the message challenges the culture of silence and encourages responders and their families to drop the emotional shield we often carry.

Using Operation Yellow Tape's signature H.E.L.P. acronym, the presentation provides practical, real-life tools first responders and their families can use in their daily lives to recognize stress, address trauma early, and build healthier coping strategies. The goal is simple but powerful. Let's start to normalize conversations about mental health, strengthen personal resilience, and remind those who serve that asking for support is a sign of strength—not a sign of weakness. At its core, Dropping the Shield is about awareness, connection, and giving first responders and their families permission to take care of the person behind the badge.

10:30 AM–10:45 AM

Break

10:45 AM–11:30 AM

Beyond the Uniform With the LT's Daughter: Strengthening First Responder Families and How the Job Can Affect Your Kids — *Grand Ballroom ABCD*

Katherine Boyle, *Beyond the Uniform, LLC*

This session explores the often-overlooked experiences of kids growing up in law enforcement homes, and how family wellness directly impacts officer wellness and career longevity. This educational, story-driven presentation is designed for first responders and their families, drawing from Katherine Boyle's personal experience as the daughter of a retired police lieutenant and her professional work nationwide. Attendees will gain insight into the often-unseen ways the job can impact children and family dynamics, along with practical strategies to strengthen connection at home. Through real-life stories and relatable examples, Katherine highlights the importance of small, intentional moments that build trust and lasting relationships. Participants will walk away with actionable tools they can use immediately in their personal lives and with their families.

11:30 AM–12:30 PM

Lunch (provided) — *Grand Ballroom EF*

12:30 PM–2:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

1. Building Your Legacy Beyond the Uniform — *Grand Ballroom ABCD*

Katherine Boyle, *Beyond the Uniform, LLC*

This interactive workshop builds on the presentation "Beyond the Uniform With the LT's Daughter" by guiding participants through Katherine Boyle's BTU Framework: Community, Intentionality, and Personal Values. Designed for first responders, this session creates space for conversation and practical application.

Participants will examine who they surround themselves with, how they show up in their daily lives, and what they truly stand for at their core. Through focused discussion and practical exercises, they will learn how to take control of their time and energy, rather than allowing the job to dictate it. This workshop equips attendees with simple, actionable strategies to strengthen their foundation, take better care of themselves, and show up as their best selves on the job and at home.

2. Behind the Badge, Behind the Walls: How Family Systems Impact Responder Health — *104-105*

Kristina Moore, *Loudoun County Fire and Rescue*

This session explores how the patterns and dynamics within our families shape the way responders handle stress and stay grounded. Using the eight concepts of Bowen Theory, we will look at why certain reactions and roles show up in responder households and how those patterns influence well-being both at home and at work. The focus is on helping responders understand their own family system so they can strengthen resilience, communication, and connection. Participants will walk away with practical tools to support healthier dynamics at home and steadier functioning on the job.

3. Exploring Recent Trends in Peer Support — 106-107

Kit Cummings, *Virginia Law Enforcement Assistance Program*

In this session, the facilitator and participants will discuss the recent evolution of Public Safety Peer Support. Various types of organized peer support have been practiced for nearly 50 years, and while there has been steady systems growth and updated protocol, many practices have not kept pace, and change is in order. Session topics will include a review of peer support models in use in Virginia; choosing a protocol that suits your agency and community; shifting from centralized to dispersed peers and teams; the emergence of digital interactive care platforms; Peer Support; and integration of Human Resources active personnel tracking. Bring your curiosity and an open mind—we look forward to a lively conversation!

4. The Weight We Carry: Through the Lens of a Survivor; Trauma, Grief, Resilience and Wellness for Those Who Serve — 108-109

Scharnelle Hamlin, *Virginia Victim Assistance Network*

Your shift will never be the same. Mine wasn't either. First responders are equipped to respond to crisis after crisis, but are we equipped to handle the ongoing and cumulative effects of trauma, grief, loss, and survivor's guilt? These jobs and our desire to serve others often cause us to carry an invisible weight. We try to do this on our own because we believe it's expected of us. We aren't taught how to manage the emotional impact of our work, which leads to poor decision-making, broken relationships, physical ailments, and an overall decrease in wellness.

This powerful session covers professional and lived experience related to the unseen trauma survivors experience, as well as the hidden impact traumatic events have on those who serve. Through personal experiences and professional practice as a military veteran, homicide and suicide loss survivor, nationally credentialed victim advocate, and trauma professional; Scharnelle Hamlin will guide attendees through a realistic but compassionate discussion around cumulative trauma, resilience, healing, and seeking help without shame.

Learn about survivor's guilt, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and how to leverage cultural humility and trauma-informed practices to help others without compromising your own wellness. Remember that healing isn't weakness; it's one of the strongest things you'll ever do.

2:00 PM–2:30 PM

Break

2:30 PM–4:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

1. Unhurried: The Art of Slowing — Grand Ballroom ABCD

Mary Ghali, *NOTA Fitness*

Life is busy. We're constantly going from one thing to the next, especially as first responders. Do you wish you had more time to enjoy the things that matter most to you? If so, you are not alone. In this workshop, we will explore the concept of "hurry sickness" and how it affects our health, work performance, relationships, and spirituality. You will walk away with practical tips and strategies to help you find balance and joy in a hectic world.

2. Behind the Badge, Behind the Walls: How Family Systems Impact Responder Health — 104-105

Kristina Moore, *Loudoun County Fire and Rescue*

Session repeated, see description above.

3. Back on Track: CommonHealth's Guide to a Healthy Back — 106-107

Marylouise Gerdes, *Virginia Department of Human Resource Management*

Cynthia Duncan, *Virginia Department of Human Resource Management*

If you suffer from back pain, you're not alone. Back pain is one of the most common medical problems in the United States. It is estimated that more than 16 million adults experience chronic back pain. Most back problems are not the result of a single injury but rather result from months or years of poor posture, improper body mechanics, tight or weak muscles, and a lack of overall fitness. CommonHealth's Back on Track campaign will provide you with some simple steps to help you care for your back to prevent injury and pain.

4. Financial Wellness for First Responders — 108-109

Matthew Tuttle, *Financial Growth Partners*

Join us for an in-depth session tailored to law enforcement officers, covering key financial strategies for retirement, wealth management, and more. Attendees will gain essential financial knowledge to help them manage their money with confidence. They will learn practical steps to prepare for a secure retirement, along with clear strategies for navigating taxes, income planning, and building long-term wealth. Throughout the session, participants will benefit from guidance shared by an experienced professional, who will offer insights to support informed decision-making and lasting financial well-being.

4:00 PM

End of Day 1

8:30 AM–10:00 AM **Fueling Resilience: Leading Yourself First to Turn Pressure Into Growth** — *Grand Ballroom ABCD*

Michael Laidler, *Michael Laidler Unlimited*

Before leaders can lead others, they must first lead themselves. In an era where uncertainty challenges even the most seasoned professionals, Michael Laidler empowers audiences to strengthen their mindset behind exceptional self-leadership. Drawing on two decades in law enforcement and his Failure F.U.E.L.S. Growth framework, he reveals how to transform internal pressure into fuel for growth and success. Through real-life stories and actionable strategies, Michael shows leaders how to build resilience that lasts when it matters the most. Perfect for law enforcement agencies looking to strengthen their leadership ranks, equip frontline teams, elevate command-staff development, or engage professional associations.

10:00 AM–10:30 AM **Break**

10:30 AM–11:30 AM **Healthy-ish Eating & Sleep** — *Grand Ballroom ABCD*

Megan Lautz, *RescueRD, LLC*

“Healthy-ish” will dispel the illusion that there is a “perfect diet” for all law enforcement officers. LEOs face a variety of challenges when it comes to eating well and recovering from a shift. This LEO-specific approach will zone in on challenges and typical gaps in nutrition discovered through eight years of experience and hundreds of station visits.

Through this session, you will understand tangible, realistic nutrition interventions for improving energy levels, mood, and performance. You’ll also discover tips and tricks for eating well on day and midnight shifts and learn how to make healthier choices when packaged food and fast food are the only options available. This presentation will give you the tools to perform better mentally and physically on shift work.

11:30 AM–12:30 PM **Lunch (provided)** — *Grand Ballroom EF*

12:30 PM–2:00 PM **BREAKOUT SESSIONS**

1. **Sound for Healing: Sound Bath Meditation for First Responders** — *Grand Ballroom ABCD*

Mary Ghali, *NOTA Fitness*

First responders regularly face high-stress situations that can take a toll on their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. “Sound for Healing: Sound Bath Meditation for First Responders” offers a powerful, restorative experience using sound frequencies to promote deep relaxation, stress relief, and mental clarity.

This session introduces the practice of sound bath meditation, where participants will immerse themselves in the soothing vibrations of singing bowls, chimes, and other healing instruments. The session is designed to help first responders reduce stress, improve sleep quality, lower anxiety, and enhance overall resilience. Guided by an experienced practitioner, attendees will explore how sound therapy can support emotional regulation, nervous system recovery, and mindfulness, providing a much-needed reset from the demands of their profession. No prior meditation experience is required—just a willingness to relax and receive the healing power of sound. By the end of this session, first responders will leave feeling rejuvenated, centered, and equipped with a new tool for ongoing stress management and well-being.

2. **My Brothers’ and Sisters’ Keeper: Understanding How Trauma Impacts First Responders and Service Providers** — *104-105*

Julia Fuller-Wilson, *Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services*

Dawn Bush, *Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services*

This training will provide a better understanding of the effects of historical and acute trauma on those who provide services and care for the victims and survivors of a traumatic incident. We will discuss self-assessing for stress reactions and identifying warning signs that someone on your team may be struggling. We will also explore elements of stress first aid and the short- and long-term effects of primary and secondary trauma, as well as effective interventions that have proven successful for the first responder community.

3. **Train for Thee, but Not for Me: Closing the Gap in First Responder Wellness** — *106-107*

Kari Magner, *Virginia Office of Emergency Medical Services*

As first responders, we spend countless hours training and honing our skills and knowledge in preparation for the next call, the next patient, the next scene. The question becomes, “Why do we spend hundreds of hours preparing for the call, but little time preparing for what we carry home afterward?” This session treats responder health like any other critical piece of equipment: requiring regular maintenance, practical care, and tactical preparation. Join us to learn how to bridge the gap between caring for your community and caring for yourself.

4. Tempest in a Teacup: How to Be Effective When You're Expected to Be Delicate — 108-109

Abigail White, *Law Enforcement Analyst*

Women have been climbing career ladders, breaking glass ceilings, and handling career hurdles in law enforcement for decades, all while navigating a minefield that many of their teammates can't see. This session tells one woman's story, from believing sexism wasn't real to discovering in a single workday that she was simultaneously "too sexy," "not sexy enough," "autistic," "inspiring," and that she needed to "dial back on the testosterone from her CrossFit." It addresses the emotional exhaustion of fighting systems, the Madonna-Whore minefield of undercover work, and the bureaucracy-induced fatigue that slowly chips away at women's desire to keep doing the job. The talk will also cover what (and who) actually helps the most—and, spoiler alert, it's not who you think. Men are both welcome and needed in this session.

2:00 PM–2:30 PM

Break

2:30 PM–4:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

1. Creating a Culture of Well-Being & Kindness in Corrections and Law Enforcement: A Foundational Wellness Approach — *Grand Ballroom ABCD*

Carrie Baines, *Virginia Department of Corrections*

Dr. Jennifer Jessee, *Virginia Department of Corrections*

Creating a supportive culture is essential for the well-being, resilience, and retention of staff working in corrections, jails, and law enforcement. This session explores how agencies can intentionally build a culture grounded in kindness and holistic wellness using the 8 Dimensions of Wellness: emotional, physical, occupational, intellectual, social, spiritual, environmental, and financial. Participants will learn how these dimensions form a foundation for sustainable wellness and how responsibility for well-being is shared across three levels—organizational systems, leadership behaviors, and individual practices.

Through practical examples and real-world strategies, attendees will walk away with actionable steps to foster kindness, reduce burnout, and integrate wellness seamlessly into daily operations. This presentation is designed to support agencies as they work toward creating safer, healthier, and more compassionate work environments for all staff.

2. The Foundation Within: Spiritual Wellness in Law Enforcement — 104-105

Steve Boots, *Henrico Police Department, Mount Victory Baptist Church*

Law enforcement officers face pressures that affect every area of life. This session explores spiritual wellness as a foundational pillar for navigating stress, trauma, anger, grief, relationships, and the weight of the badge. Officers will gain practical tools for strengthening their spiritual foundation, finding renewed purpose, and developing resilience for both duty and life.

3. Understanding Problem Gambling: What It Is, How to Recognize It, and How to Access Resources for the People You Serve — 106-107

Anne Rogers, *Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services*

Marie Bage, *Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services*

This session will introduce participants to the core concepts of how gambling can develop into a serious problem, with a focus on understanding who may be at greater risk. Attendees will learn to recognize the key signs and symptoms that often signal when gambling behavior is becoming harmful. The session will also highlight the range of resources and support services available throughout Virginia, giving participants clear pathways to help themselves or others who may be struggling.

4. Beyond the Call: The Psychological Shield of the Clinical-Tactical Partnership— 108-109

Kristen Strickler, *Chesterfield County Mental Health Support Services*

Brian "Rhodie" Rhodenizer, *Chesterfield County Police Department*

Traditional crisis training often misses the human reality of the crisis. This session explores the psychological impact of embedding a clinical therapist directly into law enforcement operations. Designed for first responders, we examine how a trusted co-responder partnership mitigates cumulative moral injury, shares high-stakes decision-making burdens, and relieves hypervigilance—protecting officer well-being and restoring professional stamina.

Together, Kristen and Rhodie present "Beyond the Call: The Psychological Shield of the Clinical-Tactical Partnership." Their session blends clinical insight with lived experience, offering practical strategies, honest dialogue, and a shared belief that first responders deserve support that is culturally competent, accessible, and grounded in real-world challenges.

4:00 PM

End of Day 2

8:30 AM–10:00 AM	Training for the First Responder: Fitness That Supports the Job—and Life After — Grand Ballroom ABCD Brandon Holder, <i>Tactical Performance Project</i> This presentation breaks down how first responders can train to improve their work performance while building long-term resilience for their career and life after the job. It was developed with the realities of the lifestyle in mind, prioritizing the physical demands and common obstacles that first responders face, such as limited time, inconsistent schedules, injury history, and uncertainty around effective training methods. From there, practical solutions will be provided to help simplify training, improve exercise selection, and build a sustainable approach to strength and conditioning. The goal is longevity and what fits the individual to support performance when it matters most.
10:00 AM–10:30 AM	Break
10:30 AM–12:00 PM	From Stuck to Unstoppable: Breaking Through Self-Sabotage and Reclaiming Your Inner Power — Grand Ballroom ABCD Carlo Taormina, <i>Peak Performance Coach</i> Carlo's talk is designed for high performers, entrepreneurs, professionals, students, and anyone who feels stuck or burned out or indulges in self-sabotage. Through Carlo's personal story and actionable strategies, he walks the audience through how he overcame feeling stuck, self-sabotage, limiting beliefs, depression, and suicidal ideation. This talk isn't about motivation, but transformation. Carlo gives the audience the tools to shift their identity, build real confidence, and reclaim control of their mindset and future. This session is designed to help people reconnect to their power and finally get out of their own way.
12:00 PM	Conference Concludes

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Additional conference materials are available by accessing this QR code:



www.dcjs.virginia.gov/training-events/2026-first-responder-wellness-conference

Virginia First Responder Wellness website:



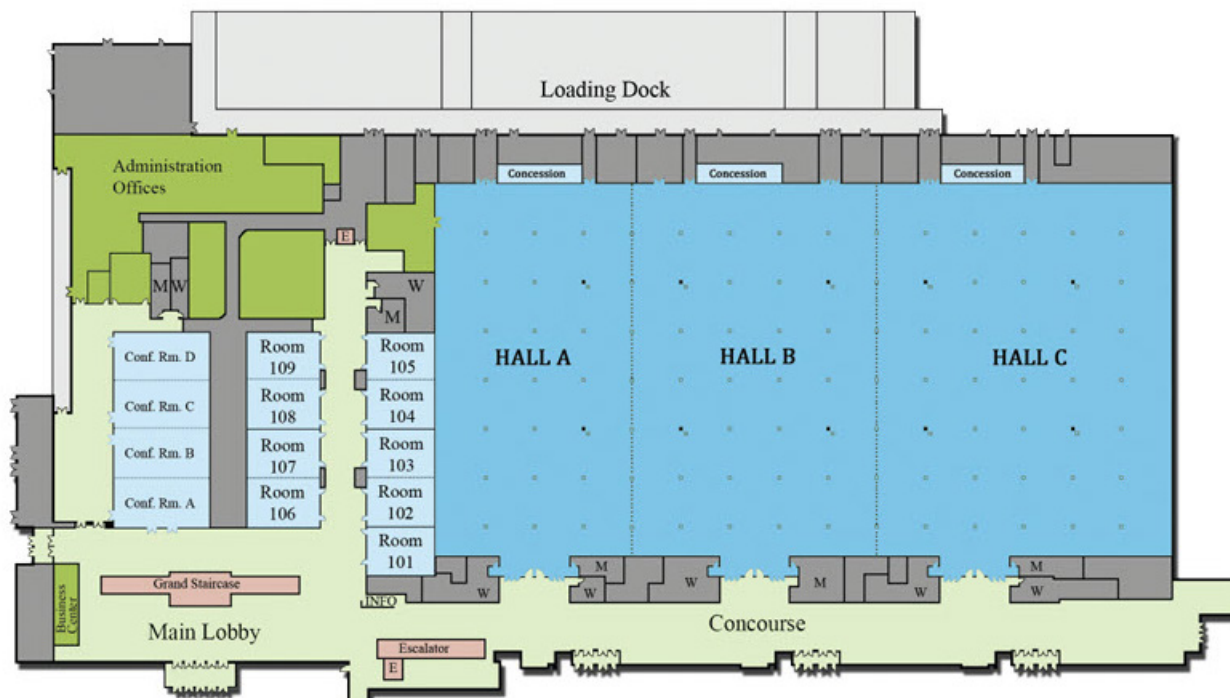
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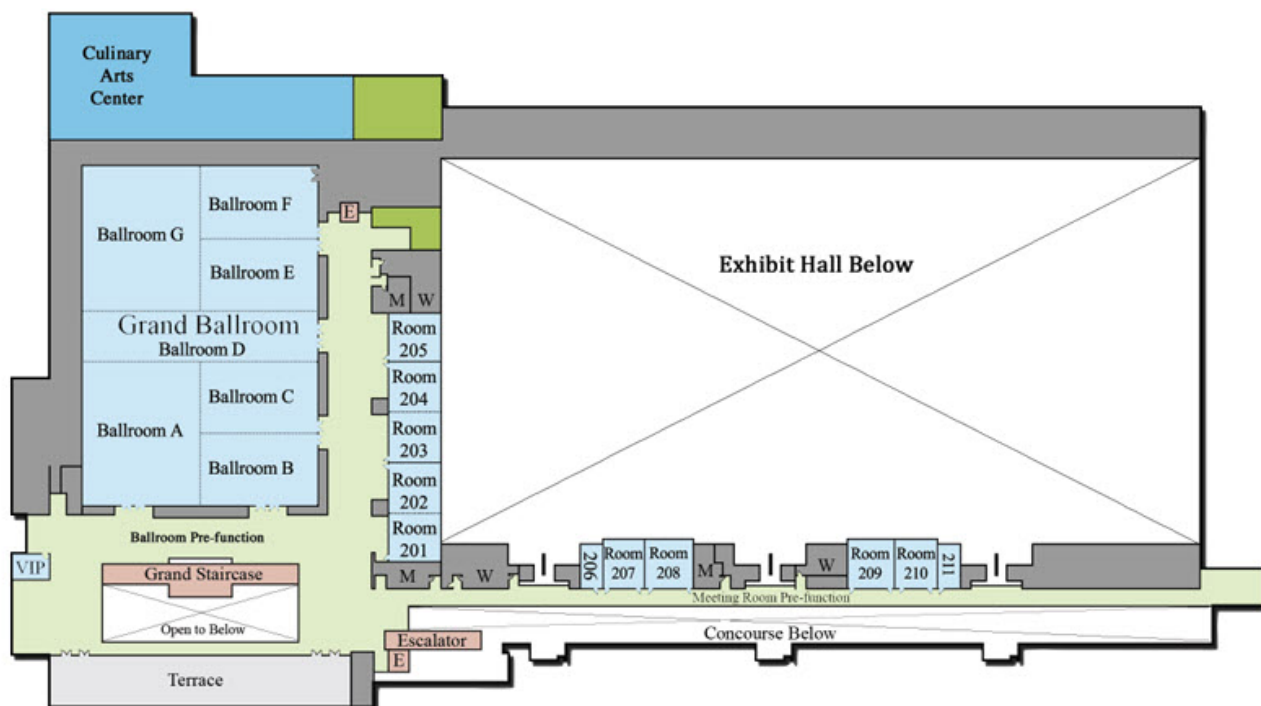
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