Lessons Learned: Mental Wellness After a Critical Incident

Speaker 1: You are listening to a SAFLEO Sessions Podcast, a production of the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program. The SAFLEO Program is funded through grants from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, BJA, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The points of view and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the podcast authors and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. Here's your host.

Michon M.: Hi. I'm Michon Morrow with the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program through the Bureau of Justice Assistance and host for this podcast. I am a captain at the Lincoln, Nebraska, Police Department with 23 years of experience. For me, this is something that I work on daily at our department through a wellness program that we have implemented in the past several years.

Today, I'm joined by Lieutenant Mike Madden, who spent 28 years in law enforcement before retiring from the San Bernardino, California, Police Department. Mike worked in a variety of roles during his career and was amongst the first responding officers on scene following the San Bernardino terrorist attack in 2015, a mass shooting at the Inland Regional Center.

Mike, how are you today?

Mike M.: I'm doing well. How are you?

Michon M.: I'm good. Again, very excited to be able to talk with you today about your journey in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in your

city and how it impacted you and your department and what lessons that we can learn today as we have this discussion. I'm hoping that you'll be willing, even though this is a topic that you've discussed several times over the years, to set the stage for our listeners and take us back to that day of when that initial call for service came out and your response.

Mike M.: Absolutely. This occurred on December 2, 2015. The initial call came out at 10:58 in the morning. During that period, I was a lieutenant and I was the manager for both our records and our dispatch divisions. I had been out in a meeting at our city hall. And following that meeting, I went to put some fuel in my unit, and I heard the initial call of shots fired at the Inland Regional Center.

I began responding toward the location, and I was the first unit on scene. We were getting a lot of different updates as to possibly multiple shooters still in the location, this being an active shooter situation with the gunmen having what was being reported as machine guns by some of our callers.

I decided to have three other officers—the first three officers to arrive on scene on my location, we formulated a four-person entry team, and we then approached and made entry into the building.

We've all been through active shooter training in the course of our careers. I had been through the in-house training three times in the years following the Columbine incident, but what I had found and what we were experiencing when we made entry into that room where we had 14 fatalities and 22 others critically wounded was that everything that we deal with in those active shooter training scenarios—it's so much more than that when you're actually experiencing it firsthand.

Michon M.: In law enforcement, we frequently train on those perishable skills that we have to continue to work on—our firearms, our defensive tactics—and departments across the country for years now since Columbine High School have been training on active shooter events. When you are now faced with responding and being one of the first responders to an active shooter in your community—when

you think back to that training, tactics aside, do you think that we do enough to prepare our responding officers for that emotional impact and those visuals that you start seeing on your arrival?

Mike M.: That's a good question because I think we do get so deeply embedded and ingrained in the process that we're not necessarily always factoring in what you're going to experience at that time. I was no stranger going into violent situations. I've been to my fair incidents where there were multiple shooting victims before, but nothing prepared me for what we were seeing at that time. You're going to have that moment to where you really have to be prepared for that, not just from a tactical perspective, but also from an emotional perspective.

Michon M.: Right. Can you take us to that—what you were seeing, hearing, just the experiences that you were going through while trying to remain tactically sound to keep yourself and the others in the room as safe as possible?

Mike M.: We experienced our first victim in the threshold at the door that we made entry through, and she was clearly deceased. There was another gentleman sitting on a bench outside of the conference room. He was seated in an upright position, and he was looking down at his cell phone. I was yelling at him that he needed to get up, he needed to run, he needed to flee to safety.

It wasn't registering why he wasn't listening to me, why he was frozen, and I thought he must be in shock from his fellow employee being deceased at his feet essentially. I had to stop and take that deep breath for myself and recognize that he, unfortunately, had been shot as well and was deceased where he was. It was things like that that really—we need to be aware of that we get into that tunnel vision and we have to be ready and prepared to see the big picture.

When we made entry into the room, there was a number of victims everywhere. This happened on December 2. I think one of the initial things that struck me was that they had decorated the room in holiday decorations. There was a Christmas tree in there at the

table. There were multiple other Christmas-oriented decorations within the room. It just seems so wrong to me that here people were at a work-related event that also turned into somewhat of a Christmas party or celebration for them, and to have that kind of violence—it was really hard to fathom and to deal with.

The stimulus was just overwhelming. You had fire alarms going off. The lights were flashing from the alarms. It was so loud. We could barely communicate with one another unless we were yelling essentially into each other's ears. There were victims everywhere. The fire sprinklers were going off. They were saturating the ceiling tiles, which were falling to the floor. It was absolutely sensory overload. There was fresh gunpowder just filling the air.

7:06

Michon M.: I'm just simply struck by the ability and the enormity of the situation that you have found yourself in—to be able to have a brief moment in time where you are stopping and processing the scene to the level that, the recognizing the Christmas decorations and the trauma and the impact that it has on our daily lives and what these people should be doing. I think that that speaks volumes on who you are and your character in recognizing that.

I think it is, again, a reminder to us of the importance of being able to better train for how we will work through these. Of course, we will all work through it differently, but how we will take in that environment and, again, still stay attuned. You talked about tunnel vision and how we continue to progress through safely so when we come out on the other end of this, that we are well-grounded and emotionally sound. Again, it speaks volumes in how you process that.

Mike M.: It's been an evolving process, that's for sure.

Michon M.: Yeah. As most people and I watched this from my department in Lincoln, Nebraska, and at home, and on the national news—I watched a lot of interviews and press conferences. One of the things that I picked up and part of the story was you having

discussions of your interactions with these individuals that you're coming across. Can you talk to us more about that?

Mike M.: Absolutely. We had some people who had sustained some horrific wounds. Here, we're making entry, and to them—they were seeing us as their saviors and yet, to have to move past those people because our goal at that time had to be finding our shooters to eliminate the threat. That was a really, really difficult decision to have to make. Those people were definitely in great amounts of pain, and it was tough to move past those. Your first inclination is to just want to stop and provide them comfort and try to extract those individuals.

So, in my discussions with them afterwards, and I didn't even realize that myself or the other three officers who were part of our entry team were saying this—some of the survivors told us in the aftermath that we told them we were apologizing and saying, "We're sorry. There's others coming in. We have to keep moving." Several of them said that that gave them that hope that they knew that even though we were having to move beyond, that there were others who were coming in and in fact, that was the reality. There were multiple other teams assembling and making entry within minutes of us having to leave those folks. So, it's important that we continue to train that, and that we're communicating that because that could be the difference between life and death.

Michon M.: That's powerful. That's so powerful that you were able to share that with us as a part of training, and I think as a part of, if I'm hearing you correctly, the healing process down the road as you reflect back. You talked about going through a feeling of failing, but those communications down the road and recognizing that those words mattered and that you did support them and that you did give those hope that others were coming to assist them.

I would like to go to after you've cleared the facility and all of the reinforcements are there to assist. What role you took immediately after—once the building is cleared and medical personnel are on scene and treating those survivors? Where you were at in your mind-set in the role that you took afterwards?

Mike M.: We had a SWAT Team sergeant take over the initial search, took over my role in leading our initial search team. I then went back into the room and began working or thinking that I was going to start—how do we extract our wounded and how do we start getting them to the medical attention that they need?

When I went back into the room, I noticed that there were a number of first responders already in there taking on that role. So, people were being triaged and carried out of the location. So, once we've got the victims out, I then was called to go out to the tactical command post to give a debrief to our other commanders who were on scene. After doing that, I found myself in a very strange position or place. There were so many things happening, and I found that my role, for me personally, seemed to come to a screeching halt. What I had done up to that point was now being taken over by other managers and other supervisors and officers on scene. After giving the debrief, I was just left to my own devices.

I went to the command post and spoke with a few people, but I realized I was compromised to a degree to where I wasn't effective as I could and should have been. I felt like I was in a bit of a fog as to, "Okay. What do I do now?" I'm sure that that was some of the adrenaline settling within my system that it was a unique situation.

Michon M.: So, from a leadership standpoint—and, clearly, there's chaos and they're trying to orchestrate through all of that—those that have come in and have started to step in to the role that you were originally leading as one of the first or the first responder on scene. In looking back now, is there something that could have been done differently that would have benefited you in that feeling of being compromised if it was still keeping you active and engaged with the scene or entirely removing you, providing resources? What could we take from this as a lesson learned of how to respond to our officers that are involved in active shooter or other traumatic incidents?

Mike M.: I've been asked a number of times in debriefs, and especially when I speak to those people within the civilian sector about what we had

experienced. Oftentimes, the question is, "Oh, my gosh, following this incident, were you immediately put off? Were you allowed to decompress? Did everybody have that opportunity available to them?" The reality is no. In fact, rather than having that in place, we still felt as if we found out shortly after the onset of our incident that this was terrorist related. We were concerned that there could be other potential cells involved, and as such, we didn't know if there would be additional threats or targets within our city. So, instead of having that immediate break for our personnel and being able to allow them to be off, we went on tactical alert. We went 12 on, 12 off shifts with no days off. That went on for five more days following our incident.

So, the recognition that we are the police—we still have to function, we have to deal with that situation that we have going right then and there, and we also still have an entire city that we have to continue to be able to provide service for. So, we can't just all roll up and go home and do those things that we would want to be able to do. But with that being said, we need to recognize that there are going to be individuals within our organizations that—and I was one of them, who have just dealt and experienced something like they'll probably never have experienced in their career and hopefully will never have to again. How does that prevent you from being as effective as you can and should be?

Michon M.: Did your department during that time, still knowing that there's an investigation that's still continuing and your agency or department is on high alert and putting more pressure on the resources that you have—were there any supportive measures that were put in place at that time to check in with your officers, to see how they're doing, including yourself?

Mike M.: We contracted with a group that provide counseling services for not just our agency, but several of the surrounding agencies, and they were immediately notified and brought in for some of the debriefs and things like that that were happening.

There's so many things happening that sometimes, things are overlooked. What happened in our instance was that we did have

this attack, our shooters, our two suspects were able to flee from the location, and there was this manhunt going on for them. And there was a prolonged gun battle with the suspects with both of them being killed.

We had 22 officers from various agencies who were involved in that shooting portion. Each of those individual agencies already had protocols in place to where when you're in an officer-involved shooting, there's mandates that you have to go, and you're now mandated to go before the counseling team and go through a fitness for duty before you return to active duty. That is a great protocol and policy for departments to have in place and something that almost all do.

Michon M.: So, I want to take a second and ask you, because you're talking generally on the departments and having these policies. Going through this yourself and understanding your role and your position in your agency as a leader—do you think that participating in debriefings and potentially seeking services through a therapist or a psychologist identified by your city or whatever that looks like in your areas, should it be mandated?

Mike M.: Prior to this, I would have said no, but in the aftermath of it, absolutely, because there was the mandate put on those individual officers who actually were engaged in the gun battle, but there was no such mandate placed upon those officers who had made entry into the location, myself having been one of them.

I would argue that those individuals were as potentially emotionally compromised as the officers who were involved in the officer-involved shooting with our suspects. So, with that being said—and one of the things, and just to give you a little personal anecdote for myself, was that I was back at the command post when the shooting was taking place. I was within a mile and a half of the location, and when everybody was heading there, I wanted so badly to run over to a car, jump in, and go and be involved in this engagement because I had seen the horror and the atrocities that they had afflicted, and I wanted to be involved in the apprehension and stopping the threat.

I didn't do that because we had talked so much, and we had pushed very heavily from a managerial perspective about mass response. Sometime when you have those types of situations that are taking place, you'll get officers self-dispatching, and we just sometimes get in our own way. So, I wanted to lead by example and not add to that chaos because I knew we had more than ample officers on the scene. The reality was me being there wasn't going to help. I would just be yet another officer getting in the way potentially of this active gunfight.

Part of me really had struggles with that. I felt as if having seen what they had done, if I had just gotten there somehow and been involved in the apprehension or the take down of those individuals, would I have had more closure? That was something that I had to deal with and talk through in the wake of this incident for myself personally.

I think that from a managerial perspective, we still see that there's still somewhat of a stigma related to people coming forward, officers coming forward, officers or deputies coming forward after a major incident and saying, "Hey, I may have been affected by that." The mind-set for years has always been, "Don't show your emotions. Rub some dirt on it and get back in the game."

We particularly see that in our older officers to where if you somehow say that, "I was affected by this incident," that you're somehow showing some degree of weakness. The reality is—is that this career will do that. If you're not being somewhat compromised or if you're not being affected by an incident of this magnitude, then you probably really need to do a self-check as to—we're not robots, we're individuals, and we are impacted by these things, and we need to recognize that.

In the aftermath of the incident, I found that some people—and now I'm talking about my fellow officers, some people processed it differently than others. I mean, it's just human nature that some people were very open to discussing what we had dealt with and gone through, and others were much more closed off. It was just

trying to assess those. And I found for myself that it was a little different, because here I was a manager with our organization—I was a lieutenant, so I feel like, potentially, I was even trying to wall off a little bit of some of maybe the emotional aspect when I was having those discussions, because I didn't want to show any vulnerability or that I had been potentially compromised by what I had personally gone through.

Michon M.: Exactly. So, you are processing through this in these discussions that you're having with yourself—for example, wanting to be a part of taking down the two people responsible for the carnage that you just witnessed. Did you have that conversation with any others that were still on the scene? If I remember correctly, you had three other officers that were on your initial entry team with you. Were they still on scene? Were you conversing with them and having these conversations and providing support to them? I'm just curious of how we make sure that no one falls through the cracks.

Mike M.: Yeah. The other officers from my team—the three others were actually put into other roles. I didn't even see them until much later in the day. We didn't have that opportunity to debrief in the moments following our incident. Whether or not we would have taken that, I don't know, but I think it probably would have been beneficial for us to have at least collectively had that opportunity to just assess, "Hey, how you guys doing? You okay?"

Michon M.: Yeah, have that moment.

Mike M.: Yeah. In law enforcement, we don't have that. For the most part, we run single-person units. There are larger departments that run two-person units, but for the most part, we go in to situations and we sometimes handle situations that are shocking to the senses in just a normal course and scope of our days, and then we're expected to just go back to your car by yourself and then move on to the next call.

That kind of process just goes on and on and on, and we don't always get that chance to be able to evaluate what it was and process what it was that we just saw and have that debrief. It's so

critical to just venting and being allowed to have that emotional release.

Michon M.: I can't tell you how much I appreciate that you made reference that we're not robots, and that we're human beings as well. I think that this is something that needs to come from top down to create sustainable change and allowing for our officers to be able to process through their emotions and impact their emotional and mental health and their overall wellness.

We train so much in law enforcement to be able to deal with people in our communities that are suffering from mental health issues, but yet, we sometimes turn a blind eye internally that this is a conversation that we also need to be having on a regular basis to have the impacts that we need to keep our workforce healthy.

Mike M.: Absolutely. It's not just in the wake or aftermath of major incidents like we experienced on December 2. It's just the day-to-day things that officers are confronted with. It's going into homes where you have an abused or molested child. It's going to that traffic collision where you have a family involved and you see just that carnage that results from it. That is a very cumulative effect, and it's going to have an emotional impact. Whether it's one watershed moment from a major incident or whether it's just dealing with those things day-in and day-out, we all have to understand that those things take the toll on each of us in the course of our careers.

Michon M.: Absolutely. I want to take you back for a moment, if I may, to—December 2 was the day of the terrorist attack, but I want to take you to December 3. As with most of our listeners and those across the country, we watched the press conference. You were front and center the very next day talking about your response and the things that you saw and heard. I'd like, if you're willing, to talk about how that evolved that you were a part of the press conference and now reflecting back if that was helpful at that critical time.

Mike M.: For several days, we had multiple media outlets in our city looking for any and every story they could possibly get. One of the big

things that they kept asking repeatedly of our administration was that they wanted to be able to talk to some of the first responders. That's not something that we are traditionally open to. We certainly don't want to compromise anything to do with the ongoing investigation, but then you also have to be aware of potentially—is that officer going to be able to handle the questions that may come? Are they emotionally well enough to be able to do that?

The chief, who I was personal friends with—and he knew I was an assistant PIO for our department at the time, so he knew that I was not a stranger to speaking on camera. They kept repeatedly getting those requests. So, he came to me, and he by no means made it an order, a directive. He just was having a conversation as a friend and telling me how much pressure he was getting to have a first responder give something to the media. He asked me if I would be willing to do that.

I agreed to go on camera. I'll tell you, fortunately, I didn't throw up all over myself because it was a little daunting. I've been on camera before, but there had to be 100 cameras there, it seemed like. Fortunately, we were able to get through it, and it seemed to resonate with the public.

For me personally, I know that I was exhausted after I did that, just the emotional—in recalling for the media, I was going through and playing some of these things through my mind and was trying to relate that back to them. When I was done, I just remember being physically exhausted because I think, once again, the influx of everything that had been happening hit me.

Michon M.: Did you have any, after the press conference, any support systems in place to help you work through that? Again, I rewatched the press conference in preparation for talking with you today. The emotion was evident not only for you. Your chief, I will tell you, his concern was sincere and could be read through his facial expressions and body language. I appreciated seeing that, especially reflecting on this on a leadership position and how we support our officers. So, when this was said and done, did you have a safe place to land?

Mike M.: I did. I have to tell you, for me personally, there was nowhere that I wanted to be more for that safe place than home. So, when I was able to get home to my wife and my kids, that was where I felt that safety net. Although the counselors were on scene at the station, I had not been mandated to go speak with them. I didn't elect voluntarily to go and speak with them at that time. I guess I wasn't ready, personally, to do that. I was stopping and talking with other officers involved and things like—and checking in with them. I was concerned about showing too much vulnerability, because I was still a manager with our department. I didn't want word getting around that, "Hey, Mike was potentially emotionally compromised." It was with my family that I could let my guard down to some degree—that I didn't go into full blown debriefs with them. I didn't want them to be horrified by any of that, but I could just be candid and talk about what I was feeling, and that was really therapeutic for me.

Michon M.: You had mentioned that you felt vulnerable and not necessarily wanting to express the emotions that you were going through and feeling, because I don't know if that gives you a sense of feeling, or all of us a sense of feeling, less credible when we're trying to lead our agencies, but were there any lessons learned or takeaways that you can share with us?

Mike M.: Certainly. From a departmental aspect, that as quickly as you possibly can, it's important to get your management team together and talk about and debrief what the incident—what are we doing well? Where do we need to be focusing our attention to? Are we doing best by our community? Are we doing best by our people internally? How do we address those issues? That conversation needs to be happening as soon as practical following a major incident of this magnitude, because your organization and your community is going to be looking to you for guidance and for leadership. So, that absolutely needs to take place.

You need to be talking about, "Okay. Well, now, are we going to have debriefs within our department?" You need to have those debriefs as soon as you possibly can. One of the things that I think

where we have failed historically on law enforcement is that we tend to include in our debriefs—we include those people who were directly involved. What about those people who were indirectly involved? Just because they weren't necessarily on scene doesn't mean that they're not also impacted. We talk so much about being families, but yet, we don't always include other people in those conversations and suddenly, they feel as if they're relegated to some—they're not as important as those people who were actively involved in that incident that we're debriefing at the time. So, you need to have these inclusive debriefs.

Michon M.: Yeah, so many of our support staff, that it's very easy on a day-to-day basis, like you said, to dismiss things as we go about business. But at the end of the day, our business can't occur without our support staff, without our emergency operation communication centers, without our records personnel, who have to process all of those reports that have been dictated by officers that have been through these traumas, and while they're reading it, they're living it vicariously, and that has an impact on them. I think you're right that that's very important for us to keep in mind and recognize as we move through these.

Michon M.: Are there support systems that could have been in place to help at home? If that was a safe place for you to land, that if your family needed resources, were they available through your department or in your community?

Mike M.: Yes, through the counseling team. The organization that we contract with, they also will reach out to family members and have that mechanism in place. Now, how many people avail themselves to that? I don't know. My family did not. We're fooling ourselves if we think that these are the only things that impact us directly. These are huge impacts on our families as well. I would say that my wife and kids, they were absolutely impacted by this.

My wife works in a law firm. She's a paralegal. Her office is actually less than a mile away from where the shooting had taken place. She's on the sixth floor, and she could see the Inland Regional Center. One of her coworkers—he had an application where he

was able to hear San Bernardino PD traffic. We weren't encrypted at the time. He came to her and he said, "Hey, isn't Mike Lincoln Three? I think he's got something going on right now."

She said, "Well, yeah, he's Lincoln Three, but he'd be back at the office. He wouldn't be out in the field."

He said, "I think you may want to hear this."

So, she was hearing real-time our police traffic that was taking place. I had 27 missed phone calls from her on my cell phone when I exited and finally had a moment to look at my phone. She kept dialing my phone repeatedly because she was hearing what was happening. She was seeing all of the traffic and all of the units rolling code three to the location in response to this terrorist attack. Just the fear that she was having within herself that she wasn't able to reach me, and that I wasn't answering her call, that was something that we definitely had to work through in the aftermath of this.

Michon M.: So, important for us to recognize all of the impacts. While you were in such a unique position as a leader in your agency and wanting to support the officers that you were checking in with, but yourself needing that safe place to land, and knowing that your family is also journeying through this trauma with you. It's just something that we always need to keep in mind and where we should have support systems in place. So, everyone gets back to some sense of normal on the other side.

A couple of things that I want to talk on that you had mentioned—and you said that the community was watching you. I think that that's important, because as we work to build legitimacy in our communities, we are tending to be very transparent, open, and engaging with our relationships. I am curious of what that looked like to you and if there were points in time that it was difficult while you were trying to support your staff, your officers internally. Can you do that at the same time that we are also trying to support the healing process and be that leader in our community and what's that look like?

Mike M.: Yeah. I'm glad you brought that up because at the end of the day, we are servants to the people in our communities. That's our role and our job. We had certainly a department affected by this, but we have a community that felt as if they were victimized. There was fear. There was trepidation because we went on tactical alert, like I said, that there may be other potential targets and that word started to permeate throughout the community, and people were fearful. And it was important that we be there for them, that we provide them safety and hope and shelter.

I've got to tell you, it worked well for us. We had tremendous amount of community support, and that people felt as if the department have been responsive to their needs and how our incident played out on a national media level—they were proud of us. It was one of those moments where we actually had officers being applauded when they would go to a public location, whether for their lunch or dinner break.

Michon M.: I think that is such a great piece to share. To see that response and that support and that respect they have for the job that you do day-in and day-out and recognizing that they appreciate and value you is powerful. That really leads back, again, to that healing process and supporting each other as you move forward.

Mike, at any point in this process, did you or any others at your department meet with the family members of those lost in this terrorist attack or survivors?

Mike M.: So, we did just that, not just our department, but all of the allied agencies who were involved in the response, from both law enforcement as well as the medical response and fire departments who were affiliated with it.

So, what we had was—essentially, we did it at our airport. It was essentially set up to there were hors d'oeuvres there and just to have a mingling. There was nothing that was formal. The chief—our chief and the sheriff of our county got up and spoke briefly and explained and said a few words. Then they said, "If anybody wants

to speak to a particular first responder, come contact our representatives up here at the front, and we'll direct you to where that person is."

This was a really interesting time for me personally. We decided internally when we were doing that that we were going to make it optional. We were not going to mandate anybody—any of the first responders to have to be there. It was purely optional, but the chief thought it was a good idea that I'd be there as well.

Well, as soon as the sheriff and the chief got done talking, people went up, and all of a sudden, I saw a lot of people pointing at me directly. Then suddenly, I had a number of people surrounding me. Many of these people were still in wheelchairs and walkers because they had been victims of the gunshots, and it wasn't that I was any more important or special or anything like that. I was just the guy that they had seen on TV.

So, they wanted to come over, and so many were appreciative that—it's so gracious and so wonderful and a lot of hugs and things like that going out. I had this one woman in particular—she came to me and she said, "I just need to know whether or not my husband suffered. He didn't make it, but I just know he wouldn't have wanted to have suffered."

For me personally, I had to stop and think for a minute, and I said, "I'm so sorry. Maybe this is just something that I've done to be able to better deal with it myself, but I don't really remember where individuals were. I don't remember faces of individuals. Maybe that's just a self-defense mechanism, and I'm sorry. I couldn't tell you where people were in the conference room."

She stopped, and she said, "But he wasn't in the conference room. He was seated outside."

I immediately knew who she was referring to. It was the individual that we talked about before who was sitting there with his phone, and it just stopped me cold because I knew exactly. I had to stop and really think about it for a second as to whether or not I should

tell her. I made the decision to tell her what I had related to you previously.

I said, "No, he didn't suffer. I don't believe he even knew what was about to happen, and that was because he was still seated in an upright position rather than trying to flee from the scene."

She actually took comfort in that. Her son came over afterwards. He was 17 years old—real big kid. I held out my hand to him. He took my hand, and I have big hands and his hand just enveloped my hand. He started breathing heavier and heavier and heavier. I thought, "Oh, my goodness! He's going to hit me. I didn't save his dad. I didn't get there in time."

I didn't know what to do, so I just grabbed him, and I hugged him. He hugged me. I mean, squeezed so hard and we embraced each other. I got to tell you, following that—that was by far and away that moment for me to where I could not be there any longer. I had to leave, and I had to leave quickly. I broke down following. I got away from everybody and had that moment for myself.

In fact, I still even now thinking about it and talking about it—it's one of those moments that we need to be mindful of. I guess I tell this story because it was good. It was a cathartic thing for many, for those victims and their family members, for many of the officers who were there. I don't see that as having been a negative for me, but it certainly took an emotional toll on me. That's something that as administrators thinking about having this kind of gathering or reception, definitely recognize that there are those moments and vulnerabilities and certainly don't mandate that your people be part of that. Let it be an optional thing for them.

Michon M.: I am so emotionally moved by you sharing this part of the story that I'm almost speechless on how to respond other than to tell you, "Thank you." Not even knowing that family, but thank you despite the hardship that it caused on you to be able to respond to that family and not having any prior training or understanding of what they needed, that you were there for them. I guarantee that that is something that they still hold very dear.

I appreciate you sharing that there is positives to come out of this, but that we do need to reflect back and, again, provide that ability for our officers to be vulnerable with support systems in place. So, a takeaway that I have, and please feel free to correct me if I'm wrong. I'm looking at this now through a leadership lens of—if something like this were to occur in our community, I see it as a primary issue for us is to have prior supports in place. Maybe a mandate if our officers are going to participate in this meeting with these survivors and their families that we prepare them, that we maybe have a therapist or person specialized in this type of debrief event to be able to help potentially guide them on what they will experience, and then help them with that safe landing that they're going to need after.

Mike M.: I couldn't agree more. I think that there's certainly value there. The whole goal of doing that is to be able to provide comfort, and just imagine if somebody isn't able to do that or has a negative reaction to that or has that watershed for themselves to where they have backlash. So, we need to have that dialog ahead of time just to somewhat prepare them so that they can assess, "Hey, is this really a good decision for me to take on?"

Michon M.: I know we've spent a lot of time talking about this today and, certainly, I have a lot more questions, as I'm sure some of our listeners do. So, I just want to ask one more for a takeaway before we end today, and that is we talk about the culture of law enforcement and as we are working through the best response to our officers, our staff who have been involved in a critical incident. How do we break that stigma of being able to share our vulnerabilities, to get past that we could potentially be seen as weak or not competent to do this job, recognizing that we are human and that we need those same support systems in place? I'm just curious on what your final thoughts are for those listening of, "How we can do better at serving those that are serving our community within our departments?"

Mike M.: It's funny. I feel as if I'm still part of the old guard now that my law enforcement career is behind me. I'm recently retired. I found that

our younger officers were much more open to sharing their feelings than our more senior officers and our veteran officers. It was the older officers I saw who were the most closed off and myself probably having been part of that old guard to where you just don't share your emotions.

Hopefully, that is partial as well that through our academies and through our training, we've talked about, "Hey, there is this component. It's not just about your physical fitness and how well you can shoot. There's other aspects of being a well-rounded officer that go far beyond that, and that includes assessing your emotional wellness." That's certainly something that our academies are now teaching but have just recently started doing.

So, I think that we're starting to see that become much more accepted in law enforcement, but it's still the old guard who probably puts up the most barriers. Some of that change is starting to filter into them as well, but I think what we'll see is that as that old guard—their careers start to come to a close as mine has, that that will just naturally have a way of infiltrating our departments, because now we have this new generation recognizing that this is a very, very real aspect of what we face in the course of our careers.

Michon M.: Yeah, that new generation that will soon be leading our agencies, our departments, as that old guard—whether they're in a leadership role—and start moving out. For those that are still there and that are listening and are in that leadership role, please take note that we need to care, and we need to care deeply about those that come to work every day to serve our community, and we need to be there to support them.

Mike, I really appreciate you coming on today and talking with us. I really can't thank you enough for sharing so openly and deeply the emotions and the processes that you went through in this journey after the traumatic event.

For our listeners out there, if you want to get more information about the SAFLEO Program or if you want to speak with Mike

directly, please let us know through our website. I would also like to encourage our listeners to visit the SAFLEO website at www.S-A-F-L-E-O.org.

Again, thank you to our listeners for giving us your time today, and thank you, Mike. Please be well and stay safe out there.

Mike M.: Thank you, Michon. Thank you so much.

Michon M.: Thank you.

Speaker 1: The SAFLEO Program is dedicated to providing training, technical assistance, and resources to law enforcement agencies, staff, and families to raise awareness, smash the stigma, and reduce and prevent law enforcement suicide. For additional information regarding the SAFLEO Program, please visit safleo.org. That's S-A-F-L-E-O.org. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance, BJA, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, is committed to making our nation's communities safer through resources, developing programs, and providing grant-funding opportunities to support state, local, and tribal criminal justice efforts. All are available at no cost. Please visit www.bja.gov to learn more.