

# Too Strong for Too Long

## *Virtual Meetings Offer Support to First Responders*

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has caused a sharp increase in anxiety and depression, even among individuals who have not been personally affected by the disease.

Imagine the potential toll on first responders, particularly emergency medical services (EMS) and rescue squads who were on the front lines every day, caring for seriously ill patients and realizing they might be exposing themselves, and ultimately their loved ones, to the virus.

That was the impetus behind ***Too Strong for Too Long***, a new virtual support group for first responders moderated by Princeton House Behavioral Health staff members, all of whom have experience as first responders themselves.

Former police officer and military veteran **Michael Bizzarro, PhD**, director of clinical services for First Responder Treatment Services (FRTS) at Princeton House, said he and peer support specialist **Ken Burkert**, a former corrections officer, have taken hundreds of calls since March from first responders who shared similar stories and expressed a range of emotions: fear, anger, uncertainty about the future. Yet at the same time, they remain committed to their duties and the people they serve.

"This year has seen one crisis after another," Bizzarro said, "and they keep showing up every day, without regard to their own safety and well-being. That takes an incredible toll on the strongest of people. The support group is intended to give them a place to talk through their experiences with other first responders and with clinical professionals who can relate to them."

In addition to Bizzarro and Burkert, moderators will include retired police officer **James Schneider**, peer recovery support specialist with FRTS; Air Force veteran **Kim Dove, MSW, LCSW**, clinical manager for adult services at Princeton House in Moorestown; and possibly other staff members with backgrounds as first responders.

The group is open to all first responders. In addition to EMS and rescue workers, many firefighters, law enforcement and corrections officers, and military personnel have been greatly affected by the pandemic and other social upheavals that have characterized the year 2020.

The support group meets via videoconference on Thursdays at 12:45 pm. Sessions can be accessed via computer, tablet, or smartphone.

Registration is required. Visit [www.princetonhcs.org/calendar](http://www.princetonhcs.org/calendar) and search *Too Strong*.

