

Flourishing Beyond the Badge

The Second Mission GUIDE

Ben Binger

Master of Applied Positive Psychology Program, University of Pennsylvania

MAPP 800: Capstone Project

Advisor: Faisal N. Khan

July 15, 2026

Abstract

Serving as a first responder is a stressful and dangerous job. Through the course of their career many law enforcement officers, firefighters, military personnel and emergency medical responders experience multiple traumatic events. A sense of belonging, camaraderie, purpose and meaning during their career acts as a buffer against these stressors. Upon retirement, however, most support mechanisms that helped insulate them during their career disappear resulting in higher rates of substance abuse, broken relationships and suicide than their active duty colleagues experience. Positive psychology is uniquely positioned to provide pathways for retired officers, soldiers, firefighters and medics to regain a sense of belonging, purpose and meaning. This paper will explore these pathways and provides The Second Mission GUIDE a series of interventions designed to help regain balance and an ability to flourish post-retirement. The Second Mission GUIDE is designed to be utilized in a digital format in partnership with The GUIDE App which has thousands of retired first responders as users. These interventions should help our nation's heroes cope with years of accumulated stress, enable them to imagine a brighter future and thrive beyond the badge.

Keywords: first responders, policing, law enforcement officers, military, firefighters, emergency medicine, posttraumatic stress disorder, posttraumatic growth, retirement, accumulated stress, unprocessed trauma

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following individuals and programs for their assistance with the research and completion of this capstone. Faisal N. Khan, my capstone advisor who provided excellent feedback and guidance throughout this process. The professors and assistant instructors at the University of Pennsylvania Master of Applied Psychology Program including James Pawelski, Leona Brandwene, Marty Seligman and Judy Saltzberg. My esteemed Service Learning Project teammates, Evan Milnor and Scott Barentsen, whose ideas and work permeate this capstone (Milnor et al., 2026). My family, who supported me during this challenging MAPP program. And lastly, my colleagues in the FBI who for 20 years had my back in numerous high risk operations both foreign and domestic and who are still fighting the good fight, still absorbing the weight of moral injury and earning additional scars both physical and psychological. May this capstone guide all first responders to a place where you and your families can set down your burdens, bask in the satisfaction of a job well done, and begin a new journey filled with satisfaction, purpose, and meaning.

Note on LLM Use: ChatGPT 5.5 (released April 23, 2026), by OpenAI was utilized to help organize concepts, brainstorm ideas and develop paper structure throughout this capstone and formatting within the appendix. All outputs were edited, fact-checked, and critically evaluated by the author before inclusion.

Introduction

The Hidden Cost of Service

A career as a first responder (law enforcement officer, firefighter, emergency medical professional or military personnel) can be rewarding but also extremely demanding. Police officers are routinely exposed to traumatic events from domestic violence assaults, multivehicle crashes, to child abuse and homicide investigations. Firefighters enter burning buildings in an effort to save families and pets but unfortunately are not always successful. Emergency medical professionals work tirelessly to save the sick and injured often at great personal risk of being exposed themselves to dangerous diseases. Military personnel often serve in austere environments away from friends and family with exposure to death, violence and morally complex situations. While the uniforms, badges and tools of the trade may be different these first responders share a common reality: repeated exposure to trauma in service to others - often at great personal cost. Resources and training to absorb this stress varies greatly across agencies. With larger departments, such as the NYPD, dedicating resources to employee resilience and well-being while many small departments lack the resources to provide members the resources needed to adequately deal with workplace trauma. Regardless of the resources available, this repeated exposure to stress and trauma leaves a mark, sometimes physical and visible but some scars are invisible, obscured by a culture that values courage, competence, self-sacrifice and resilience. Despite the risks, and sometimes because of the risks inherent in the job, first responders derive profound benefits from their service to others. They belong to something

larger than themselves; they are serving their communities. They belong to a tightly knit community built on trust, shared sacrifice and mutual dependence. This exposure to difficult situations and service to others often bonds these professionals and creates a strong sense of belonging, purpose and meaning. Each day provides a new opportunity to serve, contribute to society, protect others and make a difference. These benefits can act as a tremendous buffer against stress, burnout and trauma during a first responder's career.

Difficult Transition to Retirement

However, once an officer, firefighter, medic or soldier turns in his or her badge, gun or uniform and retires, they lose their team, their purpose and meaning. Then the cumulative effect of a career's worth of traumatic events begins to surface and without the pillars of support found within the force the effects can be devastating. As a result, retired first responders face higher rates of depression, substance abuse, broken relationships, and suicide than the general population (Bowler et al., 2016; Craddock & Telesco, 2021; Syrotiak et al., 2024; Violanti, 2025).

While a lot of attention has been devoted to assisting active duty first responders cope with and manage stress and trauma, relatively little focus has been given to assisting these professionals once they retire. This capstone seeks to fill this gap, by providing resources for retired first responders to build meaningful, purposeful and flourishing lives after service.

Positive psychology offers a unique framework to enable retired first responders to move beyond loss of identity and community toward renewed purpose, resilience (maintaining health and well-being through hardship) and posttraumatic growth (emerging stronger and healthier after a stressful event) through interventions targeting optimism, character strengths (courage,

compassion, leadership, service) and social reengagement. Rather than focusing on pathology and dysfunction, positive psychology focuses on what helps individuals and communities thrive. It seeks to understand how people cultivate meaning, purpose, resilience, connection, optimism, and growth even in the face of adversity.

Retirement should not be viewed as the end of a first responder's story. Rather, it should be considered a transition to a new mission. The "first mission" consists of years of service to others through law enforcement, firefighting, emergency medicine, or military service. During this mission, or life chapter, identity, belonging, purpose, and meaning are often closely tied to occupation. Once this chapter ends and a first responder is no longer a part of their former community there can be a profound sense of loss of belonging, purpose, and meaning. First responders rarely receive guidance on how to navigate this change. The loss of mission can create a vacuum, yet the very qualities that made them successful during their career – courage, perseverance, compassion, teamwork, and service to others—remain available to them into retirement.

The Second Mission

The second mission framework proposed in this paper seeks to help first responders identify and build on the character strengths (often honed through years as a first responder) that made them successful throughout their careers. Qualities such as: courage, judgement, compassion, devotion, and desire for justice. Rather than abandon their commitment to service, retirees are encouraged to translate that identity into new forms of contribution such as through mentorship and community engagement. Retirement becomes a continuation of service to others, a second mission to embark upon.

This capstone builds upon prior Service Learning Project work conducted by University of Pennsylvania Master in Applied Positive Psychology students Ben Binger, Evan Milnor and Scott Barentsen -- Team Indigo, Milnor et al., (2026), in partnership with the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF), which explored the creation of peer advisor networks to support retired law enforcement officers. While that work focused primarily on developing in-person peer support groups, this capstone seeks to expand the scope to a digitally available peer advisor network available to all first responders. Specifically, this capstone will provide programming for The GUIDE App to create scalable positive psychology focused modules for its online first responder wellness app. The GUIDE App is a commercially available online app with over 30,000 *active duty* first responder customers, approximately 30,000 *retired* first responder customers and approximately 30,000 *family members* of first responders. The GUIDE App provides health and wellness solutions for first responders in an accessible online app format. This capstone's artifact is **The Second Mission GUIDE** which provides programming for The GUIDE App to immediately incorporate into its product, reaching approximately 30,000 retirees. It expands on the work conducted in partnership with the NLEOMF to support not only retired law enforcement officers, but the broader first responder community, including firefighters, emergency medical personnel, military veterans, and their families.

Understanding the Problem

The Psychological Cost of a Life of Service

First responders, defined as; police officers, firefighters, emergency medical professionals, and military personnel, spend their careers repeatedly engaged in situations most

people never encounter. They witness death, violence, tragedy, human suffering, and moral complexity as part of their weekly, if not daily, responsibilities. These experiences can accumulate psychological burdens that may emerge or intensify later in life. As an example, law enforcement officers experience significantly greater exposure to traumatic events than the general population. While the general population may experience one traumatic event in their lifetime, officers routinely respond to fatal traffic accidents, suicides, child abuse investigations, violent assaults, domestic disputes, and homicides. Research has found officers from small and midsized agencies (service population of less than 100,000 residents) were exposed to nearly 188 critical incidents across their careers, with posttraumatic stress symptoms increasing alongside cumulative exposure (Chopko et al., 2015). Another study found urban officers are exposed to up to 900 potentially traumatic events during the course of their careers (Chopko et al., 2018).

Importantly, traumatic events are not the only stressors experienced by first responders. They also face organizational pressures such as: night shifts, public scrutiny (and sometimes disdain), administrative demands, and the constant requirement to maintain emotional control. These organizational structures create additional sources of chronic stress. Research suggests this repeated exposure to trauma and chronic stress leads to symptoms of posttraumatic stress (Craddock & Telesco, 2021), burnout (Queirós et al., 2020), decreased psychological well-being and changes in worldview, such as loss of trust in others, prejudice towards others (Craddock & Telesco, 2021; Marshall, 2006) and changes in faith and belief systems (Marshall, 2006).

Despite these many stressors, most first responders successfully navigate these challenges throughout active service in part due to the psychological buffers inherent in the occupation. These resources include; strong identity—providing a sense of belonging to a group, deep

camaraderie, shared purpose, meaningful work, and membership in a close-knit community. Unfortunately, many of these protective factors disappear at retirement.

Retirement as a Major Life Transition

Retirement is frequently viewed as a reward for decades of service and finish line after which one can finally rest and find peace. Yet research suggests retirement is a complex life transition rather than an easy stroll in the park. The transition requires individuals to rebuild routines, form new relationships, new identities, and sources of meaning that may have developed over decades. For first responders, this adjustment may be particularly challenging because the profession often becomes central to one's sense of self (Bullock et al., 2020; Syrotiak et al., 2024; Violanti, 2025).

Studies of retired police officers consistently identify retirement as a period marked by conflicting emotions (Cameron et al., 2016). Many retirees welcome relief from job related stress and cherish increased freedom, others report feelings of isolation, loss of relevance, uncertainty, and diminished purpose (Cameron et al., 2016). Common themes include the loss of social networks, difficulty adjusting to civilian life, financial concerns, and a perceived loss of status and identity (Cameron et al., 2016). While retirees are no longer exposed to new trauma and occupational stress, they still carry the weight of a career's worth of stress. Once the buffers of camaraderie, sense of duty and belonging are removed their ability to deal with unprocessed trauma is reduced. It is as if the buffers act as a dam during active duty, holding back the trauma, but upon retirement the dam is removed, and the trauma comes flooding in.

The circumstances surrounding retirement also matter with research suggesting involuntary or forced retirement results in higher levels of distress and poorer psychological

health (Cameron et al., 2016). For many first responders, retirement is not simply the end of employment, rather, it represents the loss of an entire way of life.

The Loss of Identity

One of the most significant challenges faced by retired first responders is the disruption of identity. Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory suggests individuals derive a substantial portion of their self-concept from membership in valued groups (Austin, 1979). Over years of service, the role of police officer, firefighter, paramedic, or military service member often becomes more than an occupation; it becomes a defining identity. The profession provides a sense of belonging, status, competence, and purpose that extends far beyond the workplace (Arena et al., 2026; Bullock et al., 2020). Policing or firefighting is not experienced as “just a job”, instead, officers, firefighters and soldiers frequently describe it as a mission, a calling, or a way of life (Syrotiak et al., 2024). Consequently, retirement can create a profound loss of identity, an individual is no longer a firefighter, medic or soldier. *Role exit theory* suggests when identity is highly fused with a profession, retirement without a replacement role results in lower well-being (Merton & Ebaugh, 1988). When the uniform is surrendered, retirees may find themselves asking fundamental questions such as: Who am I now? What value do I bring? Where do I belong? Hill (2013) argues retirement requires a transition from an identity as a police officer to a broader career and life identity. While many strengths developed during service remain available to retirees—including courage, judgment, perseverance, and service to others—it can be challenging to understand how to apply these strengths to a new chapter of life. Without intentional support, some retirees struggle to make this transition.

Loss of Belonging and Community

The loss of identity is closely related to the loss of belonging. The social bonds formed among first responders are unique. Shared exposure to danger, uncertainty, and sacrifice often creates levels of trust and camaraderie rarely found in other professions. Many first responders consider their colleagues and occupation family (Arena et al., 2026; Bullock et al., 2020). Being laid off prior to normal retirement age can feel like betrayal by the organization further magnifying loss of community (Cameron et al., 2016)

A recent study of retired law enforcement officers found that belonging, social connection, and community engagement were among the strongest predictors of well-being in retirement (Violanti, 2025). Conversely, social isolation (retirees no longer have work colleagues to lean on) was consistently associated with depression, PTSD symptoms, diminished life satisfaction, and elevated suicide risk amongst first responders (Arena et al., 2026; Violanti, 2025). Participation in specialty roles such as SWAT, hazardous response teams, or undercover roles can make transition even more difficult (Curran, 2021). These roles often have more exposure to trauma and members have an even stronger sense of identity and belonging. First responders who identify strongly with their role often face greater challenges adjusting to a new career (Hill & Snell, 2018).

The challenge is compounded by cultural norms within first responder professions. Many officers, soldiers, and firefighters spend years learning to suppress emotion and vulnerability, become self-reliant, and avoid seeking help. While adhering to these norms may facilitate inclusion into the group, they can become barriers to developing new sources of connection after retirement. Former first responders frequently report reluctance to discuss emotional struggles or

seek help due to concerns about stigma and perceived weakness (Carney et al., 2021; Porter & Lee, 2024). As a result, many retirees become increasingly isolated at precisely the time they most need meaningful social connection.

The Loss of Purpose and Meaning

In addition to loss of identity and belonging retirement brings another critical challenge: the loss of purpose. *Purpose* refers to a stable sense of core goals, aims, and direction in life (Martela & Steger, 2016). It is motivating and oriented to the future, organizing behavior toward valued ends (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). During active service, first responders typically experience a clear sense of mission - their work matters. Decisions have immediate consequences and their job provides regular opportunities to help others, solve problems, and contribute to the well-being of society. This satisfies fundamental human needs for competence, relatedness, and meaning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Unfortunately, retirement can abruptly remove these sources of purpose. The loss of responsibility and structured contribution can diminish direction and perceived usefulness (how an individual perceives their ability to contribute to society) (Wang & Shi, 2014). First responders who do not have clear post-retirement goals may experience restlessness, lack of routine, and less life engagement (Barlow et al., 2020). Consequently, retirees who successfully develop meaningful post-retirement roles generally report higher levels of satisfaction and psychological health than those who struggle to find new avenues for contribution. This challenge may be especially pronounced among first responders because service often becomes central to their personal narrative. Individuals who have spent decades protecting others may struggle to envision meaningful roles outside their professional identity. Yet studies suggest that opportunities for continued contribution—through mentoring,

volunteering, coaching, community engagement, family leadership, or second careers—can help retirees maintain continuity between their past service and future aspirations (Hill, 2013).

Mental Health Risks After Service

The combined loss of identity, belonging, and purpose can create vulnerabilities that extend beyond diminished life satisfaction.

Retired first responders exhibit elevated rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD symptoms, substance abuse, and suicide compared with the general population (Arena et al., 2026; Syrotiak et al., 2024; Violanti, 2025). Violanti (2025) found that retired officers accounted for approximately 42% of documented police suicide deaths in one national sample, with depression identified as the most common mental health condition and PTSD occurring more frequently among retirees than active officers. Similarly, Pal Singh et al. (2022) found that retired police personnel reported higher levels of anxiety, stress, and depression than serving officers. Arena et al. (2026) found higher rates of PTSD in retired first responders than current first responders.

Importantly, these outcomes should not be viewed as inevitable consequences of retirement. Rather, they highlight the need for intentional support during a major life transition. Many retirees thrive after service. The evidence suggests those who maintain strong social connections, develop meaningful post-retirement roles, preserve a sense of purpose, and remain engaged with their communities experience better outcomes (Syrotiak et al., 2024).

Positive Psychology as a Solution

Treating Acute Distress versus Cultivating Flourishing

The challenges facing retired first responders are often discussed through the lens of pathology and focused on PTSD. Research has documented high rates of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, substance abuse, social isolation, and suicide among members of this population (Marmar et al., 2006; O'Dell et al., 2026). These can be acute problems that require clinical interventions, and such interventions should be included in any wellness strategy. However, focusing exclusively on pathology misses half the equation. Wellness is more than the absence of illness. Individuals may not have a diagnosable mental disorder but still experience loneliness, disengagement, lack of purpose, and be unfulfilled. Likewise, individuals who carry emotional or physical scars from adversity and trauma may still live meaningful, productive, and flourishing lives.

Positive psychology addresses this imbalance. Historically, psychology focused on understanding dysfunction, trauma, and psychological disorders while devoting comparatively less attention to understanding what enables individuals and communities to thrive. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) argued that psychology should not only seek to repair what is wrong but also understand and cultivate what is best in people. The field of positive psychology was developed to examine strengths, virtues, relationships, meaning, resilience, and the conditions that contribute to flourishing.

This perspective is ideally suited to assist the majority of first responders in retirement. Many retirees do not need clinical intervention but rather help moving from distress to

flourishing. They need help building lives characterized by purpose, connection, contribution, and growth after their professional careers conclude.

Positive Psychology and the Reality of Human Suffering

Research suggests flourishing is not achieved by avoiding suffering but often through engaging with it (Bonanno, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This perspective is particularly relevant for first responders. The careers of police officers, firefighters, emergency medical personnel, and military service members are defined by repeated encounters with hardship, uncertainty, tragedy, and loss. Any framework that ignores these realities is unlikely to resonate with the lived experiences of those who serve. Adversity and flourishing are not opposing forces but rather, they are often intertwined. Meaning, resilience, wisdom, gratitude, and personal growth frequently emerge through the successful navigation of life's most difficult experiences (Bonanno, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Pawelski (2016) offers a useful distinction between what he terms “red cape” and “green cape” approaches. Red cape interventions focus on alleviating suffering, repairing damage, and addressing pathology. Green cape interventions focus on cultivating strengths, building resources, and promoting flourishing. Both are necessary. Individuals suffering from significant PTSD, depression, suicidality, or substance abuse require evidence-based clinical care. At the same time, many retirees who are not experiencing clinical levels of distress still struggle with questions of identity, belonging, purpose, and meaning. These individuals may benefit most from interventions designed to cultivate flourishing rather than simply reducing suffering. This capstone focuses on green cape interventions while recognizing the continued importance of red cape interventions when needed.

Flourishing as More Than Happiness

Flourishing extends beyond momentary happiness or positive emotion. It reflects a state in which individuals function well psychologically, socially, and emotionally while pursuing meaningful goals that contribute to something larger than themselves. Seligman's (2011) PERMA model identifies five core elements of flourishing: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Positive emotion is experiencing emotions such as joy, gratitude and hope. Engagement is being deeply absorbed in an activity where skill set is closely matched to difficulty, often resulting in a state of flow and loss of sense of time. Relationships refer to maintaining supportive and meaningful connection with others. Meaning relates to serving something larger than yourself like family, community or country. Accomplishment refers to experiencing competence, developing expertise and attaining goals. Flourishing involves connection to others, engagement in meaningful pursuits, opportunities for growth, and a sense that one's life matters.

These themes align closely with the retirement challenges previously identified and suggest positive psychology can offer a particularly useful framework for helping first responders navigate life after service. The remainder of this section will describe how various positive psychology concepts can be applied to these retirement challenges.

Broaden and Build

Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build Theory proposes positive emotions such as gratitude, joy, hope, and savoring expand individuals' thought-action repertoires enabling them to build psychological, social, intellectual, and physical resources that promote resilience and long-term flourishing. Negative emotions often narrow focus and corresponding options to a

fight, flight, or freeze reaction. Cultivating positive emotions, on the other hand, encourages exploration, creativity, broadens perspectives and increases perceived options. Over time this uplift of positive emotions helps individuals build greater social, psychological, and physical resources leading to greater connection, more engagement, and improved resilience (Fredrickson, 2001). In addition, the Mindfulness to Meaning Theory suggests mindful reflection can lead to improved meaning making through reappraisal of adversity and enhanced savoring (Garland et al., 2015). The Second Mission GUIDE proposes interventions designed to cultivate positive emotions through strengths identification, gratitude practice, meaningful relationships, and mindful reflection. By broadening participants' perspectives and building their personal resources, these interventions support greater resilience, meaning, and sustained flourishing during the second half of life.

Reconstructing Identity

As discussed, one of the primary challenges facing first responders upon retirement is the loss of identity, when they are no longer a cop, firefighter or medical professional. Positive psychology offers several pathways to assist with this transition.

Narrative identity research suggests individuals create meaning by constructing stories that integrate past experiences into coherent understandings of self (McAdams, 2011). Rather than viewing retirement as the end of an identity, retirees can be encouraged to view it as the continuation of a larger life narrative. Similarly, strengths-based approaches emphasize that personal strengths transcend occupational roles. Courage, perseverance, leadership, teamwork, kindness, integrity, and judgment remain available long after a badge or uniform has been retired (Niemic, 2017). First responders do not need to abandon their identity rather redefine and

expand it. Retirement becomes an opportunity to translate service-related strengths into new roles and ways to serve. For example, a former medic can volunteer on the community search and rescue team, or a retired police officer can join the security team at his or her local church.

Restoring Belonging and Connection

Humans possess a fundamental need to belong. Self-Determination Theory identifies relatedness as one of three universal psychological needs essential for well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Individuals thrive when they feel connected to others and experience meaningful social relationships. For many first responders, retirement disrupts the social network that provided rewarding daily interactions that provided deep connection and support for decades. Positive psychology research consistently demonstrates that social relationships are among the strongest predictors of well-being, resilience, and life satisfaction (Seligman, 2011). Belonging contributes to identity, emotional security, mattering, and psychological resilience. Peer groups (whether in person, as suggested by the Team Indigo Service Learning Project (Milnor et al., 2026), or via an online platform as detailed later), mentorship opportunities, and service oriented social groups may therefore play critical roles in promoting flourishing after retirement. For first responders, opportunities to remain connected to others who share similar experiences may be especially valuable because the lived experience they share is unique to their profession. There is a sense amongst the first responder community that others, “don’t get it” if they haven’t been a part of the community. A special bond develops between those who have been in the trenches together and have experienced similar trauma. Reconnecting with this brotherhood or sisterhood through peer groups in retirement can be especially rewarding. As previously discussed, Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model outlines the importance of meaningful relationships to well-being. These

peer groups do not naturally exist, but will be created through the application of this capstone in partnership with The GUIDE App.

Reclaiming Purpose and Meaning

A deep sense of meaning and purpose in life has been found to be one of the most robust predictors of psychological well-being, resilience, and life satisfaction (Martela & Steger, 2016). Individuals who perceive their lives as meaningful tend to report greater well-being, better physical health, and greater resilience in the face of adversity. As previously discussed, during active service, purpose is often clear and built into the profession itself. This clear sense of purpose is lost in retirement but the need for meaning and purpose in one's life is not. (Frankl, 2006) argued that human beings possess a fundamental need to find meaning in their lives and in their suffering. Similarly, Erikson's concept of generativity emphasizes the importance of contributing to future generations and leaving a positive legacy. Retirees can find meaning through mentoring, volunteering, community leadership, family engagement, teaching, coaching, spiritual involvement, or other ways to serve. Research demonstrates that helping others benefits both recipients and those providing support (Post, 2005). Helping retirees find purpose and meaning in retirement should fill this basic human need and lead to greater life satisfaction.

Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth

Contrary to popular belief, exposure to trauma does not inevitably result in dysfunction. Many individuals demonstrate resilience following adversity, maintaining relatively stable levels of functioning despite significant challenges (Bonanno, 2004). In fact, resilience, or the ability to maintain consistent functioning in the face of adversity is the norm not the exception.

Approximately 10% of police officers and approximately 20% of firefighters experience post traumatic stress disorder, 80 – 90% experience trauma and either grow from it or avoid dysfunction (Craddock & Telesco, 2021; Marmar et al., 2006; O'Dell et al., 2026). Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) describe this phenomenon of growing through adversity as posttraumatic growth, which may include increased appreciation of life, strengthened relationships, greater personal strength, an understanding of new possibilities, and deeper meaning. The concept of posttraumatic growth is particularly relevant to first responders because so many experience trauma throughout their careers, and it recognizes that adversity can become a source of wisdom and growth rather than merely a source of suffering. Years of service often produce valuable knowledge, insight, and perspective that can be used to benefit others. In this sense, some of the most difficult experiences of a first responder's career may ultimately become resources for mentoring, leadership, and service in retirement.

Positive Institutions and Communities of Flourishing

Positive psychology seeks to not only help individuals thrive but also the institutions within which people work. Seligman (2011) argues flourishing occurs not only through individual effort but through participation in supportive families, organizations, and communities. Positive institutions can help cultivate a sense of belonging and can be a means through which we realize our purpose and contribute to society. These institutions are the means through which first responders contributed and served during active duty. Upon retirement they lose the institutional structure that once provided identity, community, and meaning.

Organizations such as the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF), peer support networks, retiree organizations, and digital communities may therefore serve as positive institutions capable of fostering flourishing beyond retirement.

The GUIDE App represents one such opportunity. By combining peer connection, positive psychology interventions, strengths-based reflection, and opportunities for continued contribution, this digital platform may help create scalable communities that support flourishing long after active service ends.

This paper suggests retirement should not be viewed solely as a period of decline, disengagement, or loss. Rather, it can be a transition that creates opportunities for a reconstructed and extended identity, a new community in which to belong, and different but continued meaningful contribution, which all contribute to continued growth. Through intentional intervention challenges of loss of identity, belonging, and purpose can be transformed into opportunities for continued growth.

The next section introduces the Second Mission Framework, a positive psychology model designed to help first responders transform the end of a professional career into a second mission that is also defined by purpose, connection, contribution, and flourishing.

From First Mission to Second Mission

The Missing Conversation

Throughout their careers, first responders receive extensive training on how to succeed at their job. They learn the technical skills necessary to perform their duties. They are taught how to navigate dangerous situations, make difficult decisions under pressure, and serve their

communities with professionalism and integrity, but most receive little to no advice on the transition to retirement. If received at all, retirement planning often focuses on finances, pensions, healthcare benefits, and legal considerations. While these issues are important, as discussed, some of the most difficult challenges in retirement are often psychological not financial.

As detailed above, the retirement focused research discusses the importance of identity, belonging, and purpose (Bullock et al., 2020; Cameron et al., 2016) which positive psychology can address. Yet what appears to be missing is a practical model that helps first responders understand retirement not as the conclusion of their story but as a transition into a new chapter. This capstone proposes such a model.

The Second Mission Framework

Retirement should not be viewed as the end of service but rather as a transition from a First Mission to a Second Mission. The Second Mission Framework proposes retirees are more likely to flourish when they intentionally translate the strengths, values, experiences, and their sense of purpose developed during their First Mission into new forms of contribution. This concept draws from several complementary bodies of research.

Narrative identity theory suggests people find meaning in their lives by integrating life experiences into an evolving personal story (McAdams, 2001). Erikson's (1951) theory of psychosocial development highlights the importance of generativity—the desire to contribute to future generations and leave a positive legacy. Likewise, research suggests purposeful contribution is strongly associated with well-being and life satisfaction (Steger, 2009). These perspectives suggest a satisfying retirement is not one of disengagement and relaxation, rather, it

can become a period of renewed growth, contribution, and purpose. The goal is not to replace the First Mission with a comparable occupation, which would be very difficult to accomplish, but to build on the First Mission using the strengths cultivated throughout their career.

Components of the Second Mission

Although each person's Second Mission will be unique, the framework proposes four common elements; identity, purpose, community/belonging and legacy. Each helps retirees reframe their experience from "what I used to do" to "how can I use the resources I have to continue to serve."

Identity Reconstruction

The first task involves expanding identity beyond the occupation recently left behind. Rather than asking, "Who am I without the badge?" retirees begin asking, "How can the person I became because of the badge, and the strengths I developed and cultivate help me continue to contribute?" This subtle shift preserves continuity between past and future while creating space for growth.

Purpose Development

The second task involves identifying meaningful goals and opportunities for contribution. Purpose may emerge through mentoring younger officers, supporting family members, volunteering, community leadership, coaching youth sports, supporting charitable organizations, teaching, writing, caregiving, entrepreneurship, spiritual service, or countless other pathways. What matters is not the specific activity but the experience of contributing to something larger than oneself.

Community Connection

The third task involves rebuilding a sense of belonging. Strong social relationships are among the strongest predictors of flourishing and resilience (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023). The Second Mission therefore emphasizes peer connection, mentorship, community engagement, and participation in supportive networks. Retirees need places where they continue to feel seen, valued, and understood.

Legacy and Generativity

The final task involves transforming accumulated experience into a resource for others. Many retirees possess decades of hard-earned wisdom that remains largely untapped. Positive psychology research suggests that helping others often benefits both the recipient and the helper (Post, 2005). The Second Mission invites retirees to view their experiences not simply as memories but as a resource for future generations in service to others.

From Merely Surviving to Flourishing

The purpose of the Second Mission Framework is not intended to replace clinical interventions for individuals experiencing significant mental health concerns. Instead, it seeks to address an important gap in current approaches to first responder wellness. Many wellness programs seek to help individuals *survive* adversity rather than help them *flourish* after adversity. For example, a resilience program may suggest an employee take time off work to process a traumatic event. The goal being to prevent stress related decline in wellness, or, degradation. The Second Mission Framework's goal is slightly different. Rather than seeking to merely prevent decline, the goal is to help people thrive. Flourishing occurs when retirees successfully

reconstruct identity, restore belonging, cultivate purpose, and continue contributing in meaningful ways. Retirement then becomes something more than the end of a career, it becomes the beginning of a Second Mission.

Operationalizing the Second Mission

The goal of this capstone is to move from theory to practice and to operationalize the Second Mission Framework at scale. The next section introduces The GUIDE App and the proposed Second Mission GUIDE, a practical model designed to operationalize the Second Mission Framework through The GUIDE App. The artifact provides a number of interventions The GUIDE App can immediately incorporate into its platform to reach thousands of retirees. The suggested interventions create a scalable pathway for helping first responders flourish beyond the badge, beyond the uniform, and beyond retirement.

Retirement Challenges Addressed by the Second Mission GUIDE

Connecting the retirement challenges, positive psychology foundations, Second Mission Framework, and GUIDE intervention phases

Retirement Challenge	Positive Psychology Theory	Second Mission Component	GUIDE Phase(s)
Loss of Identity	Narrative Identity; Character Strengths	Identity Reconstruction	Phases I–III
Loss of Belonging	PERMA (Relationships); Self-Determination Theory (Relatedness)	Community Connection	Phase V
Loss of Purpose	Meaning; Self-Determination Theory; Generativity	Purpose Development & Legacy	Phases IV & VI
Accumulated Stress & Trauma	Broaden-and-Build Theory; Mindfulness-to-Meaning; Posttraumatic Growth	Processing the Journey	Phase II

Note: This table illustrates the conceptual logic of the capstone by linking the primary retirement challenges identified in the literature with the positive psychology theories that inform the Second Mission Framework and the corresponding phases of the Second Mission GUIDE.

The Second Mission GUIDE

The preceding sections argue many first responders experience retirement not as a peaceful transition into a life of leisure but as a disruption of identity, belonging, and purpose. Positive psychology provides a framework for understanding these challenges and suggests flourishing is most likely when individuals maintain positive emotions, meaningful relationships, cultivate purpose, continue contributing to others, and remain engaged in personal growth. The

Second Mission Framework offers a conceptual model for understanding this transition. The next challenge is implementation. How can organizations help first responders move from First Mission to Second Mission in a scalable, accessible, and meaningful way?

This section presents the primary artifact of this capstone: The Second Mission GUIDE, a digital positive psychology pathway designed to help first responders flourish after service. The model is envisioned as a partnership with The GUIDE App, an online health and wellness tool for first responders, that combines positive psychology interventions, peer connection, reflective practices, mentorship opportunities, and artificial intelligence-assisted coaching. The GUIDE App is a subscription-based service sold directly to agencies for their employees to use. The GUIDE App has approximately 30,000 active duty first responders and approximately 30,000 retired first responders as members. In partnership with The GUIDE App, the goal of the Second Mission GUIDE is not merely to reduce distress but to help first responders build purposeful and fulfilling lives after active service.

Efficiency of a Digital Platform

The GUIDE App today is exclusively an online platform. Historically, support for retired first responders has relied heavily on local organizations, in-person gatherings, retiree associations, and peer support networks. These programs provide valuable opportunities for connection but are often constrained by lack of anonymity, geography, resources, and inconsistent participation. A digital platform offers several advantages to these in person gatherings. First, it provides accessibility. First responders living in rural communities or distant locations can access support regardless of geography. Second, it provides continuity. Individuals can engage with resources before retirement, during transition, and throughout retirement. Third,

it provides scalability. Effective interventions can be delivered to thousands of users without requiring extensive additional infrastructure. Fourth, it allows for varying levels of engagement. Some users may prefer active participation in discussions and mentoring relationships, while others may initially engage through anonymous reflection and self-directed activities. Finally, digital delivery may reduce barriers associated with stigma. Research suggests that first responders often hesitate to seek support because of concerns about appearing weak or vulnerable (Porter & Lee, 2024). Executive leadership at The GUIDE App confirmed (personal communication, April, 2026) first responders speak much more freely in anonymous online forums than in person groups. Certainly, anonymous participation will increase engagement for some individuals who might otherwise avoid traditional programs. The intent is not to replace human relationships but to facilitate them. This is likely the biggest potential drawback of a digital platform, a user may use it to replace true social interaction with other human beings. Users should be encouraged to use the platform as a tool to enhance or facilitate social interaction, not replace it. In addition, some users may have a natural aversion to sharing personal information on a digital platform or may not have the technological know-how to engage with the platform. The GUIDE App should seek to mitigate these challenges through its programming.

The Second Mission Journey

Currently the GUIDE App provides workout trackers, journaling tools for reflection, gratitude journals, health and wellness focused education and courses, meditation guides, and online forums for connectivity, The Second Mission GUIDE looks to expand this programming and is primarily focused on *retirees* but can be modified in time to target *active duty* first

responders as well. The Second Mission GUIDE is organized around six developmental phases that mirror the transition from First Mission to Second Mission. While users may move through these phases at different rates, the sequence reflects the psychological challenges identified throughout retirement literature. The phases are designed to provide a logical flow from active duty to fulfilling second mission.

Phase One: Honor the First Mission

Before retirees build a new chapter, it can be helpful to first acknowledge and honor the one they have completed. Many first responders spend decades focused on serving others while rarely reflecting on the significance of their own experiences. Retirement creates an opportunity to reflect on, savor, and recognize accomplishments, sacrifices, lessons learned, and personal growth that has occurred. The purpose of this phase is not nostalgia but self-reflection and integration of story and strengths. Narrative identity research suggests people make meaning by constructing coherent stories that connect past experiences with future possibilities (McAdams, 2001). This phase helps users understand that their First Mission remains an important part of their story even as they prepare for what comes next.

Phase Two: Process the Journey

Many first responders carry unresolved trauma from years of service. Including grief, regret, disappointment, moral complexity, or simply difficult memories that were never fully processed. The Second Mission GUIDE is not intended to provide clinical treatment, but it does create opportunities for structured reflection and meaning-making. Research suggests that making sense of difficult experiences contributes to resilience and posttraumatic growth

(Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). The emphasis is not on reliving painful experiences but on understanding how those experiences shaped the individual and contributed to the person they have become.

Phase Three: Strength Discovery

The Third Phase shifts attention from the past toward personal resources and the future. Many retirees define themselves by the roles they held rather than the strengths they possess. Retirement can therefore feel like a loss of identity because individuals confuse the position with the qualities that enabled success in that position. Positive psychology offers an alternative perspective. The courage, perseverance, leadership, teamwork, integrity, kindness, and judgment developed during service remain available long after retirement. This phase helps retirees recognize their most valuable assets were never the badge, rank, or title but the strengths they developed while serving.

Phase Four: Designing A Second Mission

This phase represents the centerpiece of the program. Having reflected on their experiences and identified their strengths, participants begin designing a meaningful future. The objective is not to create a retirement plan but a mission plan. Drawing from Erikson's research on generativity and on research around meaning and purpose, (Erikson, 1950; Steger, 2009) users explore questions such as: What matters most to me now? How do I want to contribute? What problems do I care about? Who can benefit from my experience? What legacy do I hope to create? The outcome is a personalized Second Mission Plan that identifies meaningful opportunities for contribution, growth, and engagement.

Phase Five: Community, Connection, and Belonging

People flourish in community with one another. One of the strongest findings within positive psychology is that meaningful relationships are central to well-being (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023). The Second Mission GUIDE therefore places substantial emphasis on connection.

Phase Six: Giving Back

The final phase reflects the concept of generativity. Many retirees possess decades of knowledge and wisdom that can benefit others. Rather than viewing retirement as withdrawal from service, participants are encouraged to view retirement as an opportunity for a different kind of service. Drawing on Post's (2005) research that suggests helping others benefits both recipients and helpers this phase helps facilitate and encourage service to others. This phase completes the transition from First Mission to Second Mission, service continues, only the form changes.

The GUIDE App is purposefully designed to give users great autonomy and choice. Each user is unique with different time constraints and needs. While the six phases follow a logical sequence, users can choose to complete the phases in any order that suits them. The app will track completion and make suggestions on sequence but will not require completion of one phase before moving on to the next. The goal is to provide a customizable solution and make the resources available to users to tailor to their needs.

Incorporating Artificial Intelligence

A unique feature of the Second Mission GUIDE is the integration of artificial intelligence into the programming. Artificial intelligence should be able to function as an effective reflection

partner and coach. This may be particularly attractive to individuals still struggling with the stigma attached to asking for help. Each phase of the Second Mission GUIDE provides suggestions on how AI tools can be integrated into the app. AI, of course, is not intended to replace human connection but it can be an effective tool to help individuals engage more deeply with themselves and then apply that insight to engage more significantly with others. In addition, The GUIDE App needs to be aware of the potential pitfalls associated with AI-directed “coaching” or “counseling”. The GUIDE App should implement guardrails and boundaries within its AI platform to prevent client over reliance or dependence on AI tools. That being said, the combination of AI-supported reflection and human community and connection may provide a unique and powerful model to engage with retirees.

Measuring Success

The GUIDE App is particularly interested in results and having an impact on the wellness of the first responder community. Consequently, it is important to measure the effectiveness of the proposed interventions. An appendix has been included with suggested measures and appropriate timing and frequency in which to apply the measures. The measures include outcomes consistent with positive psychology such as the PERMA Profiler, and Meaning in Life Questionnaire. In addition to these wellness measures it is important to provide assessments that can indicate when more clinical interventions may be required. As a result, measures that assess potential PTSD or alcohol abuse are also included.

The goal of the Second Mission GUIDE is straightforward, to provide a roadmap for first responders transitioning from their First Mission to their Second Mission.

Stronger Together – NLEOMF and The GUIDE App

This capstone builds upon work conducted during the Team Indigo Service Learning Project (SLP) in partnership with the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF). The purpose of that project was to address a growing but often overlooked challenge within the *law enforcement community*: helping *retired* officers maintain well-being, connection, and purpose after active service.

Drawing upon research from positive psychology, retirement studies, and peer support literature, Team Indigo developed a *peer advisor model* designed to foster belonging, social connection, and flourishing among retired law enforcement officers. While the Team Indigo project focused primarily on retired law enforcement officers and in-person peer advisor groups, this capstone explores how the same principles can be *expanded* through digital delivery and applied across the broader first responder community. This capstone is essentially building upon the Team Indigo SLP work and expanding its reach.

Specifically, The Second Mission GUIDE introduces additional components such as a digital community, anonymous peer discussion forums, and AI-assisted reflection tools. In addition, given the nature of The GUIDE App, the opportunities for support are not constrained by geography or scheduling limitations. Given the overlapping missions, the NLEOMF and The GUIDE App are well positioned to work together to have even greater impact. The NLEOMF possesses deep credibility within the law enforcement community. Through its programs, memorial activities, educational initiatives, and support networks, the organization has earned the trust of officers and their families nationwide. The organization also possesses extensive experience supporting officers throughout various stages of service and retirement. The GUIDE

App's digital platform and commercial expertise offers the ability to create scalable communities that transcend geographic barriers – and it targets the broader first responder community. Its technology allows users to engage anonymously, participate in moderated discussions, access resources on demand, and connect with others who share similar experiences.

Together, these organizations could create a hybrid model that combines the strengths of both approaches. Working together may be more powerful than either organization operating independently. The future of first responder wellness is unlikely to be exclusively in-person or exclusively digital but likely a combination. Under a collaborative model, retirees might engage in several ways:

1. Participate in local NLEOMF-sponsored peer groups.
2. Connect with fellow retirees through GUIDE discussion forums.
3. Complete strengths and purpose-development activities within the GUIDE platform.
4. Receive support from trained peer advisors with NLEOMF.
5. Receive AI-based support from the GUIDE.
6. Engage in mentorship relationships under either platform.
7. Access educational content and positive psychology interventions under either platform.
8. Develop and implement personalized Second Mission plans under either platform.

Such a model creates multiple pathways for engagement while allowing participants to choose the level of involvement that best fits their needs. The digital platform does not replace but rather expands access to the community.

Expansion from law enforcement to the entire first responder community may also provide opportunities for further collaboration. A digital platform such as GUIDE creates opportunities to connect these communities while still preserving profession-specific spaces and

identities. This cross-disciplinary engagement may provide additional benefits. Individuals who have spent careers serving in different roles may discover their retirement experiences are remarkably similar. Shared conversations around purpose, identity, resilience, and contribution may create new opportunities for learning and support.

In summary, the Team Indigo Service Learning Project demonstrated the potential of peer-led communities to promote flourishing among retired law enforcement officers, this capstone extends that vision to all first responders. The peer advisor model developed through Team Indigo provides an important foundation. The Second Mission GUIDE offers a scalable pathway for expanding that foundation. Together, NLEOMF and The GUIDE App have the potential to create a national ecosystem that supports first responders as they transition from First Mission to Second Mission. The goal of this potential **national level impact** is not simply to help retirees avoid decline; it is to help them continue living lives of meaning, service, connection, and flourishing long after active duty has ended.

Future Directions and Research Opportunities

The Second Mission GUIDE is intentionally designed as a flourishing-oriented intervention rather than a clinical treatment program. However, it is important to help those in crisis and get them the resources they need. Some first responders enter retirement carrying significant psychological burdens that extend beyond the influence of positive psychology interventions alone. As discussed, the cumulative trauma experienced by first responders results in elevated rates of posttraumatic stress symptoms (Bowler et al., 2016; Craddock & Telesco, 2021; Wilson, 2015). Future versions of The GUIDE App should be able to help identify individuals who could benefit from more acute clinical intervention. The app could assist with

this by providing validated screening tools that help identify individuals who may benefit from additional support. Such assessments might include measures of posttraumatic stress symptoms, depression, anxiety, substance misuse, loneliness, social isolation, or suicidal ideation. The purpose of these assessments would not be diagnosis but rather suggested pathways for more appropriate resources. Individuals identified as potentially needing additional support could be directed toward peer support networks, employee assistance programs, mental health professionals, crisis resources, or specialized treatment providers.

The anonymous nature of the GUIDE App should remove, or at least reduce, the stigma barrier for those needing help. By integrating the assessment and referral directly into the app several friction points and barriers will be removed. This may be particularly valuable for first responder populations, where concerns about appearing weak or vulnerable often discourage individuals from accessing support (Porter & Lee, 2024). Ultimately, this may be one of the most promising possibilities for The GUIDE App, the creation of integrated systems that seamlessly connect flourishing interventions with clinical resources when needed.

In addition, The GUIDE App has access to thousands of active duty and retired first responders who appear to be functioning well despite the trauma they have endured. For instance, of the 30,000 active duty first responders with access to the app, only 10,000 are active users. There may be lessons to be learned from the 20,000 active duty first responders who are not using the app. Research could determine what they are doing differently, if anything, from those actively seeking help. These members will also be encouraged to get involved in mentorship programs to assist their colleagues.

Moral Injury and Meaning Reconstruction

Although discussions of first responder wellness often focus on trauma exposure and PTSD, another construct may be equally important in understanding long-term psychological outcomes: moral injury. Moral injury refers to the psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual distress that can occur when individuals perpetrate, fail to prevent, witness, or otherwise become involved in events that violate deeply held moral beliefs and values (Litz et al., 2009). For many first responders, the most difficult experiences encountered during service are not necessarily the most dangerous. Rather, they are situations that challenge deeply held beliefs about justice, fairness, loyalty, responsibility, or human dignity. Examples may include: witnessing severe abuse or neglect, or being unable to save a victim despite one's best efforts, making decisions under conditions of uncertainty that result in unintended consequences, feeling betrayed by organizational leadership, and experiencing conflict between professional obligations and personal values. Unlike traditional PTSD frameworks, which often focus on fear-based responses to traumatic events, moral injury centers on disruptions in meaning, trust, identity, and values (Litz et al., 2009). For this reason, moral injury may represent a particularly important area of study within positive psychology.

The themes that emerged throughout this capstone—including identity reconstruction, purpose development, belonging, forgiveness, contribution, and meaning-making—may have significant relevance for individuals struggling with moral injury. Interventions rooted in self-compassion, narrative reconstruction, values clarification, forgiveness, gratitude, and posttraumatic growth may provide promising avenues for future investigation. Future research should explore whether the Second Mission Framework can contribute to healing processes

among individuals experiencing moral injury. In particular, researchers might examine whether helping retirees construct coherent service narratives, reconnect with deeply held values, and identify meaningful opportunities for continued contribution promotes greater well-being and mental health.

Psychedelic-Assisted Therapies

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the therapeutic potential of psychedelic-assisted interventions for a variety of mental health conditions, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders. Given the prevalence of PTSD within the first responder community, as high as 15 – 20% by some estimates Wilson (2015) further research around appropriate treatment would be highly beneficial. Although this remains outside the focus of this capstone, it represents a potentially important direction for future research involving first responder populations.

Several clinical trials have reported promising outcomes associated with psychedelic-assisted therapies. Interest in these approaches has been especially strong within military and veteran communities, where exposure to trauma and moral injury are common. Similar interest is beginning to emerge among law enforcement officers, firefighters, and emergency medical personnel where PTSD rates are arguably higher. These psychedelic-assisted interventions appear to help participants gain new perspective on meaning, connectedness, and spirituality. These themes overlap substantially with constructs frequently studied within positive psychology, including purpose, spirituality, gratitude, posttraumatic growth, and flourishing.

The Second Mission GUIDE is not intended to provide psychedelic-assisted interventions. However, given The GUIDE App's large client base (approximately 60,000

current or retired first responders) there may be potential to conduct research across this population. Even at a relatively conservative 10% prevalence estimate there could be approximately 6,000 individuals within GUIDE's client base suffering from PTSD. If half of this subset was interested in participating in PTSD related research, there would be 3,000 participants. The potential exists for The GUIDE App to partner with a research institution, such as Johns Hopkins University, to further psychedelic-based treatment for PTSD within the first responder community.

Ultimately, the goal of any intervention—whether clinical or positive psychology based—is not simply symptom reduction. The broader objective is helping individuals build lives characterized by meaning, connection, contribution, and flourishing. For first responders who have spent their careers serving others, that objective remains just as important after retirement as it was during active service.

The Second Mission GUIDE at a Glance

Integrating Theory, Intervention, Outcomes, and Assessment

GUIDE Phase	Primary Challenge	Positive Psychology Principle	Primary Intervention	Target Outcome	Key Assessment
Phase I – Honor the First Mission	Identity	Narrative Identity	Life review, career story, savoring accomplishments	Stronger identity continuity	PERMA Profiler; Satisfaction With Life Scale
Phase II – Process the Journey	Identity & Purpose	Meaning-Making; Posttraumatic Growth	Structured reflection, expressive writing, AI-assisted coaching	Meaning from adversity	Posttraumatic Growth Inventory
Phase III – Discover Strengths	Identity	Character Strengths	VIA Character Strengths Survey; strengths coaching	Strength-based identity	VIA Character Strengths Survey
Phase IV – Design a Second Mission	Purpose	Self-Determination Theory; Meaning	Mission plan, values clarification, goal setting	Increased purpose and direction	Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)
Phase V – Community, Connection & Belonging	Belonging	PERMA Relationships; SDT Relatedness	Peer groups, mentoring, community engagement	Greater social connection and belonging	Social Connectedness Scale
Phase VI – Giving Back	Purpose & Belonging	Generativity	Mentoring, volunteering, service, legacy projects	Legacy, contribution, continued service	Loyola Generativity Scale

Note: This table summarizes how each phase of the Second Mission GUIDE translates positive psychology theory into practical interventions, expected outcomes, and corresponding assessment measures. It is intended to provide readers with an integrated overview of the conceptual framework presented throughout the capstone.

Conclusion

For generations, first responders have answered society's most difficult calls. Police officers, firefighters, emergency medical personnel, and military service members routinely

place themselves in harm's way to protect others. In doing so, they witness tragedy, accumulate stress, and carry burdens that most people never encounter. Yet despite these challenges, many first responders derive profound benefits from their service. Their careers provide identity, belonging, purpose, meaning, and the opportunity to contribute to something larger than themselves, but challenge emerges when that service ends. Retirement is often viewed as a reward for decades of service, yet for many first responders it also represents the loss of a community, mission, and a deeply held identity. Research suggests that retired first responders experience higher rates of depression, social isolation, substance abuse, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and suicide than their active duty colleagues. While these outcomes are not inevitable, they highlight the psychological challenges that can accompany the transition from active service to retirement. This capstone argues positive psychology offers a powerful framework for understanding and addressing these challenges. Rather than focusing on pathology and dysfunction, positive psychology is focused on what enables people and communities to thrive. Research consistently points toward the importance of identity, belonging, purpose, meaning, relationships, contribution, and opportunities for continued growth.

Building upon these principles, this paper proposes the Second Mission Framework. The framework recognizes retirement should not be viewed as the end of service but rather as a transition from a First Mission to a Second Mission. The strengths that helped first responders succeed throughout their careers—courage, perseverance, leadership, compassion, teamwork, and commitment to others—do not disappear upon retirement. Instead, they can be redirected toward new forms of contribution, community engagement, mentorship, service, and personal growth.

To apply this framework, I have partnered with The GUIDE App to introduce the Second Mission GUIDE, a digital pathway designed to help first responders navigate the transition from active service to retirement. Through reflection, strengths identification and development, purpose exploration, peer connection, community engagement, and opportunities for generativity, the Second Mission GUIDE seeks to create a practical and scalable roadmap for flourishing after service.

The project also extends the work of the Team Indigo Service Learning Project and its partnership with the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund. The peer advisor model developed through that project demonstrated the importance of belonging and peer connection in retirement. The Second Mission GUIDE expands upon those insights by leveraging digital technology to make positive psychology interventions accessible to a broader first responder population. Together, organizations such as the NLEOMF and The GUIDE App have the potential to create a national ecosystem that supports first responders not only during active service, but throughout retirement as well.

Future research should continue exploring pathways that support both flourishing and healing. Opportunities exist to examine the role of moral injury, further develop and integrate screening and referral systems into wellness programs, and explore psychedelic-assisted therapies for individuals suffering from PTSD. These important areas of inquiry could help bolster the resources available to first responders and further the field of positive psychology.

Ultimately, this capstone aims to build upon and apply the work started by Team Indigo and extend it to the broader first responder community. Providing a platform through which the men and women who have dedicated their lives protecting and serving others can enjoy retirement and flourish during their second mission, beyond the badge.

References

- Arena, A. F., Vilus, B., Gregory, M., Collins, D. A. J., Gayed, A., Bryant, R., Harvey, S. B., & Dedy, M. (2026). Posttraumatic stress disorder prevalence among former first responders: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 39*(3), 564–575. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.70073>
- Austin, W. G. (Ed.). (1979). *The social psychology of intergroup relations*. Brooks/Cole Publ.
- Barlow, M. A., Wrosch, C., & McGrath, J. J. (2020). Goal adjustment capacities and quality of life: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Personality, 88*(2), 307–323. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12492>
- Bonanno, G. A. (2004). Loss, trauma, and human resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *American Psychologist, 59*(1), 20–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.1.20>
- Bowler, R. M., Kornblith, E. S., Li, J., Adams, S. W., Gocheva, V. V., Schwarzer, R., & Cone, J. E. (2016). Police officers who responded to 9/11: Comorbidity of PTSD, depression, and anxiety 10–11 years later. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine, 59*(6), 425–436. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.22588>
- Bullock, K., Garland, J., & Coupar, F. (2020). Police officer transitions to retirement in the United Kingdom: Social identity, social support, and (in)justice. *Policing and Society, 30*(10), 1123–1137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2019.1664522>
- Cameron, T. M., Griffiths, A., Cameron, T. M., & Griffiths, A. (2016). The impact of involuntary retirement on senior police officers. *Policing, 11*(1), paw020. <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paw020>

- Carney, C., Bates, L., & Sargeant, E. (2021). Exploring the impact of retirement on police officers' wellbeing. *Police Practice & Research*, 22(1), 257–273. (148447370).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2019.1658584>
- Chopko, B. A., Palmieri, P. A., & Adams, R. E. (2015). Critical incident history questionnaire replication: Frequency and severity of trauma exposure among officers from small and midsize police agencies. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 28(2), 157–161.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21996>
- Chopko, B. A., Papazoglou, K., & Schwartz, R. C. (2018). Mindfulness-based psychotherapy approaches for first responders: From research to clinical practice. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 71, 55–64. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.20180015>
- Craddock, T. B., & Telesco, G. (2021). Police stress and deleterious outcomes: Efforts towards improving police mental health. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 37(1), 173–182. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-021-09488-1>
- Curran, L. S. (2021). An exploration of well-being in former covert and undercover police officers. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 36(2), 256–267.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-020-09406-x>
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society* (Vol. 20). W. W. Norton.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21674086.1951.11925846>
- Frankl, V. E. (2006). *Man's search for meaning*. Beacon Press.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 218–226.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.218>

- Garland, E. L., Farb, N. A., R. Goldin, P., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2015). Mindfulness broadens awareness and builds eudaimonic meaning: A process model of mindful positive emotion regulation. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26(4), 293–314.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2015.1064294>
- Hill, S. C. (2013). *Identity and later-life work behaviors among retired police officers*. The University of Akron. (1645957525).
- Hill, S. C., & Snell, A. F. (2018). *Exploring later-life work behaviors among retired police officers: Survey research for a specialized population*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526428479>
- Kashdan, T. B., & McKnight, P. E. (2009). Origins of purpose in life: Refining our understanding of a life well lived. *Psihologijske Teme*, 18(2), 303–316.
<https://go.exlibris.link/gSbzljKS>
- Litz, B. T., Stein, N., Delaney, E., Lebowitz, L., Nash, W. P., Silva, C., & Maguen, S. (2009). Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy. *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*, 29(8), 695–706. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.07.003>
- Marmar, C. R., McCaslin, S. E., Metzler, T. J., Best, S., Weiss, D. S., Fagan, J., Liberman, A., Pole, N., Otte, C., Yehuda, R., Mohr, D., & Neylan, T. (2006). Predictors of posttraumatic stress in police and other first responders. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1071(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1196/annals.1364.001>
- Marshall, E. K. (2006). Cumulative career traumatic stress (CCTS): A pilot study of traumatic stress in law enforcement. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 21(1), 62–71.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02849503>

- Martela, F., & Steger, M. F. (2016). The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 11*(5), 531–545. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2015.1137623>
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology, 5*(2), 100–122. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100>
- McAdams, D. P. (2011). Narrative identity. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 99–115). Springer New York. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9_5
- Merton, R. K., & Ebaugh, H. R. F. (1988). Becoming an ex—The process of role exit. In *Becoming an ex—The process of role exit* (pp. xviii, 247). University of Chicago Press. (37333688; 1118946).
- Milnor, E., Binger, B., & Barentsen, S. (2026). *Improving well-being in retired law enforcement officers* [Working Paper, University of Pennsylvania]. <https://repository.upenn.edu/handle/20.500.14332/62669>
- Niemiec, R. M. (2017). *Character strengths interventions: A field guide for practitioners*. Hogrefe Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1027/00492-000>
- O'Dell, K. D., Winch, A. T., Su, S., Bowers, C. A., Newins, A. R., & Beidel, D. C. (2026). Latent typologies of posttraumatic stress disorder amongst first responders: A comparison to combat veterans. *Psychiatry Research, 359*, 117045. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2026.117045>
- Pal Singh, D., Rastogi, K., & Subodh Kumar, S. K. (2022). Grit, depression, anxiety and stress in serving and retired police personnel. *Journal of Psychosocial Research., 17*(1), 249–259. <https://doi.org/10.32381/JPR.2022.17.01.21>

- Pawelski, J. O. (2016). Defining the ‘positive’ in positive psychology: Part II. A normative analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 11*(4), 357–365.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2015.1137628>
- Porter, C. N., & Lee, R. (2024). The policing culture: An exploration into the mental health of former British police officers. *Current Psychology, 43*(3), 2214+.
- Post, S. G. (2005). Altruism, happiness, and health: It’s good to be good. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 12*(2), 66–77. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327558ijbm1202_4
- Queirós, C., Passos, F., Bártolo, A., Marques, A. J., Da Silva, C. F., & Pereira, A. (2020). Burnout and stress measurement in police officers: Literature review and a study with the operational police stress questionnaire. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 587.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00587>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist, 55*(1), 68–78.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A new understanding of happiness and well-being—And how to achieve them*. Nicholas Brealey Pub.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). Positive psychology: An introduction. In M. Csikszentmihalyi (Ed.), *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology: The collected works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (pp. 279–298). Springer Netherlands.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9088-8_18
- Steger, M. F. (2009). Meaning in life. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of positive psychology*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195187243.013.0064>

- Syrotiak, B. T., Pickens, N. D., & Evetts, C. L. (2024). Unmet occupational needs of first responders transitioning to retirement. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 31(3), 591–605.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2024.2328098>
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (1996). The posttraumatic growth inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9(3), 455–471.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.2490090305>
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). A clinical approach to posttraumatic growth. In P. A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *Positive psychology in practice* (1st ed., pp. 405–419). Wiley.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470939338.ch25>
- Violanti, J. M. (2025). Retired police suicide: The enduring aftermath of career stress and post service transition. *Policing: An International Journal*, 49(1), 109–121.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/pijpsm-07-2025-0132>
- Waldinger, R., & Schulz, M. (2023). *The good life: Lessons from the world's longest scientific study of happiness*. Simon & Schuster.
- Wang, M., & Shi, J. (2014). Psychological research on retirement. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65(1), 209–233. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115131>
- Wilson, L. C. (2015). A systematic review of probable posttraumatic stress disorder in first responders following man-made mass violence. *Psychiatry Research*, 229(1), 21–26.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2015.06.015>

Appendix Not Included for Proprietary Purposes

See The GUIDE App for application of appendix material.