



# STRUGGLE WELL



## 2025 YEAR IN REVIEW

A FOUNDATIONAL REPORT



**BOULDER CREST**  
FOUNDATION

**“IT IS BY GOING DOWN INTO  
THE ABYSS THAT WE RECOVER  
THE TREASURES OF LIFE.  
WHERE YOU STUMBLE,  
THERE LIES YOUR TREASURE.”**

**— JOSEPH CAMPBELL**

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**BOULDER CREST**  
FOUNDATION

**Contact information:**  
33735 Snickersville Turnpike  
Bluemont, VA 20135  
[hello@bouldercrest.org](mailto:hello@bouldercrest.org)  
[www.bouldercrest.org](http://www.bouldercrest.org)

# INTRODUCTION

In May 2018, Boulder Crest Foundation Chairman Ken Falke and I published *Struggle Well: Thriving in the Aftermath of Trauma*. The book distilled four years of work at Boulder Crest developing Warrior PATHH, the first-ever program designed to cultivate and facilitate Posttraumatic Growth for combat veterans and first responders.

We did not anticipate what came next.

Within months, we received calls from leaders who had read the book and wanted to bring its principles to their people. Seabees in Gulfport, Mississippi. Marines at Camp Lejeune. Then, as COVID-19 swept the nation and those on the frontlines faced unprecedented strain, the calls multiplied — from healthcare systems, fire departments, law enforcement agencies, all seeking something beyond traditional approaches to help their people navigate the weight of service.

In 2020, we launched our first formal Struggle Well training pilot with first responders in Miami-Dade County, Florida. Today, Boulder Crest has trained over 100,000 people through our series of Struggle Well programs. What began as a book became a program. What began as a program became a movement.

This report documents that journey in full: the crisis facing those who serve, the science that guides our work, the model we have built, and the outcomes we have achieved. It serves as both an account of 2025 and a foundational record of Struggle Well's origins and impact.

Future reports will focus on annual progress. This inaugural edition provides the comprehensive foundation from which those reports will build.

The men and women who protect our communities and country deserve more than survival. They deserve the opportunity to transform their deepest struggles into profound strength. That conviction is at the heart of everything Boulder Crest does.



Josh Goldberg  
CEO  
Boulder Crest Foundation



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## THE PROBLEM

Our nation's first responders and military personnel are struggling. Police officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, 911 dispatchers, corrections officers, and healthcare workers — alongside active duty service members, veterans, National Guard, and Reservists — face an unprecedented crisis. These are the men and women who run toward danger to bring others to safety, who answer the call at 3 AM, who witness humanity's worst moments, and who carry the weight of life-and-death decisions every day.

We lose more first responders to suicide than in the line of duty each year. Military suicide rates have reached their highest levels since 1938. Nearly one-third of those in these high-stress professions now struggle with depression, anxiety, or PTSD. Behind these statistics are human beings — with families who love them, communities that depend on them, and lives that deserve to be lived fully.

## OUR MISSION

Boulder Crest Foundation exists to ensure that those who serve — and the families who stand beside them — live great, meaningful lives during and long after their time in uniform. Lives marked by passion, purpose, connection, growth, and service.

## A DIFFERENT PATH

Traditional approaches aren't working. The system is reactive — waiting until people are already in crisis before offering help. And even then, the mainstream mental health model too often focuses on diagnosis and dysfunction, sapping people of the one thing they need most: hope.

At Boulder Crest Foundation, we pioneered a different path: Struggle Well, a transformative program built on the science of Posttraumatic Growth (PTG). Rather than teaching people merely to survive, we show them how to turn their deepest struggles into profound strength.

Since 2018, we have trained **104,537** people how to struggle well, including **43,082 first responders**, **30,000 military personnel**, and nearly **30,000 healthcare workers, educators, and community members**.

**“THEY TRIED TO BURY US. THEY DIDN'T KNOW WE WERE SEEDS.”**

— DINOS CHRISTIANOPOULOS

## 2025 ACHIEVEMENTS

Metric	Result
Participants Trained	16,024 (14,884 first responders, 1,140 military)
Programs Delivered	633 across 30 states
Agencies/Military Units Served	500+
Average PTG Increase	48% across all five domains
Training Satisfaction	98%

### THE STRUGGLE WELL DIFFERENCE

Struggle Well works because it's built on science, delivered by peers, and focused on prevention. Dr. Richard Tedeschi, co-founder of the Posttraumatic Growth framework, serves as Executive Director of the Boulder Crest Institute for Posttraumatic Growth<sup>SM</sup>, ensuring our programs reflect decades of research.

### STRATEGIC GROWTH

Our regionalized approach has enabled sustainable growth while maintaining program quality. With operations in six regions, we've built centers of excellence that adapt to local needs while delivering consistent, transformative training.

### LOOKING AHEAD

Our goal is to transform military and first responder cultures — to normalize struggle and democratize the ability to struggle well — so that all those who serve can do so without sacrificing the quality of their lives.

# THE EPIDEMIC: THE HIDDEN COST OF SERVICE

## THE MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCY

We call them heroes. We thank them for their service. We tell our children that these are the people who keep us safe. But behind the badges and uniforms, a harder truth persists: the very people we call essential too often feel disposable.

The officer who responds to her fifth overdose of the week doesn't feel like a hero — she feels like she's failing. The firefighter who pulls bodies from the wreckage doesn't want a parade — he wants to sleep through the night. The EMT, the dispatcher, the corrections officer, the soldier, the combat medic — they signed up to serve, not to sacrifice their mental health, their marriages, their will to live.

And yet sacrifice is exactly what we've been asking of them.

The numbers tell a devastating story. Military suicide rates have climbed to their highest levels since 1938. More first responders now die by suicide than in the line of duty. Nearly one in three struggle with depression, anxiety, or PTSD. These communities are deeply interconnected — approximately 30% of first responders are military veterans, carrying the compounded weight of multiple service experiences.

But statistics flatten what is fundamentally a human crisis. Each number represents a person who chose a life of service, who believed the work mattered, who showed up again and again — until they couldn't anymore. They have families who love them. Communities that depend on them. Lives that deserve to be lived fully, not merely endured.

## THE LIMITS OF CURRENT APPROACHES

Despite enormous effort, investment, and good intentions, current approaches to supporting these communities aren't producing the outcomes we need. The reasons are systemic, and they compound one another.

**The system is far too reactive.** Most mental health resources kick in only after the crisis — after the suicide attempt, after the traumatic incident, after someone is already struggling. By then, the damage is done and the path to recovery is far steeper.

**And current, reactive approaches don't work well for many.** Stigma and cultural barriers keep many from ever seeking help in the first place. And for those who do, evidence-based therapies — while helpful to many — don't reach everyone. Research published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* and other leading journals shows that 60-72% of military veterans retain their PTSD diagnosis after completing treatment, with dropout rates ranging from 25-48%. These aren't failures of effort or intention — they reflect the reality that we need a broader range of approaches to reach everyone who is struggling.

**What qualifies as prevention isn't working either.** Resilience training has been widely adopted across military and first responder organizations, yet outcomes continue to worsen. As two senior military leaders wrote in May 2023 in *Defense One*, approaches have been “anchored in a slew of programs and activities wrapped in the buzzword of resilience, ultimately corrupting the term by applying it as a catch-all for quick-fix solutions to a long-term problem.” The premise — that we can teach people to “bounce back” — misses the deeper opportunity for transformation. As George Bonanno, a clinical psychologist at Columbia University, told the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: “I've been studying resilience for 20 years, and I don't know of any empirical data that shows how to build resilience in anybody.”

**Finally, it's hard to be well if your culture is unwell.** Culture is the invisible force that shapes behavior — it determines what's acceptable to talk about, who people trust, and whether they'll seek help when they're struggling. In too many organizations, the culture actively works against wellness. People hide their struggles because disclosure feels unsafe. Leadership outsources mental health to the department psychologist and wonders why nobody uses the resources. But here's what we've learned: you cannot help individuals become well in an unwell culture. And you cannot create a well culture without leaders who are themselves committed to their own wellness and growth — leaders willing to go first, to be vulnerable, and to model what they want to see. To truly move the needle, we need solutions that transform cultures, not simply help individuals.

## A DIFFERENT PATH FORWARD

What if struggle itself could be the pathway to strength? What if the very experiences that break people down could become the foundation for profound growth?

This is the **promise** of Posttraumatic Growth — the **mission** of Boulder Crest Foundation — and the **purpose** of Struggle Well.

# WHAT IS POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH?

For most of human history, people have understood that suffering can be transformative — that what breaks us can also remake us. In 1995, psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun gave this ancient wisdom a name: Posttraumatic Growth (PTG). Their research revealed that for many people, the struggle with trauma doesn't just lead to recovery — it leads to profound positive change.

This is different from resilience. Resilience is bouncing back, returning to where you were before. PTG is something more: it's the experience of growing beyond your previous baseline — becoming stronger, more connected, more purposeful than you were before the struggle began. It doesn't mean the pain wasn't real or that trauma is a gift. It means that with the right support and perspective, people can transform their deepest struggles into the foundation for a different kind of life.

The science of PTG suggests that deep struggle prompts individuals to reflect on what is truly valuable and significant in their lives — and that reflection can lead to profound transformation in one or more of the following domains.

## THE OUTCOMES: FIVE DOMAINS OF GROWTH

Domain	Description
<b>New Possibilities</b>	The sense that new opportunities have emerged from the struggle, opening up possibilities that were not present before
<b>Deeper Relationships</b>	Experiencing closer relationships with specific people, and an increased sense of connection with others who suffer
<b>Personal Strength</b>	An increased sense of one's own strength — "If I lived through that, I can face anything"
<b>Appreciation for Life</b>	A sense of gratitude for the small and large things in life
<b>Spiritual/Existential Change</b>	A deepening of their spiritual lives and an exploration of beliefs and notions previously unconsidered

## THE PROCESS: FIVE PHASES OF GROWTH

Growth doesn't happen by accident. It requires a process — and that process is built on a foundation of trust and connection. People need to feel safe before they can be honest about their struggles — and that honesty is what makes growth possible.

Struggle Well guides participants through five phases that facilitate Posttraumatic Growth:

Phase	Description
Education	Identify impacts of stress and trauma; examine how struggle leads to growth
Regulation	Develop mind, body, financial, and spiritual wellness practices
Disclosure	Self-disclose personal experiences to strengthen relationships
Story	Create a positive, forward-looking personal narrative
Service	Develop a plan to serve family, work, community, and country in a new way

“THE WOUND IS THE PLACE WHERE THE LIGHT ENTERS YOU.”

— RUMI

# WHAT IS STRUGGLE WELL?

Struggle Well is a transformative training program that teaches first responders and military personnel to not only navigate and overcome the stress and trauma faced in their daily lives, but also harness these challenges as catalysts for profound personal growth, deeper relationships, and renewed purpose. Built on the science of Posttraumatic Growth, Struggle Well focuses on turning struggle into strength — a departure from traditional mental health approaches that often focus solely on coping mechanisms.

Through comprehensive training and sustainable partnerships — combined with digital resources, refresher courses, and peer networks that keep growth alive — Struggle Well is transforming military and first responder culture from one of silent endurance to one of growth, connection, and positive change.

As retired Tucson Police Chief Chad Kasmar explains:

***“The reality is, these are human beings who have sick children, who have aging parents, who have just suffered a loss, who are still trying to process a child dying in their arms the shift before. These are all things that if we don’t create an environment where we can talk about it, where we can offload those feelings and support each other, we’re going to have outcomes in the field we don’t want and officers leaving the profession much sooner than they should.”***

The program is built on a foundation that runs deep: thousands of years of human wisdom about the transformative power of struggle, over 30 years of scientific research on PTG, and more than a decade of application at Boulder Crest.

Struggle Well is delivered through intensive, immersive training experiences in 1-day, 2-day, and 5-day formats — designed to meet participants and organizations where they are while providing the depth required for real transformation.

## STRUGGLE WELL TRAINING EXPERIENCES

Format	Description
<b>1-Day Awareness</b>	Foundational understanding of PTG principles; normalizes struggle in professional cultures
<b>2-Day Intensive</b>	Expanded engagement with interactive exercises often delivered to peer-support teams or supervisors
<b>5-Day Comprehensive</b>	Complete transformational experience including intensive self-reflection, group discussions, and presentations

## THE GOAL

Most mental health resources arrive after the crisis. Struggle Well takes a different approach — prevention-focused training that reaches people before challenges become crises.

The goal is threefold:

1. Transform **individuals** — Equip people with the skills and perspective to turn struggle into strength
2. Transform **culture** — Normalize struggle, democratize the ability to struggle well, and build cultures of connection, trust, and honesty
3. Transform **service** — Enable people to better serve their communities because they themselves are well

## SATURATION AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION: TRANSFORMING CULTURES

Boulder Crest partners with departments, units, associations, and leaders to help them reclaim their role as guardians of their people's wellbeing. The objective is to transform culture — from one where people are taught to “suck it up because this is what you signed up for” to one where struggle is normalized and the ability to receive support is democratized.

This transformation occurs through two complementary lines of effort:

### Saturation

Provide intensive, immersive, and interactive training for a critical mass of team members — achieving a compounding effect that fundamentally shifts how organizations think about struggle. Saturation means:

- Training everyone, not just those who are struggling
- Leveraging key informal and formal leaders within organizations
- Building momentum through word-of-mouth as graduates become advocates
- Creating a shared vocabulary and common framework across the organization

### Institutionalization

Embed Struggle Well training and concepts into the fiber of the institution throughout the entire career journey:

- Integrate training from academy through retirement
- Develop internal trainers to maintain program momentum
- Minimize dependency on Boulder Crest by building internal capacity
- Create self-sufficient support systems that sustain growth over time

## SUSTAINING GROWTH

The intensive training is just the first step on the journey from struggle to strength. To ensure the benefits of training endure, Boulder Crest provides an ecosystem of ongoing support:

### Digital Platform and App

The Struggle Well app and digital learning platform provide continuous support with:

- 150+ microtrainings of varying lengths
- Continuous learning resources
- Community engagement opportunities
- Progress tracking and goal setting

### Refresher Training

Ongoing refresher courses reinforce concepts over time, ensuring that growth continues long after the initial training experience.

### Peer Networks

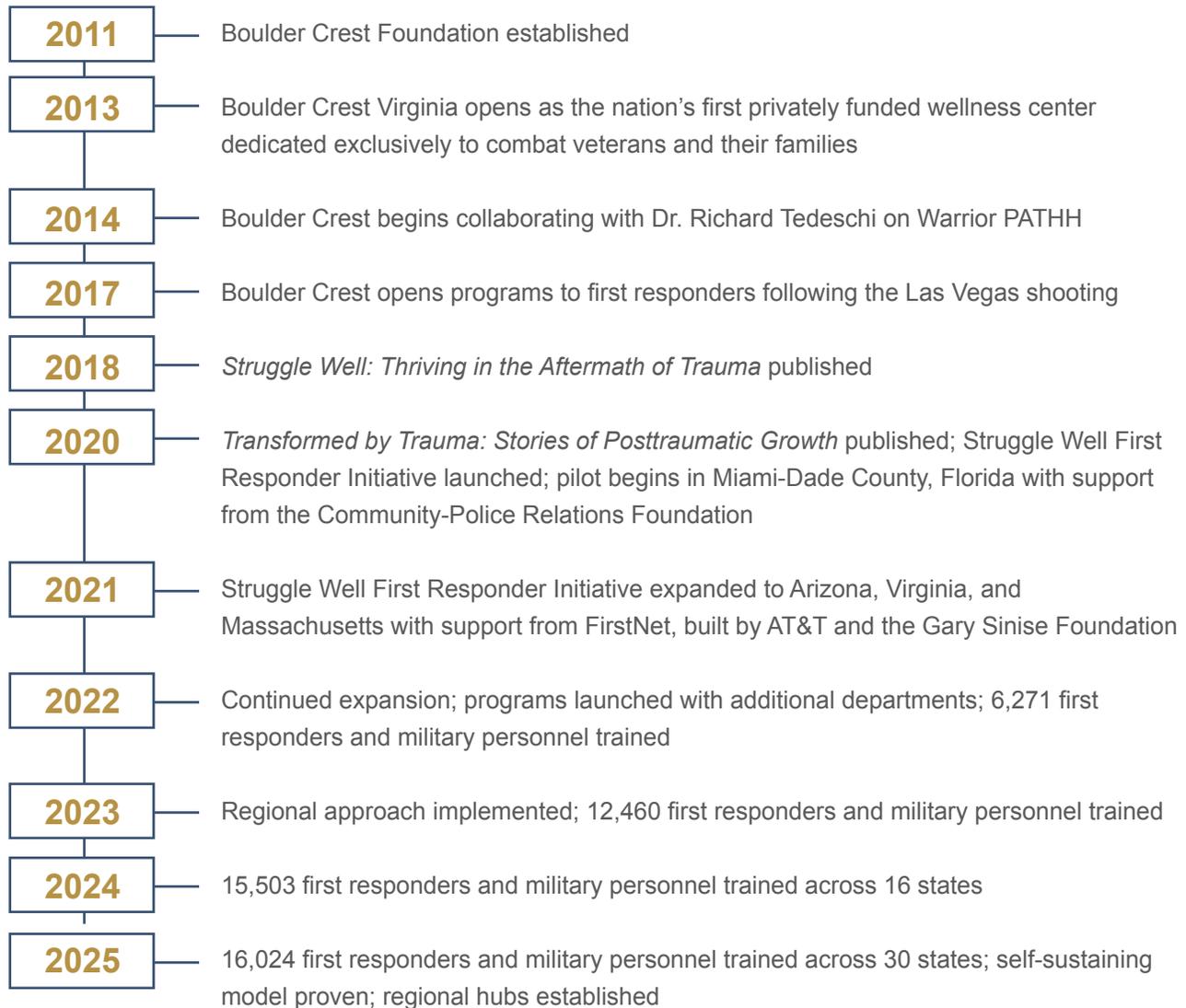
Graduates of Struggle Well training become part of a community dedicated to the principles and practices of PTG — a network of peers who support one another through ongoing challenges.

### Family Programs

Because struggle affects the whole family, we continue to explore how to share the principles and practices of Struggle Well with family members of those who attend the 2- and 5-day programs.



## STRUGGLE WELL: KEY MILESTONES



## OUR GROWTH: 2018-2025

Since publishing *Struggle Well: Thriving in the Aftermath of Trauma* in 2018, and officially launching the Struggle Well First Responder Initiative in 2021, we have experienced remarkable growth, fueled by participants telling other people that Struggle Well truly works.

CUMULATIVE IMPACT	
Metric	Total
First Responders & Military Personnel Trained	72,607
First Responder & Military Training Days	4,163

*Note: In addition to the first responder and military numbers above, Boulder Crest has trained nearly 30,000 healthcare workers, educators, and community members to struggle well — bringing our total to over 100,000 people trained since 2018.*

First Responder and Military Year-by-Year Growth				
Year	First Responders	Military	Total	Days of Training
2018	—	12,500	12,500	10
2019	—	2,500	2,500	5
2020	280	3,000	3,280	16
2021	1,069	3,000	4,069	88
2022	3,513	2,758	6,271	267
2023	9,659	2,801	12,460	786
2024	13,677	1,826	15,503	1,326
2025	14,884	1,140	16,024	1,665
<b>Total</b>	<b>43,082</b>	<b>29,525</b>	<b>72,607</b>	<b>4,163</b>

# OUR NATIONAL FOOTPRINT

**“ALONE WE CAN DO SO LITTLE; TOGETHER WE CAN DO SO MUCH.”**

— HELEN KELLER

**Struggle Well reaches military and first responder communities through two complementary delivery strategies — each tailored to the unique structure and needs of the populations we serve.**

## **STRUGGLE WELL FOR THE MILITARY: A NATIONAL APPROACH**

For military personnel, we deliver training directly to installations and units across the country. This national model allows us to reach active duty service members, National Guard, and Reservists wherever they serve — partnering with programs like the Army Recovery Care Program to maximize impact.

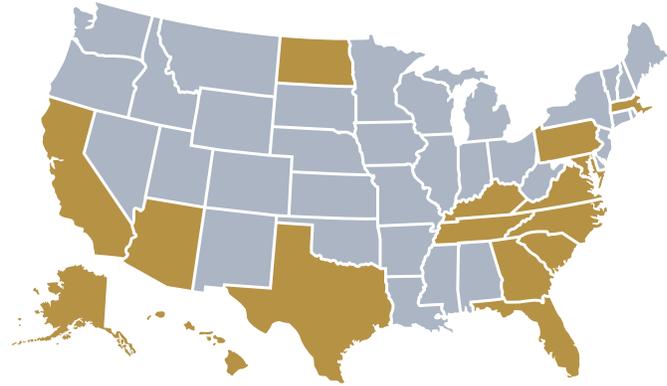
Since 2018, Boulder Crest has trained almost 30,000 military personnel across all branches of service in 20 states and Japan — from drill sergeants at Fort Jackson to Coast Guardsmen in Kodiak, Alaska; from Marines at Parris Island to Airmen at bases across the country. The work has taken us into basic training classrooms, operational units, remote installations, and recovery programs.

The goal is readiness — not just physical, but mental, emotional, and spiritual. Service members who can regulate under pressure, connect authentically with teammates, and find meaning in their service are more effective in the field and more likely to stay in the fight. Struggle Well strengthens unit cohesion, sharpens decision-making, and builds the kind of trust that holds teams together when it matters most.



## 2025 MILITARY TRAINING

- 1,140 military personnel trained
- 17 programs delivered
- Installations in 16 states



### Army Recovery Care Program Partnership

Our partnership with the Army Recovery Care Program — initiated by the Surgeon General in 2022 — demonstrated what’s possible when PTG is embedded within existing military structures.

Working within Soldier Recovery Units, we trained wounded, ill, and injured Soldiers alongside the cadre who support them.

In 2025, we trained 660 service members through the ARCP program at 7 installations:

- Fort Belvoir (VA)
- Fort Campbell (KY/TN)
- Fort Cavazos (TX)
- Fort Stewart (GA)
- Schofield Barracks (HI)
- Walter Reed (MD)
- Joint Base San Antonio (TX)

Since the partnership began, 1,448 Soldiers and cadre have completed training, with a 49% average improvement in Posttraumatic Growth scores and 98% participant satisfaction.

### Additional Military Engagements

Beyond the Army Recovery Care Program, Struggle Well has reached service members in diverse settings:

- Fort Jackson & Parris Island: Working with drill sergeants and recruits at the start of the military journey
- Fort Huachuca & Davis-Monthan Air Force Base: Building culture through ongoing engagement with operational units
- US Air Force JROTC at the University of Arizona: Preparing cadets for service
- Minot Air Force Base: Supporting leadership after elevated risk events
- 104th Fighter Wing: Hosted nearly 100 members of the Wing, based in Westfield, Massachusetts, through Struggle Well classes in the Commonwealth
- Coast Guard Base Kodiak & Coast Guard Academy: Bringing training to isolated and high-stress environments

## STRUGGLE WELL FOR FIRST RESPONDERS: A REGIONAL APPROACH

With more than 46,500 police and fire departments and nearly 2 million first responders across the United States, the scope of the challenge demands a strategy focused on growing dramatically and responsibly. We cannot — and should not — try to train everyone ourselves. Instead, our model is designed to build capacity, multiply impact, and create lasting change.

### Our three-fold delivery model:

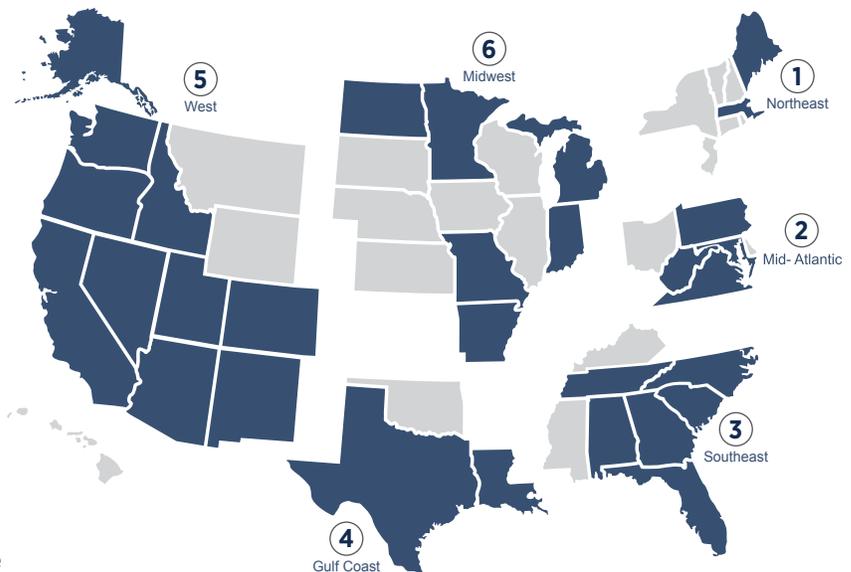
1. **Self-Sustaining Agencies:** Large departments build internal capacity to deliver Struggle Well to their own personnel. Through our train-the-trainer model, we certify agency guides who can facilitate training independently, eliminating dependency on Boulder Crest and ensuring the program becomes embedded in the organization's culture. This is the ultimate goal: agencies that own their own wellness.
2. **Regional Hubs:** Universities, foundations, and state agencies serve as centers of excellence that support multiple departments within their geographic areas. These hubs combine Boulder Crest team members with certified agency trainers to deliver training collaboratively, extending our reach while maintaining program quality and fidelity.
3. **Direct Training:** For agencies without access to a regional hub or the capacity to build internal programs, Boulder Crest delivers training directly. This ensures that even smaller or more remote departments can access the transformative power of Struggle Well.

### 2025 First Responder Training

- 14,884 first responders trained
- 633 programs delivered
- Departments/Agencies across 30 states

### The Six Regions

We divide the country into six regions, each with dedicated leadership and tailored strategies to meet the unique needs of the agencies we serve. Regions 1, 2, 3, and 5 are fully operational with established partnerships and infrastructure. Regions 4 and 6 are emerging markets we expect to bring fully online over the next 1-2 years.





## REGION 1: NORTHEAST

**States Included:** Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont

### Participants by Year

2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
348	596	2,274	3,995	3,619	<b>10,832</b>

**2025 at a Glance:** 109 programs | 3,619 participants | 251 training days

### Agencies Engaged by Year (Cumulative)

State	2022	2023	2024	2025
<b>Massachusetts</b>	25	70	130	175
<b>Maine</b>	—	1	22	97
<b>Rhode Island</b>	—	—	1	10
<b>New Hampshire</b>	3	4	6	6
<b>Vermont</b>	—	—	2	2
<b>New Jersey</b>	—	—	2	2
<b>Connecticut</b>	—	—	1	1
<b>New York</b>	—	—	—	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>294</b>

## ANCHOR PARTNERSHIPS

### **Massachusetts Department of Corrections & Hampden County Sheriff's Office**

These agencies have almost achieved full self-sustainability — utilizing their own certified Guides to deliver Struggle Well internally. Both organizations have further integrated the training by integrating Struggle Well into their respective academies. Furthermore, the Hampden County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) has created a dedicated Peer Support Team (PEER 3-5) and initiated the Recharge program, weekly PTG meetings for Struggle Well participants.

### **Plymouth County Sheriff's Office (Massachusetts) and Maine Department of Corrections**

Both agencies are in the beginning stages of building internal, self-sustaining systems. They are in the process of developing a cadre of internal Guides.

## EMERGING STATES

Rhode Island saw significant momentum in late 2025, with 10 agencies trained including the State Police, Department of Corrections, and Municipal Police Training Academy. New Hampshire has 7 agencies engaged including State Police and UNH Police Department, with training dating back to 2022.



## REGION 2: MID-ATLANTIC

**States Included:** Delaware, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia

### Participants by Year

2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
90	143	1,161	1,521	2,209	<b>5,124</b>

**2025 at a Glance:** 94 programs | 2,209 participants | 194 training days

### Agencies Engaged by Year (Cumulative)

State	2022	2023	2024	2025
Virginia	23	78	118	163
Maryland	—	1	28	65
Pennsylvania	—	1	10	40
DC	1	14	23	31
West Virginia	—	—	—	6
Delaware	—	—	—	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>307</b>

## ANCHOR PARTNERSHIPS

### **Chesterfield County, Virginia**

Chesterfield represents the gold standard for integrated, county-wide implementation. We've trained personnel across Police, Fire & EMS, Sheriff's Office, Department of Social Services, Probation, Commonwealth Attorney, Employee Behavioral Health, and Emergency Communications — creating a shared language and culture of support that spans the entire public safety ecosystem.

### **Virginia State Police**

Virginia State Police is projected to achieve full self-sustainability in 2026. Their commitment to Struggle Well demonstrates how a large state agency can embed PTG principles into organizational culture at scale — a model we hope to replicate with state police agencies nationwide.

### **Federal Agencies (Washington, D.C.)**

Our presence in the nation's capital includes active partnerships with the FBI, Capitol Police, Supreme Court Police, US Marshals Service, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps.

### **Frederick County, Maryland**

Frederick County has built a comprehensive Struggle Well infrastructure including Police, Fire & Rescue, Sheriff's Office, Crisis Response Team, Command Staff, and Adult Detention Center — all actively engaged.

## EMERGING STATES

Pennsylvania saw significant growth in 2025, with training concentrated in the Lehigh Valley through partnerships with local police departments, the PA State Police, and regional peer support teams. West Virginia is emerging with EMS-focused training across several counties.



## REGION 3: SOUTHEAST

**States Included:** Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee

### Participants by Year

2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
442	1,873	3,698	5,014	3,606	<b>14,633</b>

**2025 at a Glance:** 190 programs | 3,606 participants | 375 training days

### Agencies Engaged by Year (Cumulative)

State	2022	2023	2024	2025
Florida	20	85	200	308
North Carolina	5	45	120	185
Alabama	—	—	15	35
South Carolina	3	10	18	28
Georgia	—	5	18	25
Tennessee	—	1	1	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>588</b>

## ANCHOR PARTNERSHIPS

### **Miami-Dade County, Florida**

Miami-Dade represents one of Struggle Well's most comprehensive county-wide implementations. Since launching in early 2022, the program has reached virtually every public safety entity: Miami-Dade Sheriff's Office, Miami Police Department, and 20+ municipal police departments, Miami-Dade Fire Rescue, Corrections and Rehabilitation, Miami Dade College School of Justice, and the Crisis Intervention Team. The county's Peer Support Steering Committee coordinates training across agencies, creating a unified approach to first responder wellness.

### **Broward County, Florida**

Broward County showcases how municipal government buy-in accelerates adoption. Cities including Coral Springs, Miramar, Lauderhill, and Pompano Beach have embedded Struggle Well into their public safety cultures. The Coral Springs Regional Institute of Public Safety partnership integrates Struggle Well concepts into recruit training.

### **Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina**

Charlotte-Mecklenburg County represents the most comprehensive county saturation effort in the Southeast. Since December 2022, Struggle Well is active across Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, Charlotte Fire Department, Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office, Mecklenburg Medic, CMS Schools Police, Crisis Intervention Team, NC Department of Adult Corrections, and UNC Charlotte Police. The county's Trauma and Justice Partnership coordinates implementation.

### **Clemson University, South Carolina**

Clemson University demonstrates how academic institutions can serve as regional training hubs, with partnerships spanning the Police Department, Fire Department, Emergency Management, and Emeritus College. Beyond campus, Clemson's influence extends to surrounding Pickens and Oconee counties.

## EMERGING STATES

Florida continues to have the highest engagement rate in Region 3 with the densest agency concentration, but North Carolina is rapidly expanding beyond the Charlotte hub. Rowan County has emerged as a secondary saturation target with 20+ engaged agencies. Tennessee represents significant growth potential — Nashville Fire Department's 2023 engagement has sparked interest across Sumner, Robertson, and Cheatham counties. Georgia's Atlanta-area agencies and South Carolina's Midlands region are positioned for greater saturation in 2026.



## REGION 4: GULF COAST

States Included: Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas

### Participants by Year

2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
—	—	84	—	171	<b>255</b>

**2025 at a Glance:** 13 programs | 171 participants | 27 training days

### Agencies Engaged by Year (Cumulative)

State	2022	2023	2024	2025
Texas	—	3	—	4
Louisiana	—	—	—	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>5</b>

## GROWTH POTENTIAL

Region 4 represents a tremendous opportunity to bring our Struggle Well efforts to bear. Texas alone has over 1,800 law enforcement agencies and 500+ fire departments. The presence of Boulder Crest Texas — located an hour south of Dallas — serves as a platform to continue expanding in the state and region. The 2025 federal law enforcement partnerships signal interest that could accelerate regional growth.



## REGION 5: WEST

**States Included:** Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming

### Participants by Year

2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
189	824	2,366	3,019	4,407	<b>10,855</b>

**2025 at a Glance:** 183 programs | 4,407 participants | 666 training days

### Agencies Engaged by Year (Cumulative)

State	2022	2023	2024	2025
<b>Arizona</b>	10	55	75	115
<b>Oregon</b>	2	25	45	75
<b>Washington</b>	—	3	18	33
<b>Colorado</b>	—	3	18	26
<b>California</b>	—	4	7	23
<b>Idaho</b>	—	—	—	15
<b>Utah</b>	—	—	1	1
<b>Nevada</b>	—	1	1	1
<b>New Mexico</b>	—	—	—	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>290</b>

## ANCHOR PARTNERSHIPS

### **Tucson, Arizona — The First Agency-Wide Culture Transformation**

Tucson Police Department (TPD) was among the first law enforcement agencies to adopt Struggle Well in 2021, but what makes Tucson exceptional is the depth of integration. TPD became the first agency to pursue full organizational saturation — training every member from academy recruits to retirees — and the results have made it a model for culture change nationwide. Since then, the Tucson model has expanded to include Tucson Fire Department, Tucson Public Safety Communications, Pima County Sheriff's Department, and University of Arizona Police Department. The region's Border Patrol partnerships — including the Tucson Sector and Brian Terry Station — demonstrate how Struggle Well addresses the unique stressors of federal law enforcement on the southern border.

### **Phoenix Metro, Arizona — Urban Scale**

The Phoenix metropolitan area represents Struggle Well's largest urban footprint in the West. Active partnerships include Mesa Police and Fire, Gilbert Police and Fire, Chandler Police, Scottsdale Police, Glendale Police, Peoria Police, and Surprise Police. This concentration demonstrates the program's ability to scale across a major metropolitan region while maintaining quality.

### **Prescott/Yavapai County, Arizona — Rural Integration**

Yavapai County showcases Struggle Well's adaptability to rural and semi-rural settings. Central Arizona Fire and Medical Authority, Prescott Police and Fire, Prescott Valley Police and Fire, and Yavapai County Sheriff's Office have all achieved active status, creating a regional wellness ecosystem.

### **Oregon — Statewide Infrastructure**

Oregon State Police became an early adopter in 2022, setting the stage for statewide expansion. The Oregon Fire Chiefs Association partnership and engagement with Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue have created momentum in the fire service. The State Accident Insurance Fund (SAIF) partnership provides a unique funding mechanism for broader Oregon expansion.

## EMERGING STATES

Idaho emerged as a major growth story in 2025, with Boise Police and Fire Departments anchoring a rapid expansion that reached 15 agencies in a single year. California is positioned for significant growth through two nonprofit partners. Washington's Kitsap County cluster and Spokane-area engagement signal expansion potential in the Pacific Northwest. The presence of Boulder Crest Wyoming serves as a platform for future expansion into Wyoming and the northern Mountain West.



## REGION 6: MIDWEST

**States Included:** Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin

### Participants by Year

2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
—	27	76	128	872	1,103

**2025 at a Glance:** 28 programs | 872 participants | 52 training days

### Agencies Engaged by Year (Cumulative)

State	2022	2023	2024	2025
Missouri	—	—	4	7
Michigan	—	1	1	2
Arkansas	—	—	—	1
Indiana	—	—	—	1
Illinois	1	—	—	—
North Dakota	—	1	—	—
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>11</b>

## ANCHOR PARTNERSHIPS

### **Springfield, Missouri — Regional Hub Development**

Springfield is emerging as Region 6's first potential hub. Springfield Police Department launched their program in early 2024, and engagement has expanded to include Springfield Fire Department, Springfield-Greene County 911 Communications, Greene County Sheriff's Office, and surrounding school district police departments.

### **Michigan State Police**

Our partnership with the Michigan State Police began in 2023 and provides a statewide platform for broader Michigan expansion and demonstrates the viability of state-level law enforcement partnerships in the Midwest.

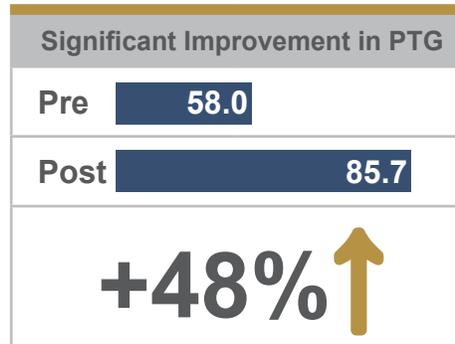
## GROWTH POTENTIAL

Region 6 represents Boulder Crest's newest and most nascent market. The 2025 participant surge (128 to 872) signals accelerating momentum. Missouri's Springfield hub provides a model for regional development, while Michigan State Police and the Twin Cities cluster offer platforms for expansion. Nebraska and South Dakota present opportunities for future growth across the northern Plains.

# IMPACT & OUTCOMES

## THE EVIDENCE BASE

In 2025, Boulder Crest completed the most comprehensive evaluation of Struggle Well program data conducted to date. This mixed-methods analysis examined data from over 8,000 participants who attended Struggle Well training between May 2022 and April 2025. The evaluation employed pre- and post-training surveys using validated instruments — the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) and the Cantril Self-Anchoring Scale — alongside qualitative analysis of participant reflections using sentiment scoring and topic modeling.



The findings are unambiguous: Struggle Well produces measurable, statistically significant growth across every dimension measured.

## QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS: POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH INVENTORY

The PTGI measures growth across five Domains: Deeper Relationships, New Possibilities, Personal Strength, Appreciation of Life, and Spiritual & Existential Change. Participants completed the inventory before training (n=8,805) and upon completion (n=8,173).

## OVERALL RESULTS

Posttraumatic Growth Experienced By Domain of PTG				
Domain-Level Results	Pre-Training	Post-Training	% Increase	Effect Size
Deeper Relationships	15.4	24.8	+60.7%	1.12 (Very Large)
New Possibilities	12.8	18.8	+47.0%	0.90 (Large)
Personal Strength	11.4	15.6	+36.9%	0.76 (Large)
Appreciation of Life	8.3	11.2	+33.9%	0.76 (Large)
Spiritual & Existential Change	10.1	14.1	+39.9%	0.75 (Large)

All results achieved statistical significance ( $p < 0.001$ ). Effect sizes ranged from large (Cohen's  $d > 0.75$ ) to very large (Cohen's  $d > 1.0$ ), indicating that observed gains are not only statistically significant but practically meaningful.

## WHAT THIS GROWTH MEANS

### Deeper Relationships

The largest gain (+60.7%) reflects participants' increased sense of connection, compassion, and willingness to be vulnerable with others. First responders, who often operate in cultures that discourage emotional openness, showed dramatic shifts in how they relate to colleagues, family, and community.

### New Possibilities

Participants left training with an expanded sense of what's possible in their lives — new paths, new interests, new ways of being that they couldn't see before.

### Personal Strength

Participants reported increased confidence in their ability to handle difficulties and a stronger sense of self-reliance.

### Appreciation of Life

Training shifted participants toward greater gratitude and presence, with heightened awareness of what matters most.

### Spiritual & Existential Change

Participants reported deeper understanding of life's meaning and their place in it — shifts that often accompany profound personal transformation.

## MEASURING HOPE: THE CANTRIL LADDER

The Cantril Self-Anchoring Scale asks participants to rate their current life and their expected future life on a 0-10 scale. This instrument provides a quantifiable measure of hope and forward-looking optimism.

Cantril Self-Anchoring Scale Results			
Measure	Pre-Training	Post-Training	% Increase
Current Life Evaluation	6.44	7.66	+19.0%
Future Life Potential	8.08	8.94	+10.6%

Before training, participants already envisioned a better future (8.08) than their present (6.44), a hopeful baseline. After training, both measures shifted upward significantly, with current life evaluation showing the largest gain. This suggests participants aren't just more hopeful about the future, they're experiencing their present lives more positively.

The post-training distribution showed tight clustering toward the top of the scale, with median scores of 8 (current) and 9 (future). Participants left training with what can only be described as quantified hope.

## QUALITATIVE FINDINGS: THE TRANSFORMATION IN PARTICIPANTS' OWN WORDS

Complementing the quantitative data, qualitative analysis examined open-ended reflections from participants using sentiment scoring and topic modeling. The goal: understand not just whether participants changed, but how they experienced that change.

### Pre-Training Themes

Before training, participant reflections clustered around:

- Struggle and hardship
- Uncertainty and internal conflict
- Neutral emotional tone
- Limited emotional engagement with growth concepts

### Post-Training Themes

After training, a marked shift emerged:

- Hope and optimism
- Gratitude and appreciation
- Connection and openness
- Willingness to share and be vulnerable

Sentiment Analysis			
Reflection Question	Ave Polarity	Avg Subjectivity	Dominant Themes
<b>Most powerful learning</b>	0.10 (Slightly positive)	0.32	Struggle, growth, story
<b>Recognizing PTG in self</b>	0.15 (Positive)	0.35	Better, helped, realize
<b>Thoughts about future</b>	0.21 (Positive)	0.38	Hope, optimistic, brighter
<b>Plans to incorporate PTG</b>	0.10 (Positive)	0.24	Daily, gratitude, breathing
<b>Impact on family/community</b>	0.20 (Positive)	0.32	Better, family, share
<b>Willingness to share struggles</b>	0.15 (Positive)	0.42	Open, share, willing

The question about willingness to share personal struggles showed the highest subjectivity score (0.42), indicating deep personal reflection. Words like “open,” “share,” “struggles,” and “people” appeared consistently, pointing to emotional openness, vulnerability, and peer connection.

## KEY THEME CLUSTERS

### ON LEARNING:

“Growth,” “story,” “struggle,” “triangle,” “help” — participants internalized the PTG framework and narrative structure

### ON PERSONAL IMPACT:

“Better,” “realize,” “life,” “helped,” “need” — recognition of personal transformation

### ON FUTURE OUTLOOK:

“Positive,” “hope,” “optimistic,” “brighter,” “future” — forward-looking mindset

### ON DAILY PRACTICE:

“Daily,” “practices,” “gratitude,” “breathing,” “meditation” — actionable takeaways

### ON SOCIAL IMPACT:

“Family,” “share,” “open,” “people,” “help” — commitment to extending growth to others

## Participant Voices

These unfiltered responses capture the impact of Struggle Well on participants:

### TRANSFORMATIVE

“

*“I was a student that was worried about taking this class because I don't talk about my feelings but I felt how powerful this class was. I think this is the best class I have ever taken.”*

*“It exceeded my expectations. Their human approach and passion for their story makes me see a light.”*

*“Learning I am normal.”*

*“I didn't know what to expect but I feel every person in the world today should have access to this course.”*

”

### CONNECTIVE

“

*“It made recognize the importance of sharing our struggles.”*

*“Hearing similar stories from the lives of classmates and instructors made me be more comfortable with being open about my thoughts, emotions and past experiences.”*

*“Disclosure. I had fear and worry as it became closer to my turn but also felt supported by the fact that others were sharing openly.”*

*“You're only as stuck as your secrets.”*

”

## RELATABLE

*“The instructors were phenomenal and went beyond what I was expecting. I thought that this would be taught by psychologists or people like that. But I found out my instructors were people like me who have been through trauma in my line of work or have had experiences that were like mine. Seeing that built my trust in the program.”*

*“The instructors taking the initiative by sharing their struggles caused me to open up.”*

*“Both Scott and John were very sincere, passionate and willing to share honestly, intimately, and openly. I appreciate their willingness to be vulnerable. They seemed to be very genuine and were able to foster strong connection and ability to bring others along on the journey of growth.”*

*“I think this instructor combo was perfection. Having a military/firefighter and a firefighter checked all these boxes and because they were each so willing to share their ‘lore’ it set the stage for us to be open. They answered the question of how deep are we going to get?”*

## LASTING

*“The art work of fixing the bowl; Kintsugi. I am going to have one in the home for a reminder of what is broken can be fixed.”*

*“To be a lobster & light to everyone around me.”*

*“Don’t set yourself on fire to keep someone else warm.”*

*“Having to write my own eulogy made me realize there’s many things I need to change or improve on.”*

*“The biggest growth in life will happen when you’re uncomfortable. I need to embrace those times for what they are.”*

## TESTIMONIALS

### METRO POLICE DEPARTMENT OFFICER

*“In May 2023 I attended a Struggle Well training at our police department. I learned a lot in the course but didn’t know at the time how much I would rely on some of the concepts. On July 14, 2023, my partners and I were ambushed on a traffic accident; my one partner died and I was shot 7 times and in critical condition. The Struggle Well hat that was given to me at the class has been something I’ve worn proudly almost every day! To me it represents the ability to find peace in the storm. I always fall back on the idea of Posttraumatic Growth and that has really helped me keep pushing forward through this tragedy. My faith has been the cornerstone to my healing and so has Struggle Well. I truly believe every aspect of that course prepared me for the biggest difficulty of my life.”*

### FIRE DEPARTMENT CAPTAIN

*“Never have I experienced such an amazing class. FINALLY, something that is geared for our men and women in service. This course gets you uncomfortable, shakes the tree, makes you dig deep inside and ask the bigger question, WHAT ABOUT ME?”*

### SHERIFF’S OFFICE LIEUTENANT

*“This program should be mandatory. Outstanding in every way. A necessary training. It will save lives and provide first responders a second chance. Open dialogue is key — we must help each other.”*

## TRAINING EXCELLENCE

Participants also evaluated the quality of Struggle Well instruction. Results were overwhelmingly positive, with average scores exceeding 4.8 on a 5-point scale across all categories. Over 90% of participants gave top scores in every evaluation category.

Sentiment Analysis	
Category	Average Score (out of 5.0)
Instructor Enthusiasm	4.9
Knowledge of Subject	4.89
Overall Experience	4.89
Organization of Topic	4.88
Teaching Skill	4.85
Classroom Discussions	4.8

These ratings reflect the quality of Boulder Crest's peer-led facilitation model. Guides with lived experience create environments where participants feel safe to engage deeply — and the satisfaction scores demonstrate that this approach resonates.

## WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings tells a consistent story:

1. **The Program Works and We Can Measure It:** Participants showed statistically significant growth in all core areas measured by the PTGI. The total score increased by nearly 48%, with the largest gains in Deeper Relationships and New Possibilities — key Domains of Posttraumatic Growth.
2. **Participants Leave with More Hope:** Cantril Ladder scores demonstrate that participants don't just learn about hope, they experience it. A 19% increase in current life evaluation and 11% increase in future outlook represent meaningful shifts in how people see their lives.
3. **Qualitative and Quantitative Data Align:** Before training: struggle, uncertainty, hardship. After training: hope, gratitude, connection, openness. The sentiment analysis mirrors the PTGI Domain gains; participants aren't just scoring higher on surveys, they're describing their experience in fundamentally different ways.
4. **The Training Experience Is Exceptional:** With training satisfaction scores of 98%, participants are engaged, supported, and deeply satisfied with the experience. The peer-led model isn't just philosophically sound — it delivers.
5. **This Is Real-World, Measurable Impact:** These aren't abstract improvements. Over 8,000 first responders — people who run toward danger so others can run away — are reporting that they relate better to others, see more possibilities in their lives, feel stronger, appreciate life more deeply, and have found greater meaning. That's transformation at scale.

## ONGOING RESEARCH

Boulder Crest continues to advance the science of Posttraumatic Growth through ongoing research partnerships:

**Longitudinal Case Studies: Deep Agency Partnerships** — Building on our 2024 Tucson Police Department case study, in 2025 we launched two-year evaluation studies with Massachusetts Department of Correction (MA DOC) and Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue (TVF&R) to determine the extent to which infusing Struggle Well throughout an agency leads to lasting behavior and culture change. These studies will track changes in staff wellbeing, morale, trust, and connection — both among staff and between staff and leadership.

The mixed-methods design includes:

- Participant surveys at four time points (pre-training, post-training, 3-month and 6-month follow-ups) measuring PTGI, Cantril Ladder, self-regulation practices, leadership support, and organizational climate
- Interviews with agency leaders, Struggle Well guides, and select training participants
- Observations during 5-day trainings at both sites
- Behavioral and organizational data from agency partners (sick leave, retention, overtime usage)

# THE SCIENCE BEHIND STRUGGLE WELL

*A comprehensive review article, 'Struggle Well: A Posttraumatic Growth-Based Training Model for First Responders and Military Personnel,' was created by Dr. Richard Tedeschi, Dr. Bret Moore, and Dr. Taryn Greene. The article provides a detailed examination of the theoretical foundations, implementation strategies, and organizational impacts of the Struggle Well model.*

## Introduction

The mental health risks associated with high-stress service professions are well documented (Shakespeare-Finch, et al., 2024). Military personnel, firefighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), and other first responders operate in environments characterized by danger, unpredictability, moral complexity, and exposure to human suffering. These occupational hazards increase the likelihood of developing psychological conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders (Berger et al., 2012; Haugen et al., 2017). The personal and professional costs are substantial: suicide rates among veterans and first responders continue to climb, while stigma and underutilization of mental health services persist.

While evidence-based treatments for PTSD, depression, and anxiety are widely promoted as first-line interventions, emerging research reveals concerning limitations in their real-world effectiveness. Recent meta-analyses of psychological treatments for PTSD in military populations found effect sizes as low as 0.3-0.4, with some studies showing no significant difference between active treatment and control conditions (Steenkamp et al., 2015). For depression, the much-cited efficacy of CBT has been questioned, with studies accounting for publication bias and researcher allegiance finding effect sizes reduced by 25-50%, and some analyses suggesting that CBT performs no better than non-specific supportive counseling (Cuijpers et al., 2010; Wampold et al., 2017). Similarly, the

effectiveness of psychiatric medications, specifically selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI), has been challenged by analyses showing that these medications fail to achieve clinically meaningful improvement in 60-70% of patients, with benefits over placebo being minimal except in the most severe cases (Kirsch et al., 2008; Turner et al., 2008).

The limitations become more pronounced when examining treatment failures and non-response rates across disorders. In the largest effectiveness trial of PTSD treatments to date, 60-72% of military veterans retained their PTSD diagnosis after completing evidence-based psychotherapy, with no significant differences between CPT, PE, and group therapy (Steenkamp et al., 2015). For anxiety disorders, long-term follow-up studies reveal that 30-45% of patients who initially respond to CBT experience symptom return within two years, and up to 50% never achieve full remission despite multiple treatment attempts (Durham et al., 2012). The STAR\*D trial, the largest study of depression treatment in real-world settings, found that only 30% of patients achieved remission with initial SSRI treatment, and even after four successive treatment steps, one-third of patients failed to achieve remission (Rush et al., 2006; Warden et al., 2007). These sobering findings are compounded by evidence that treatment effects may be largely attributable to non-specific factors: studies controlling for therapist contact time and patient expectations find that structured treatments often perform no better than supportive listening or placebo conditions (Baskin et al., 2003; Wampold et al., 2017).

Perhaps most concerning are the high rates of deterioration and adverse effects that are often underreported in efficacy trials. Research indicates that 5-10% of patients experience symptom worsening during psychotherapy, with rates potentially higher for trauma-focused treatments that require detailed recounting of traumatic experiences (Lilienfeld, 2007); For medications, beyond commonly reported side effects like sexual dysfunction affecting 40-70% of SSRI users, emerging evidence links long-term antidepressant use to increased risk of treatment-resistant depression, emotional blunting, and withdrawal syndromes that can persist for months or years after discontinuation (Fava et al., 2015; Davies & Read, 2019). Furthermore, effectiveness trials in diverse, real-world populations consistently show poorer outcomes than controlled studies: treatments developed and tested primarily with White, educated populations show significantly reduced effectiveness among ethnic minorities, individuals with lower socioeconomic status, and those with complex comorbidities which are populations that arguably have the greatest need for effective interventions (Miranda et al., 2005; Cabral & Smith, 2011). These accumulated findings suggest that current evidence-based treatments, while helpful for some, fall far short of providing adequate relief for many individuals struggling with PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

An alternative framework is needed that honors the struggles of service professionals while empowering them to find growth, strength, and meaning through adversity. Posttraumatic Growth (PTG), as conceptualized by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004), offers such a model. PTG refers to the positive psychological transformation that can occur as a result of the struggle with major life crises. It suggests that trauma can disrupt existing beliefs in ways that ultimately allow individuals to reorient their lives in more meaningful directions.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the Boulder Crest Foundation developed Struggle Well, a training program that operationalizes PTG into a practical curriculum for military and first responder populations. Struggle Well is not therapy; it is a structured, experiential training program that teaches participants to view the struggles that emerge from

trauma as opportunities for transformation rather than signs of weakness or failure. This paper outlines the origins, design, implementation, and outcomes of Struggle Well observed since the program's launch, with a focus on the psychological mechanisms that underlie its effectiveness.

### **Theoretical Framework: From Trauma to Growth**

Posttraumatic growth is distinct from resilience. While resilience describes the ability to bounce back from hardship and return to baseline functioning, PTG refers to the process of achieving a higher level of functioning than before the trauma occurred (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The PTG model identifies five domains in which individuals may experience growth after trauma:

**Greater Appreciation for Life** — Survivors often report a heightened awareness of life's fragility and value.

**Enhanced Relationships** — Deepened empathy and emotional intimacy with others often emerging due to the need for support during the struggle with what happened.

**New Possibilities** — Discovering that life has been altered, and now new life paths, careers, or purposes are necessary.

**Personal Strength** — Recognition of one's capacity to endure and overcome adversity.

**Spiritual and Existential Change** — Confrontation with existential crises leading to revising one's understanding of life, death, purpose, or faith.

The process of PTG begins when a traumatic event shatters core beliefs about important aspects of life, such as safety, identity, control, and justice. This creates psychological distress and cognitive disorientation, which often manifest in the forms of anxiety, depression, and symptoms of PTSD. However, with time and support, individuals can engage in deliberate rumination, a reflective process that helps make sense of what happened

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and why. Through this process, individuals work to reconstruct their core belief systems. When combined with emotional regulation and a supportive social environment, this meaning-making process can lead to psychological growth.

Crucially, PTG is not about denying or minimizing the pain of trauma. It is about integrating that pain into a new, more purposeful life narrative. Struggle Well builds on this framework by guiding participants through the PTG process using five phases derived from the empirically-derived PTG model: psychoeducation, emotional regulation, constructive self-disclosure, building a cohesive life story, and finding a new mission or purpose (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011).

### **Development of Struggle Well**

Boulder Crest Foundation was founded in 2011 to serve combat veterans and first responders. Recognizing the limitations of the clinical model in addressing psychological struggles of military members and first responders, Boulder Crest developed a non-clinical program that could teach trauma-exposed individuals how to thrive. The result was Warrior PATHH, which is a curriculum for combat veterans built explicitly on the PTG framework and delivered by peers with lived experience (Tedeschi & Moore, 2016). Struggle Well was a program derived from Warrior PATHH as a more streamlined and highly scalable program for first responders as well as military veterans.

Since its inception, Struggle Well has expanded to include one-day, two-day, and five-day training formats and has reached more than 100,000 participants across the United States. The program has been delivered to and adopted by law enforcement agencies, fire departments, emergency medical services, veteran support organizations, and active-duty military units.

### **Structure and Delivery of Struggle Well Training**

Struggle Well is available in three formats:

**1-Day Course** — Introduces the concept of PTG, including the domains where people grow and the phases of PTG. Seeks to normalize struggle in professional cultures, especially among groups that experience more than typical exposure to potentially traumatic events.

**2-Day Course** — Expands on the 1-day course with PTG-based interactive exercises and leadership-focused content, often delivered to peer-support teams or supervisors.

**5-Day Immersive Training** — A comprehensive, immersive, experiential program for informal leaders and frontline professionals. Participants engage in PTG-based self-reflection, group processing, growth-oriented goal identification, and identifying one's mission and purpose in the aftermath of trauma.

The foundation of all formats rests on five interconnected principles that guide the healing journey. First and foremost is the recognition that struggle is universal and a fundamental human experience that touches everyone's life, not a sign of personal weakness or failure. This understanding helps normalize the challenges participants face due to exposure to potentially traumatic events and reduces the shame that often accompanies struggle and mental health difficulties.

Building on this foundation, the second principle affirms that growth is possible, emphasizing that with appropriate support and resources, even the most difficult traumatic experiences can become catalysts for profound personal transformation. This principle instills hope and agency while acknowledging that healing requires both time and the right conditions to flourish.

The third principle recognizes that narrative matters deeply in shaping our lives. The stories we construct about our past experiences, how we interpret what happened to us and what it means about who we are, profoundly influence our trajectory forward. By examining and potentially reframing these narratives, individuals can discover new possibilities for their future that were previously obscured by limiting beliefs about their traumatic experiences.

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Central to the healing process is the fourth principle: connection heals. This principle acknowledges that authentic relationships serve as powerful catalysts for growth, providing the safety, understanding, and support necessary for individuals to process their experiences and develop new ways of being in the world. Rather than viewing healing as a solitary journey, this approach emphasizes the transformative power of genuine human connection.

Finally, the fifth principle recognizes that service strengthens recovery. By entering relationships with compassion and empathy, and helping others who face similar struggles, individuals not only contribute to their community but also reinforce their own healing and growth. This principle transforms participants from recipients of help into agents of change, creating a sustainable cycle of healing that extends beyond individual recovery to community transformation.

### **Facilitator Roles and Peer Leadership**

A hallmark of Struggle Well is that it is peer-led. Facilitators have lived experience with trauma and with navigating the Posttraumatic Growth process. They serve not as therapists but as guides, modeling openness to change, courage, and paradoxical thinking. This approach builds trust and counters the cultural stigma that often surrounds formal therapy, particularly in military and first responder communities. It also democratizes healing by suggesting that all people — not just clinicians — can support one another's growth.

This peer-led model fundamentally shifts the power dynamics typically found in traditional mental health settings. Rather than positioning healing as something that flows from expert to patient, Struggle Well creates a horizontal structure where wisdom emerges from shared experience. Facilitators openly share their own struggles and growth journeys, dismantling the artificial barrier between “helper” and “helped” that can make traditional therapy feel intimidating or inaccessible. This authenticity creates a different kind of safety, one rooted in mutual understanding rather than an expert-patient relationship. When a facilitator says “I’ve been there,” it carries a weight that professional credentials alone cannot match.

The model also recognizes that communities possess inherent healing wisdom that has been overlooked by professionalized mental health systems. By training community members as facilitators, Struggle Well taps into existing networks of trust and cultural understanding that outsider professionals may take years to build, if ever. This approach is particularly powerful in communities where mental health services have historically been culturally misaligned, absent, or inadequate. The peer facilitators become bridges, translating universal principles of PTG and healing into locally relevant practices while maintaining fidelity to the core Struggle Well program. In this way, the program does not just deliver services to communities, it builds capacity within them, creating sustainable networks of support that persist long after any formal program ends.

### **Cultural Relevance and Systems Change**

Struggle Well is more than PTG training for personal development. It is a tool for organizational transformation. By normalizing struggle, it reduces stigma associated with struggling in the aftermath of trauma and enhances psychological safety across organizations. Leaders trained in Struggle Well are better equipped to support their teams and create environments where openness and acknowledgement around personal struggle is not punished but embraced.

The program fundamentally reshapes organizational culture by addressing the hidden costs of unacknowledged trauma and mental health challenges in the workplace. When organizations implement Struggle Well, they signal a profound shift in values, from expecting invulnerability to recognizing that authentic strength includes the ability to acknowledge difficulty and seek support. This cultural transformation begins with leadership. When supervisors and commanders participate in the program and openly discuss their own struggles, it creates permission structures that cascade throughout the organization. The traditional fear of appearing weak or unfit for duty gradually gives way to a recognition that addressing challenges proactively is a sign of professional maturity and operational readiness.

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The impact extends beyond individual wellness to team dynamics and operational effectiveness. Teams that have gone through Struggle Well together develop a shared vocabulary for discussing challenges and supporting one another. This common framework transforms how units handle stress, setbacks, and trauma. Instead of the isolation that often follows difficult experiences, team members recognize warning signs in each other and know how to offer appropriate support. The peer-support networks that emerge become force multipliers, creating resilient units that can maintain effectiveness even under extreme pressure. This is particularly crucial in high-stress professions where the traditional response to trauma has been silence, self-medication, or eventual burnout.

Departments that embed Struggle Well into their operations report:

- Decreased burnout and turnover
- Increased retention of high-performing personnel
- Stronger peer support networks
- Improved team cohesion and communication
- Enhanced operational readiness and performance under stress
- Reduced disciplinary issues and behavioral problems
- Lower rates of substance abuse and family dysfunction
- Increased help-seeking behavior before crises emerge

The potential financial implications of these improvements can be substantial. Organizations can experience significant cost savings due to reduced recruitment and training costs when experienced personnel stay rather than leave due to unaddressed life challenges. The decrease in sick days, medical leaves, and early retirements related to mental health issues represents significant cost savings. More importantly, units maintain their institutional knowledge and operational expertise when seasoned members feel supported enough to continue serving. The program transforms what was once seen as

a “soft” human resources issue into a strategic advantage. Organizations that implement Struggle Well develop more adaptive, resilient, and ultimately more capable teams than those that maintain traditional stigma around mental health and trauma.

### Challenges and Future Directions

While Struggle Well has demonstrated significant effectiveness across various settings, implementing and expanding the program presents several meaningful challenges that must be addressed for long-term sustainability and impact.

The most immediate challenge lies in scalability. The intensive 5-day model, while powerful in its immersive approach, requires substantial time and resource investments from both organizations and participants. Taking personnel offline for a full week creates operational gaps that smaller departments or units operating with minimal staffing cannot easily accommodate. The costs associated with lodging, meals, facilitator training, and program materials can strain budgets, particularly for organizations facing fiscal constraints. Additionally, the intimate nature of the program, with its emphasis on small group dynamics and peer connection, makes it difficult to simply increase class sizes without compromising effectiveness. This creates a bottleneck where demand often exceeds capacity, leaving many who could benefit waiting months or even years for available slots.

The program also faces the ongoing challenge of ensuring cultural relevance and accessibility across diverse populations and contexts. Different communities bring varying cultural frameworks for understanding trauma, healing, and emotional expression. What resonates deeply in one setting may feel foreign or uncomfortable in another. The program must continually adapt its language, examples, and exercises while maintaining fidelity to core principles.

Perhaps most significantly, despite promising outcomes reflected in participant testimonials and preliminary data, the program has yet to undergo the level of rigorous empirical validation that many organizations require to confidently allocate resources.

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Research is currently underway to measure sustained impacts on mental health symptoms, retention rates, and organizational outcomes, but these studies require years to complete. In the meantime, programs must rely on pre-post assessments and qualitative data that, while compelling, may not satisfy skeptics or compete with evidence-based treatments that have decades of research support. This creates a dilemma where the program needs widespread implementation to generate sufficient data, but many organizations hesitate to implement without these data.

### **Conclusion**

Struggle Well represents more than an innovative training program; it embodies a fundamental reimagining of how we understand and respond to trauma in high-stakes service professions. By grounding itself in the science of posttraumatic growth while honoring the lived experiences of those who serve, the program bridges the persistent gap between clinical interventions and the cultural realities of military and first responder communities.

The program's impact extends far beyond individual transformation. When organizations embrace Struggle Well, they initiate a cultural revolution that redefines strength, leadership, and mutual support. The peer-led model democratizes healing, suggesting that the capacity to help others grow through struggle exists not just in clinical offices but within the communities themselves. This approach recognizes a profound truth often overlooked by traditional mental health systems: those who have walked through the fire possess unique wisdom to guide others through their own dark nights.

The data emerging from Struggle Well implementations reveal promising trends to include reduced burnout, increased retention, stronger teams, and cultures where vulnerability becomes a pathway to connection rather than a career liability. Yet perhaps more significant than these metrics are the countless stories of transformation: the veteran

who discovers purpose in mentoring younger service members, the firefighter who transforms survivor guilt into a mission of service, the police officer who finds in their deepest wounds the seeds of their greatest contributions to their community.

As we look toward the future, Struggle Well offers lessons that extend beyond military and first responder populations. In a world where trauma touches virtually every life, through pandemics, natural disasters, violence, and loss, the program's core insight remains universally relevant: suffering is not the end of the story. The question is not whether we will struggle, but how we will struggle. Will we struggle alone, in silence, weighed down by shame and stigma? Or will we struggle well, together, with purpose, transforming our wounds into wisdom and our pain into power to help others?

The journey from trauma to growth is neither linear nor guaranteed. It requires courage to face our pain, wisdom to reframe our narratives, and community to sustain us through the darkness. Struggle Well provides a roadmap for this journey, but ultimately everyone must choose to take the first step. For those who do, the program offers a powerful truth: our struggles do not diminish us and they can, with the right support and perspective, become the very experiences that forge us into who we are meant to become.

Rather than asking "What's wrong with you?" Struggle Well invites a more powerful question: "What's strong in you, because of what you've been through?" In that shift of perspective lies the seed of transformation, not just for individuals, but for entire organizations and ultimately for how our society understands and responds to trauma. As more communities embrace this approach, we move closer to a world where struggle is not a source of shame but a shared human experience that, when faced with courage and community, can become a catalyst for extraordinary growth.

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## CASE STUDY: TUCSON POLICE DEPARTMENT

“IT’S ALMOST LIKE A REBIRTH. IT’S RECOGNIZING THAT WHEN YOU ALLOW SOMEONE THROUGH THIS PROCESS TO BE HUMAN, TO HAVE EMOTION — THAT THAT’S OK.”

— RETIRED CHIEF CHAD KASMAR, TUCSON POLICE DEPARTMENT



### TUCSON POLICE DEPARTMENT: A Model for Culture Transformation

In 2021, the Tucson Police Department (TPD) was facing a severe crisis. Amid the pandemic, civil unrest, severe staffing shortages, and a surge in violence, the breaking point came when two employees took their own lives within two months. Despite having a robust Mental Health Support Team, a Behavioral Sciences Unit, a department psychologist, and two sergeants dedicated to wellness, it became evident that these resources were not enough.

*“We certainly knew that officers weren’t coping well. We had a robust Mental Health Support Team, a Behavioral Sciences Unit, a department psychologist, and two Sergeants, but it just wasn’t enough. It was at that time that really rocked the organization that we recognized we need to do more...and then the conversation started about what that MORE would look like.”*

— Retired Chief Chad Kasmar

In response, TPD partnered with Boulder Crest Foundation to implement an organizational change initiative focused on creating a culture of trust and supporting staff wellbeing. Chad Kasmar was named Chief of Police shortly after the partnership was initiated, and he immediately bought into Struggle Well. The initial vision: every member of the TPD would go through a 5-day Struggle Well training.

Between December 2021 and today, over 600 TPD personnel have attended Struggle Well. Until his retirement in February 2026, Chief Kasmar kicked off each training session by sharing his own experiences, modeling the vulnerability and honesty required for participants to get the most out of the training. The newly-appointed Chief, Monica Prieto, will continue this tradition as more members of TPD learn to struggle well.

# THE IMPACT:

## Measurable Culture Change

TPD participants experienced a **25% improvement in wellness** using behavioral assessment tools, compared to peers who didn't attend Struggle Well.

**Better Retention and Longer Tenure:** TPD reported a noticeable shift toward higher trust and improved satisfaction with department and job once 20% of staff completed the program. Multiple command staff reported Struggle Well is an effective way to invest in staff.

**Trust, Connection, and Sense of Community:** An ever-growing community of Struggle Well “buddies” established an atmosphere of cohesive camaraderie versus individual isolation. There was a shift from “that individual’s struggle” to “our struggle as a team.”

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*“I absolutely think this changes how we deal with the public, each other, our families. I know that’s true in my own circumstance. I’ve talked to other people who feel that way about how this changes the way that you interact with people and the way you see people and your appreciation for the struggle that they might be engaged in.”*

— Struggle Well program participant, Tucson Police Department

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**Normalized Struggle:** The program created a common language around struggle, an understanding and acceptance of the potential of struggle across all ranks, gave permission to be vulnerable and taught empathy, and increased buddy checks and public wellness practices.

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*“Now we have mechanisms in place. I can call the Doc. I can get a peer support Sergeant there within a reasonable amount of time or if it’s so bad, I can just tell them to ‘go home. You don’t need to use your leave.’ I have leeway with this, the department is behind me...and people will follow-up. When I was a new cop, it was unheard of. If you took time like that, that was a weakness — you were not a cop. That culture has changed dramatically, and I do believe it is in part because of Struggle Well.”*

— Struggle Well program participant, Tucson Police Department

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**Positive Culture Change:** Both command staff and officers reported an atmosphere of improved camaraderie, willingness to share one’s needs and struggles, and trust in a supportive culture and work environment. The culture shifted from “us versus them” to a team mentality. Even skeptical officers found value.

**Improved Policing and Connection with the Public:** Participants reported wellness practices positively impacted their ability to approach their jobs with a healthier mindset, leading to improved officer engagement and connection with community.

**Empowered Mental Health Services:** The program normalized use of agency wellness services, increased trust in and use of mental health clinicians inside and outside TPD, and created an environment of peer-to-peer accountability for use of wellness practices.

# BUILDING INTERNAL CAPACITY: The Train-the-Trainer Model

This project is sustained by the train-the-trainer model that enables Boulder Crest Foundation's partners to build internal capacity for program delivery. Boulder Crest trained the first TPD officer to deliver Struggle Well in the summer of 2022, and this officer led his first class in October 2022. Since that time, over twenty additional TPD officers have been trained to deliver Struggle Well.

TPD now has the capacity to both meet the growing demand for Struggle Well within its own workforce and among its retired staff, and introduce Struggle Well to other first responder departments around the state of Arizona.

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*"There are just some dudes that are not ever going to see a shrink.  
So this [Struggle Well] democratizes psychology."*

— Struggle Well program participant, Tucson Police Department

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## WHAT MADE IT WORK

**Buy-In and Participation from Leadership:** Leadership set an example by clearing their schedules to make training a priority, opening training and being vulnerable, and attending final training days to engage with students.

**Top-Down Planning:** Executive command and leadership were present for the planning and implementation of the program. They recognized and solved for logistical and scheduling challenges with creativity.

**Strategic Recruitment and Blended Training:** TPD strategically filled class rosters with a mix of diverse roles, ages, teams, and outlooks on life. Word of mouth became a powerful factor in generating awareness and interest.

**Program Saturation:** Intentional saturation from basic training through retirement. TPD embedded elements of Struggle Well into all training platforms including basic training, community service training, and annual advanced training — creating an atmosphere where everywhere you look there is some sort of Struggle Well messaging to help keep that pilot light going. TPD command meetings also start with gratitude. TPD includes alumni refreshers each month.

**Trust and Confidentiality:** Built an agency-wide plan centered on communication and trust. Established a norm of confidentiality — a crucial building block and key element in the success of the program.

**Consistent and Department-Wide Participation:** TPD made it clear that all staff were expected to participate and eventually go through Struggle Well training. A schedule of regular training sessions helped to socialize expectations. This led to a shift in demeanor from dutifully attending to being excited by the opportunity — a tipping point for cultural change.

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*"There has to be a point though where the people in the agency see it as integral to the culture where new leadership would get feedback that they better keep this going. Now if the TPD chief said, 'ok, we're not doing Struggle Well anymore,' I can't imagine that would go over well at this point."*

— Struggle Well program participant, Tucson Police Department

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# THE RESULT

People join the police force because they want to serve their communities, and the cost of this service should not be the quality of their lives. “We have been focusing on building trust, connection, and mutual support internally, which has had a positive effect on the community,” Retired Chief Kasmar said of Struggle Well training. In the end, you have to be well to police well, and the Tucson Police Department has found an innovative way to ensure workplace health.

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*“PTSD is something we are all familiar with, but I had not heard this alternate viewpoint, this growth aspect. There was something about that concept that struggles are an opportunity for growth. I dig that.”*

— Struggle Well program participant, Tucson Police Department

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Trauma is inevitable in these professions, obviously. Resilience is never going to be perfected, so that people are not affected by these experiences or recover without struggle. Given the inevitable struggles, posttraumatic growth provides a sense of meaning and purpose to these experiences, and compassion for oneself and others.

With posttraumatic growth, there is more recognition that the natural, human responses to the tragedies of frontline work no longer need to be viewed as symptoms of disorder. That when this challenging work stirs up pain from childhood, it is a possible route to healing childhood trauma. That being in this work can result in the deepest connections to coworkers and the people being served. Being in this work can yield the most profound understanding of what it means to face death head on, and by doing so, to live a human life fully, with wisdom, and with gratitude.

— Dr. Richard Tedeschi  
Executive Director, Boulder Crest Institute For Posttraumatic Growth<sup>SM</sup>

## **BOULDER CREST FOUNDATION SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY PANEL**

The development and evolution of all aspects of Struggle Well is supported by the Boulder Crest Foundation Scientific Advisory Panel. The Panel includes luminaries from across the field of psychology.



**Richard Tedeschi, Ph.D.**  
Executive Director  
Boulder Crest Institute



**Bret Moore, Psy.D., ABPP**  
Deputy Director  
Boulder Crest Institute



**Taryn Greene, Ph.D.**  
Director of Research  
Boulder Crest Institute



**Gary Elkins, Ph.D.**



**Christopher Frueh, Ph.D.**



**John Norcross, Ph.D., ABPP**



**Jane Shakespeare-Finch, Ph.D.**



**Kanako Taku, Ph.D.**



**Judah Viola, Ph.D.**

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## WHAT'S NEXT

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In 2026, we will continue to expand our work across the country, while always seeking to do better. To that end, we have identified five areas of focus:

### DEEPEN AND EXPAND OUR REGIONAL FOOTPRINT

Our four established regions — Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, and West — continue to grow. In 2026, we will deepen relationships with existing partners while expanding to new agencies and states. At the same time, we are building toward full operations in Regions 4 (Gulf Coast) and 6 (Midwest).

### SUSTAIN GROWTH AFTER TRAINING

The intensive training is just the beginning. We are developing new ways to keep participants connected and growing long after they leave the classroom. In Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, along with partner agencies and organizations, we are piloting weekly PTG meetings that bring together program graduates and potential participants — creating ongoing peer support and keeping the principles of Posttraumatic Growth alive. These pilots are testing different models, some led by agency personnel and others by Boulder Crest Guides. The goal is for these groups to eventually run themselves — led by peers who keep the work going long after the initial training ends. These pilots will inform how we scale post-program support nationally.

### REACH RURAL FIRST RESPONDERS

Rural agencies face unique challenges: smaller teams, fewer resources, greater distances, and less access to traditional support systems. In 2026, we are focused on understanding and addressing the barriers that keep rural first responders from accessing Struggle Well — and developing delivery models that meet them where they are.

### SUPPORT FAMILIES

Struggle doesn't stay at work. It comes home. We are expanding our focus on families — the spouses, children, and loved ones who carry the weight of service alongside the person in uniform. This means more family-focused programming and a deeper understanding of how Struggle Well can strengthen the whole household, not just the individual.

### ADVANCE THE SCIENCE

We remain committed to understanding the what, why, and how of Struggle Well's impact — on individuals and on organizational culture. Our longitudinal studies with Massachusetts Department of Correction and Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue will continue, and we will look for new opportunities to measure and learn from the work.



## CONCLUSION

**“THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE I’VE KNOWN ARE THOSE WHO HAVE KNOWN TRIALS,  
HAVE KNOWN STRUGGLES, HAVE KNOWN LOSS, AND HAVE FOUND  
THEIR WAY OUT OF THE DEPTHS.”**

**— ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS**

Struggle Well represents more than a training program — it’s a movement to transform how we support those who serve and protect our communities. Through the science of Posttraumatic Growth, we’re proving that struggle can be the pathway to strength, connection, and renewed purpose.

Everyone who walks through our training doors carries the weight of service — the calls that haunt, the losses that linger, the stress that accumulates. Struggle Well doesn’t ask them to forget or simply cope. Instead, we show them how to transform that weight into wisdom, that pain into purpose, and that struggle into strength.

**Join us in making this vision a reality.**

**“THERE IS NOTHING NOBLE IN BEING SUPERIOR TO YOUR FELLOW MAN;  
TRUE NOBILITY IS BEING SUPERIOR TO YOUR FORMER SELF.”**

**— ERNEST HEMINGWAY**

Struggle Well is a transformative training program that teaches first responders and military personnel to not only navigate and overcome the stress and trauma faced in their daily lives, but to harness these challenges as catalysts for profound personal growth, deeper relationships, and renewed purpose. Built on the science of Posttraumatic Growth and delivered by peers with firsthand experience, Struggle Well is changing how those who serve think about struggle — and transforming cultures from silent endurance to connection, trust, and positive change.

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*“Our struggles do not diminish us — they can, with the right support and perspective, become the very experiences that forge us into who we are meant to become.”*

*— Dr. Richard Tedeschi & Dr. Bret Moore*

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*“...I feel every person in the world today should have access to this course.”*

*— Struggle Well Graduate*



**BOULDER CREST**  
FOUNDATION