Public Safety Suicide: The Human Dimension
By: Mary Van Haute and John M. Violanti (Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 2015)
Reviewed By: Robyn Garrett and Deputy Chief Tommy L. Dixon

Public Safety Officers and First Responders are everyday heroes, putting their lives on the line when they leave their home and families to punch the clock and gear up for whatever emergency they may face during that day’s tour of duty. The expectations placed on them are as high as the adrenaline that kicks in every time they respond to a call, often times resulting in traumatic events. Stop for just a moment and think about them outside of their role as hero coming to your rescue in leaps and bounds. Remember that they are also individuals facing the reality of everyday life with feelings, families, problems, issues, goals, and dreams. At the end of the day, that uniform with badges, ribbons, or metals comes off but our heroes are left vulnerable to the effects of not only trauma, but also of all feelings that may be encircling their life. Statistics paint an unimaginable canvas of the heroic lives concluding that suicide is often the response for our First Responders, when it is our First Responders we expect to intervene when they encounter someone who has concluded that suicide is the only answer.

Strong personal emotions were ever present reading this book, as I recalled the tears streaming down the faces of uniformed Chiefs from Fire Departments sharing vivid visuals or auditory recollections of the pain from team members lost to suicide...real time events as they found themselves on the other end of the phone line, doing and saying everything and anything but with the end result...loss of a hero...to suicide. These uniformed and decorated leaders, with their begging for help is what gave me a new mission in my own life and led me to finding this book. Deputy Chief Tommy Dixon with Glynn County Fire Department, Glynn County Georgia, has become a partner and ally in this initiative. He has been on the other end of that phone line and shares in the mission to protect and serve, not only the community, but also his fellow women and men who put their life on the line for the betterment of all those in need.

Deputy Chief Dixon’s review of this book: “The book has been very helpful to me in understanding the dynamics of a single incident and how far reaching they can become with time and how negative they can be when lacking attention and follow-up. The stories told speak of areas that are commonly overlooked such as co-workers and distant family members that may not have been regularly in contact with a person, but could be impacted by such an event. I definitely recommend that all public safety departments make this reading available to their personnel. I believe that this should be introduced into fire officer training as continued education and a prerequisite for advancement, as well as other material. This is something that will come up throughout a carrier in public safety and will need to be addressed by someone whom has some idea of how to proceed. Although the individuals in the stories vary in their rolls, Police officer, firefighter, mother, sister etc, the behaviors are all relevant to the issue at hand even though everyone will react in differing manners. The core signs remain, and therefore I feel we must strive to be cognizant of them and to react appropriately.”
Van Haute and Violanti provide real-life stories of Public Safety Officers and First Responders who have encountered life episodes that bring them to what they think is a conclusion to resolve their inner turmoil. Each story is personal, detailing the life events leading up to suicidal ideations and plans to carry out their final life event. These real life case histories personalize the events and thought patterns that led to these heroes confronting suicide and the interventions that were choreographed. Reflections of a real person, with real life stuff, that adds up inside and carries you to a place of no return.

Given my involvement with Public Safety Officers and First Responders, on a personal and professional level, I can honestly offer that we have an obligation to take care of the heroes who take care of us. We should take the interventions used in this reading and continue our work to decrease stigma and provide opportunities for Wellness for our Public Safety Officers and First Responders and their families. This book is a great resource for our Public Safety Officers and First Responders, their families and local government officials. It provides an opening to interventions that can be incorporated into local municipality policy. The book will not likely expand the knowledge base of clinicians or mental health professionals, but is a wonderful resource for the target audience: Public Safety Officers and First Responders.