

Protecting the people who protect our communities

ASU conference examines the health and well-being of Arizona's public safety workers

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News
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Long hours, shift work, overtime and difficult interactions are unavoidable realities for public safety workers, including law enforcement officers, corrections personnel, firefighters and other first responders.

The demands take a toll. Conversations with these professionals reveal that physical and mental health are major concerns, said [Beth Huebner](#), director of the [School of Criminology and Criminal Justice](#).

In Arizona, extreme heat and dehydration create additional risks. Those concerns will be at the center of an upcoming ASU conference focused on how to better protect the health and well-being of the people who protect our communities.

On Sept. 18, criminology and health researchers will join with public safety leaders for the [ASU Future of Health and Wellness in Criminal Justice Conference](#). The inaugural event will highlight emerging ideas that advance a more health-centered approach to criminal justice and public safety and address the realities of working in hot desert climates.

“When a public safety professional is well rested, well hydrated and feels like their physical and mental health is supported by leaders, then they will interact with citizens or incarcerated individuals in a more understanding way,” said Huebner, who organized the conference. “If we address the health and safety of the people who work in the system, it will make the community safer overall.”

If you go

What: ASU Future of Health and Wellness in Criminal Justice Conference.

Conference discussions will include ways to train leaders to destigmatize mental health and educate families about resources that can help, including simple solutions such as room-darkening curtains to improve sleep. Discussions also will explore how heat exposure in Arizona adds another layer of complexity and highlight ways to reduce its effects through hydration and alternative footwear and uniforms designed for greater breathability.

"We live in Arizona, so we have to think about heat," Huebner said.

Firefighters battle infernos in triple-digit heat, but they also run up Camelback Mountain to rescue injured hikers. Police officers work in the elements while addressing the needs of community members who may be severely dehydrated due to heat exposure, potentially affecting their cognitive abilities.

One ASU solution that will be discussed during a breakout session is how monitoring first responders can protect them during extreme heat events. [Fota Sall](#), doctoral student in the [College of Health Solutions](#), will present [HeatMind](#), a project focused on developing a wearable sensor system for firefighters that uses biometric data and AI to identify signs of distress and alert commanders so they can intervene. The research is led by [Hassan Ghasemzadeh](#), professor in the College of Health Solutions.

Sall knows firsthand how demanding life as a first responder can be. She served as a volunteer EMT in Virginia and hopes that experience will help her connect with first responders who are physically and mentally exhausted and may not always feel understood in academic settings.

The HeatMind project focuses on firefighters, but Sall hopes other first responders can be helped by the technology in the future.

"At the conference, I hope to showcase not only firefighters, but all first responders, and how they can contribute to research, share their experiences and improve the field for all. Research allows us to move the world forward, and first responders are often forgotten in this regard," she said.

The overarching goal of the conference is to put research and solutions into the hands of leaders who can implement them. It is critical to demonstrate to public safety personnel and potential recruits that their well-being matters, Huebner said.

"Right now we're facing an employment crisis in public safety. We have fewer individuals who want to go into these jobs, and we have a lot of people leaving them," she said. "Public safety affects everyone — from firefighters responding to a call to police helping with a parade or responding to a crash. These are the helpers. We want to help the helpers."

The School of Criminology and Criminal Justice is part of the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions.

When: 8:45 a.m.–4 p.m.,
Friday, Sept. 18.

Where: Skysong, ASU
Innovation Center, Building 3,
Conference Rooms Synergy I &
II, 1475 N. Scottsdale Road,
Scottsdale, Arizona.

Cost: \$25. Scholarships are
available; contact
cassie.harvey@asu.edu. Space
is limited; sign up online at
bit.ly/FutureofHealth2026 before
Sept. 17.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



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