Mike Kearney: Welcome to Resilient. My name is Mike Kearney, the Risk & Financial Advisory CMO. Today we are doing something different—we are switching up things for the Confronting the COVID-19 Crisis series. And I’m joined by my good friend, Jen Fisher, Deloitte’s chief wellbeing officer and the host of the WorkWell podcast series.

Jen Fisher: Thanks for having me, Mike. We’ll be talking about the past several months, as you mentioned, and how it’s not just challenged us, but it’s really challenged our first responders in so many ways. And while we continue to navigate this pandemic, we’re going to explore the importance of continuing to practice our own wellbeing.

Mike Kearney: We’re going to talk about personal resilience and how it plays when lives are on the line.

Jen Fisher: And what we can learn from these frontline heroes. What is it that they do to practice wellbeing and create space for themselves to recover when they’re constantly responding to the rest of us? What best practices can they share?

Mike Kearney: So how are we going to do it? Jen and I have this incredible opportunity to sit down with Mike McCabe, chief of operations at McCabe Ambulance Service and a podcaster as well. Mike and his team of EMTs have lived and worked through several crises, from 9/11 to COVID-19 response and dozens of public safety and medical incidents in between. So, let’s get to it. Let’s hear what Mike has to say.

Jen Fisher: I want to start with you—learning about you. Tell us who you are, tell us your story, all your details, you know, all the good stuff.
Cyberattacks and the long-term effects on organizations

The impact of COVID-19 on people and how they are coping with crisis

Mike McCabe: Sure. So, my name is Mike McCabe. I am the owner and the chief of operations of McCabe Ambulance Service in Bayonne, New Jersey, which happens to be a family-owned and -operated ambulance service, which is 48 years old. My father started it back in the early seventies. And we have been doing the 911 service for the city of Bayonne since 1983, exclusively. We are located approximately five miles from Manhattan, so we serve on many committees and task forces that deal with large-scale incidents in this region—which we have been involved in almost all of them—fortunately or unfortunately, however you look at it—over the last two to three decades.

Jen Fisher: So, you’ve seen a lot.

Mike McCabe: Yeah, absolutely. So, I’m a paramedic by trade as well. I also work in another system to maintain my skillset and kind of separate myself from the management side of things. And I do that in Elizabeth, New Jersey, which is approximately two miles from where I am here in Bayonne.

Mike Kearney: Mike, let me jump in really quickly. Obviously, like you said, you’ve seen a lot of disasters and crises—probably everything from my guess, 9/11, throw in a hurricane or two, and now the COVID-19 pandemic. What are some of the things that you’ve learned? And you can take this any way you like.

Mike McCabe: Sure, absolutely. Well, I guess, to start, I’ve been programmed to deal with chaos just by my family, I would think, because I grew up around it. When I was younger, my father would respond to emergencies and I would be in his command vehicle with him, whether it was any high-rise fire or a pedestrian struck by an automobile or things like that. So early on, it resonated with me. And when I graduated from college, I wasn’t exactly sure which path I was going to take. And I graduated with a marketing degree, and I decided to go and get my EMT and ride on the ambulance in Bayonne while I tried to figure out what I was doing. And I did that for three years as a regular EMT on one of the city units. And I started to really get a passion for it. And at that point, I really started to figure out that this was going to be the path for me in my life, to continue doing this, helping people, serving a capacity where you can make a difference. And I think that just being around those types of incidents where, although they may be chaotic, where you have the ability to make a difference in someone’s life or a family’s life, it certainly intrigued me. It certainly isn’t for everyone, but you have to figure out a way to compartmentalize certain things and deal with them in ways that others may not be accustomed to doing.

Mike Kearney: You said early on that you’re programmed to do this type of work. Can you really be programmed? Can you learn it? Is there something that you could maybe share with others that maybe haven’t been in disasters and crises like you’ve been in, so that they could actually prepare themselves for it, because ultimately at some point in our lives, something really difficult happens that we need to be ready for.

Mike McCabe: Yeah, it’s a good question, Mike. And I think you point out, too, like complete buzzword stigmas as far as programming and compartmentalizing, some of those things that we probably shouldn’t do. I think that when I say that, I say it in a respect that, you have to take a look at the incident and say to yourself that you’re going to do the best that you possibly can with what you have in a certain situation.

Mike Kearney: How about emergency services professionals? What’s it been like for them?

Mike McCabe: Absolutely, Jen. Great question in a sense that I think you touch upon something that’s been ignored for a very long time in the emergency service sector. I think that it’s always been stigmatized in a sense that it was weakness if you admitted to being affected or impacted. And I think now we are seeing the repercussions of that with increased suicide and certain vices that are being used by responders, alcohol, drugs, all of these things that were used as coping mechanisms. I think it’s opened the eyes of
the response community now. And I also believe that there are a lot of things that are happening to say, "Hey, listen, we can’t continue down this pathway," because these types of incidents, whether it’s isolated or it’s a major incident, like what we’re talking about with COVID, it’s going to impact the responders because those are the ones that are intimately involved. And there has to be an outlet for them.

Some of the things that we do—we like to hold open ear programs. During COVID here, we made sure that we had an open line of communication to our staff. We held weekly calls, sometimes twice a week during the surge, so that we allowed our staff to decompress. They did it from home—everybody was welcome to do it. And then the open ear program was, listen, if somebody wasn’t feeling right, they had the ability to talk to any one of their peers. And we’re very much in tune with the fact that, listen, unless you have seen, felt, smelled what we have dealt with, you can’t relate to it. And so, it’s very difficult.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, certainly there are times where we need escalated care, but just the dialogue among the teams—I commend you for doing that. So, Mike, what do you do to take care of yourself? I want to get personal here.

**Mike McCabe:** Yeah, I tend to just look at things through a different lens. I try to remain positive as much as I can. Like I said, not all outcomes are always great, but I look at the good things and I try to focus on those things and always say that things could be worse. I guess what I do is I look at things that I have seen with negative outcomes and say, "Hey, listen, that didn’t happen to me." And then of course you also have things that you do outside of work, whether that is with your kids or coaching baseball or playing hockey or playing drums or any type of thing that takes your mind off of those things and kind of brings you back to a better place. There’s a million different ways you can do it, but you just have to make sure that you do it, and that’s one of the things that we try to really impress upon our staff.

**Jen Fisher:** You brought up family, and I know you have a family and you grew up in a family business. What’s it like as a child of the frontline heroes?

**Mike McCabe:** My father was one of the first EMTs in New Jersey, and he actually started the company because he was interested by the show Rescue that was on in the seventies and he wanted to be them. And so, he started it with one ambulance and my mom answering phones. And that’s kind of the way the whole thing unfolded. And he’s been an EMT and, again, I learned so much from him growing up. And even when I got into the business, I was just a line EMT. I certainly wasn’t put in a management position. We both responded to 9/11. He was very much impacted as he has subsequently received a double lung transplant, which we’re coming up on four years in October. So yeah, we were intimately involved in that together. We’ve been very much involved over the years. So yeah, like I said, it’s always been in the blood.

**Jen Fisher:** With your family and COVID and the fear of bringing it home, what’s that been like for you and your teams?

**Mike McCabe:** Yeah, it’s been difficult. A lot of the time, you’re just trying to figure out the best ways. And when this started, again, up here in the Northeast, we were some of the first to be so heavily impacted by this. We were learning on the fly. So, we were getting recommendations on a daily basis. So that’s difficult to do because you have to put certain policies in place and then potentially be audible on them within two hours and make sure you disseminate that during a process where we’re answering 60 calls a day with COVID-positive patients that are literally going into the hospital and being put on a ventilator. So, it’s complete chaos and pandemonium, and then you compound it with the fact that I also hold collateral duties as the county coordinator, and also one of the state leaders on the EMS task force.

So not only am I taking care of the local side, which is my company, but I’m also taking care of 12 other municipalities’ needs, and then also bringing in resources on a state level. So, it starts to get overwhelming. But when you have a good team that you have in place, you rely on them a lot to make sure that things go smoothly.

**Mike Kearney:** Hey, Mike, I’m really curious, because you’ve mentioned a couple of times that this has been an elongated crisis, which we’ve all seen, and we’re still in the middle of it. How do you motivate the people that work for you to come to work, especially in those early days when you’re saying, we’re picking up people all day long, we don’t know really the severity of COVID at that point in time. How do you motivate your people?

**Mike McCabe:** Mike, honestly, I think that honesty with your staff, it drives them. I really try to subscribe to basically four basic tenets in my leadership style, being action, empathy, acknowledgment, and then modification. So, if we have the ability to plan, that’s great, but a lot of times in our business, we don’t. So we act, and then after we act, we have to make sure that we have that empathy for our staff to understand what it is they’re going through from a management perspective. That’s why I say I work in a different agency as well as a line medic, because it brings perspective as to what these individuals are going through. And then once you have that empathy, you can acknowledge their concerns and then make changes or modify after that.

And I think that’s what we did, right from the beginning, as I said, we were all in the same boat, not really understanding what was going on. And so, we were honest with them and we said, “Listen, if you have a family or you’re concerned about this and you don’t feel comfortable, you just tell us.” And we had a few people bow out. But I will say for the most part, the high percentages of our staff stayed onboard. And we maintained that empathy the entire time, whether it was encouraging them, or whether it was saying we were in this together, and again, little things, making banners for them. Every single day, we were fed by the community through donations of food. I mean, they couldn’t send enough because of the
appreciation that they showed for our people. And it was heartwarming. It really was because they deserved every single thing that they got. And I think that kept them motivated because it made them realize how important they were to this process.

Mike Kearney: I love what you said about you can't plan for some of these challenges, and you obviously had a number of challenges coming at you, you had a change in environment. Can you talk about maybe an example of a solution, a creative solution that you may apply, but maybe more importantly, the underlying thinking, because what I hear you saying is we're kind of working through a lot of unknowns, we're having to think through solutions on the fly, which is extremely important in an unfolding crisis. So maybe two parts of the question—one, love to just hear a creative solution and maybe the thinking that goes through identifying the issue, coming up with a solution, trying it out, and then moving forward. Any thoughts on that, Mike?

Mike McCabe: Sure. Creative solutions in this really were, how best are we going to protect our people. And so ironically, we realized that when this started, we had to cut down on the cross-contamination. So, one of the things that we immediately put into practice was making sure that we decontaminated the back of the ambulances after every single job. And I think that that kind of gets thrown to the wayside sometimes where people think, “Oh, well, you automatically wipe those down after the jobs.” Well, to be honest, when you're doing 60 jobs, it's tough to maintain that type of disinfectant practices. And are you wiping down effectively? So, we actually purchased an electrostatic sprayer approximately three weeks prior to COVID hitting here because we were going to start to clean our ambulances better anyway.

And just by the grace of God, when that hit, we automatically implemented that policy, that quick solution by spraying the ambulances between every single job. And I'll be honest with you, Mike, we had incredible outcomes on the so minimal and almost nonexistent cross-contamination. We only had three of our employees come down with COVID with very mild symptoms. And as I said, we were answering 60 to 70 calls per day for a month and a half. So, that type of quick fix was like, okay, let's just figure out this solution now so that as we move forward, we have to implement it early or else we're going to have negative outcomes. So that was one of the quick fixes that we did. The second part of your question, refresh my memory?

Mike Kearney: Yeah, it's really just more about kind of the mindset, especially in an unfolding crisis of how you actually solve problems real time. Just your thinking of how you apply that. And probably not even just during COVID, it's probably given the nature of the work that you guys do, what you need to do every single day. And I guess what I'm trying to get at, Mike, is I come from the corporate world, we're always talking to executives around how you respond and manage crises. You're kind of in a crisis every single day. And there's different ways that organizations and leaders respond to crisis. And so, I'm really curious, like as something's unfolding and you've got to come up with a solution, what's your mindset as to how you approach that?

Mike McCabe: I think that you have to be open-minded. I think that in situations that we deal with on a daily basis, like you said, we plan, we try to plan, we try to mitigate against certain things, but it changes so often that we have to look at the problem, but we also have to be open to input from others. So, as a leader, ultimately the responsibility and the onus is going to lie on you, but you have to have that input from your staff, from your personnel on there, because otherwise it's very, very unfocused. And truly, you're doing yourself a disservice because you can be overlooking something else. It's not to say that that input you're going to take and say, absolutely we're doing that, but the more input you get, I feel the better you are in making a truly solid decision.

Mike Kearney: Yeah, I totally agree with that. And in some respects, you cannot plan for every crisis and you probably know that way better than I do. And it's almost like you need those core skills and capabilities and maybe mindset in order to adapt to any given situation. And as you just added, you need to use the people that are around you and get input and collaborate on solutions real time.

Mike McCabe: I think that we learn a lot also from our past practices that we are able to implement as we move forward. So, some of the things that we did during Superstorm Sandy, which was a huge impact here in the Northeast, we were able to take those mitigation practices and put them in place here, because we knew that this was going to be a very long-term operation. And so, I think it’s like a cookie-cutter type thing where you take a little bit from here and there, and then you implement it. It’s never going to be the same, but you can start to take some of those best practices and implement them so that you're not changing the entire game plan.

Jen Fisher: Here in South Florida, we actually had ambulances go around the city and people would come out of their homes or on their balconies and cheer. How do you and your team and other first responders feel about all the first responder parades and celebrations that were happening during the time?

Mike McCabe: So, we didn't necessarily have a lot of people come by us. It was more like them sending letters or food or donations. What we did from the EMS side is we actually put together some drive-by salutes to hospital staff from different hospital networks, because they were just so inundated inside and just nonstop. From the EMS perspective, we were able to pick patients up, drop them off, and then go back to society, whereas they were in the hospital for 12, 24, 36 hours without any time to take masks or PPE off or come outside. They were repurposing space inside the hospital, like cafeterias and everything else. And we wanted to show them our support. And so, we would establish long lines of first responders that would go by the hospital as they stood outside and we would salute them.
And we thought that was the best way that we could keep their spirits up. And I can tell you from speaking with them, they were super emotional about it because they realized that they weren't alone. They understood that we were behind them. I thought it was great.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, the reason I ask is because it was always something that brought me hope, even for a moment, but I never really knew how some of the first responders felt about it. So, I didn’t know if it was more for the rest of us or if you all actually really appreciated it too. So, I appreciate you indulging me on that answer.

**Mike McCabe:** Yeah, we certainly definitely appreciated it. It was a breath of fresh air. We had the Blue Angels fly over for us here, which was awesome. Again, it’s those little things that you don’t really think make a big difference, but they do, they make a huge difference to the responders.

**Mike Kearney:** So maybe the takeaway here is for everybody to go out and thank those that are on the front line.

**Mike McCabe:** We’ll take it when we can get it. But it’s tough, Mike, especially EMS, we’ve always been misunderstood or not on the same level of understanding as law enforcement and fire. And like I said, the COVID pandemic really brought up to the surface what EMS does for the community.

And I think that was really special. I think that the responders really appreciated that. And any time that you can show them that support, it goes a long way for them. They constantly work their tails off.

**Mike Kearney:** Hey, just out of curiosity, Mike, is there something that, as you’ve reflected on the last six or seven months, that you don’t think has been reported that you think should have been—maybe it’s been reported, but it hasn’t gotten the national attention that you think it should, and maybe from an EMS perspective, it could be from a patient perspective, a doctor perspective, whatever you think it is, what do you think is something that you’d like to shine a bright light on?

**Mike McCabe:** I think one of the big things that I think responders and health care personnel have an issue with is just this whole division on face masks being worn out in public. And I know that I’ve had this conversation with many of my colleagues, physicians alike, and I host a podcast as well, where I speak to a lot of physicians from other areas in the country. And when we went through it, it was hell, there’s no way of describing this. There were bodies that we had to find areas for. And so that type of vision and that type of situation is something that you never forget and don’t ever want to revisit. It’s disheartening. And so, that’s something from a responder perspective, and I think maybe just from a human perspective and my perspective, it’s difficult to deal with after going through and continuing to go through what we go through today.

**Jen Fisher:** What’s one thing that you think is particularly meaningful that has either come out of this at the height of the surge or just something that really mattered to you or provided a lot of meaning?

**Mike McCabe:** I think the comradery among this health care industry, not just EMTs, paramedics, but also the hospital personnel, the nurses, the physicians, the comradery was very, very strong and became very strong because we became each other’s advocates and that’s not to take away the other responders, but this really was primarily a health care–specific operation. Usually when we have these large-scale incidents, disasters, it’s all agencies and all disciplines involved. This was specific to health care. And so, we were each other’s shoulders to lean on during this. And I think that was pretty special. And also just saluting those people, like we spoke about, about the parades or having patients that came out after being three or four weeks on a ventilator, celebrating that. We’re always so quick to point out the negative numbers, but when we were able to point out the positive numbers or somebody going home off a ventilator, that really charges up people.

And like you said, a lot of times, whether you compartmentalize or whatever else, it’s very easy to get down. And I find that if you focus more, like I said, on the positive, then that’s going to recharge people. And so rather than reporting those daily death numbers all the time, getting those signs on the outside of the hospital, patient 151 to leave this hospital, is huge. It was huge to us. It was uplifting. And again, it was great for the health care industry.

**Mike Kearney:** So, Mike, do you feel like a ping pong ball yet? Like you go from Jen to me, Jen to me.

**Mike McCabe:** I don’t mind. It’s great. It’s a good flow.

**Mike Kearney:** This is the first time we’ve done this. So this is kind of fun.

**Mike McCabe:** Oh, cool.

**Mike Kearney:** One of the things that we talk about in the business world and what we try to help clients think through and, quite frankly, one of the reasons I started this podcast was to help organizations learn from others that have dealt with crisis, risk, and disaster. The thing though that I think is interesting is most senior executives, most leaders, want to know what’s around the corner, which is almost an impossible feat. And so, what we talk about oftentimes is being kind of prepared for the unknown. And I know that’s very difficult, especially in your line of work, but what are the things that you do personally and prepare your employees to prepare for the unknown so that when a crisis hits or something that they’ve never seen, even though they’ve seen almost everything, I’m sure you probably see new things all the time. What do you do to prepare them?

**Mike McCabe:** Yeah, it’s a good question because I’m going to be quite honest with you, this is something that we really didn’t prepare well for. And I don’t think it’s just specific to EMS or health care. I feel like as a nation, we didn’t really prepare for this because it was almost unbelievable. And I think that as this started to unfold, we were...
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Quick to act, but as you step back you say, “Oh my word, how did this happen?” So I think now this, if nothing else, this has raised our game to say, “Hey, listen, we have to be prepared for literally everything.”

And, as I’ve always said, we’re a very reactionary society. So, whatever’s happening at that point, you throw all your eggs in that basket. But I think that one thing that we can never lose sight of in our industry is you never take your eye off the ball and you never think that this isn’t going to happen tomorrow because anything can happen in any given day. So, we can be in the middle of this pandemic and we can still have that attack tomorrow. And so, if you aren’t prepared at all times, you will fail.

Mike Kearney: That’s great.

Jen Fisher: Based on your experiences with COVID-19, but you can broaden that to almost any of the work on a day-in, day-out basis that you have, what’s one piece of advice that you have for the rest of us?

Mike McCabe: I think that one piece of advice, honestly, I would say that you have to make sure that you enjoy and you take solace in all of the good things that exist in your life in the present moment. And I don’t mean to get too sappy or anything like that, but we’ve seen some really terrible things occur in the last five months. We’ve seen people that were completely healthy die within two weeks that got this virus. We lost 15 EMTs in the state of New Jersey to COVID. That’s unheard of for us. We’re exposed to viruses and bacteria all the time and 15 EMTs died. And I just think that it’s brought a different type of perspective on things, also because of what we’re dealing with now with the division in this country, I think that the desire to do better and to recognize the gifts that you have in life have to be of paramount importance to people.

Jen Fisher: That’s great advice, for sure.

Mike Kearney: Here’s the one thing I believe to my core, and this is I think what you’re getting at, is first of all, life’s hard. If you think about the last 100 or 200 years, I think I saw this somewhere. If you were born in 1900, you went through the Spanish flu, you went through World War I, the Depression, World War II. So it’s not like it’s new where we have all of this hardship, but I think the people who do very well have hope for the future—that can see a brighter day. Because you really don’t have an alternative. The alternative could be you go dark, and that’s not a good place to go. And I’ll pivot to my question. I’m actually going to start with the last one I was going to ask you, but given the fact that you’ve been through everything, what gives you hope, Mike? Why are you hopeful for the future? You’ve been through 9/11, hurricanes, and now COVID-19. Why are you hopeful?

Mike McCabe: I think I’m hopeful because I made it through all those things. I honestly feel there’s probably nothing that we can’t deal with. When we go through these things, it’s almost a badge of honor for us to say, “Yeah, we’ve been there, we’ve done that.” In my 21 years in this industry, I’ve been to 9/11; I’ve been to a Miracle on the Hudson, which was an actual joyful event, believe it or not, because when you hear a commercial airliner landing in the Hudson, you don’t think that you’re going to get there and see all of those individuals standing on the wings of the plane. We’ve been through Superstorm Sandy; I’ve been through an active shooter. There’s so many things that I’ve seen, but we’ve gotten through them. And so that gives you hope in a sense that you say, “Listen, we know that we serve a purpose, we know that we can make a difference, and you take pride in that.”

Mike Kearney: Ah, that’s fantastic. So, this is a mashup of WorkWell and Resilient, but when I started Resilient four years ago, it really was to talk to people that had really led through crisis, risk, and disruption. And so, I always love to end with the simple question of, what, in your opinion, based on everything you’ve been through, makes a resilient leader? What are one or two qualities that stand out?

Mike McCabe: I think that humility is absolutely number one. You should never put yourself above anyone else. I honestly feel that those that do that certainly undermines their attempts to be a good leader. I think that empathy is another one. And I think that courage is also one, where you have to be courageous enough to make difficult decisions, but you’re doing it with empathy involved in it.

Mike Kearney: It’s a great way to end this, Mike. And, Jen, you might want to say something, but thank you very much. This is inspiring. I love this conversation, so thank you.

Jen Fisher: Yeah, I completely agree. Really appreciate you spending some time with us. I know it’s going to be a meaningful listen for our listeners. Is that the right way to say that? Listen for our listeners?

Mike McCabe: I’m humbled that you had me on, guys, honestly. It’s great to be able to talk to you folks and hopefully import something that I’ve seen or done, and again, it’s nice to just get some info out to folks that really don’t know what it is we deal with on a daily basis.

Mike Kearney: Wow, that was incredible. Thank you, thank you, Mike. And thank you, Jen, for collaborating on this episode of Resilient and WorkWell. I have to say that I’m inspired by all of the stories of those on the front line—their incredible resilience and selfless giving help those in need.

I think what’s clear from this episode—the many challenges created by this crisis are all closely intertwined. If we’re going to recover and eventually emerge stronger, we need to address the human issues—wellbeing, self-care, and connecting to foster resilience.

We’ve covered a lot of topics over the last couple of months. We have an incredible backlog of guests that we’re going to continue to bring to you.

If you have anybody that you think we should speak with or any topic you think we should cover, hit me up on LinkedIn or Twitter.
I've been getting a lot of feedback, which is tremendously helpful as we prioritize which topics we'll bring to you next.

For more insights across all aspects of COVID-19, just go to deloitte.com on our COVID page. Don't forget to also visit Jen's podcast, WorkWell, and Mike's on EMS World.

And you can always listen to the Resilient podcast on Apple Podcasts, SoundCloud, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. Just use the keyword RESILIENT.

Until next time, stay safe and be resilient.

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