



Honoring Our FIRST RESPONDERS



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When being “First” truly makes a difference

People celebrate a lot of firsts - the first day of school, coming in first place in a competition, first birthday or anniversary. These types of firsts are celebrated often, in everyday life. But there are other firsts that are often overlooked - being first on the scene of a fire, accident, emergency, or criminal activity - and these are the ones that are most deserving of praise and appreciation because First Responders really do deal with life and death on a daily basis.

First responders are the first trained professionals to arrive when emergencies strike. Whether rushing to a fire, securing a crash scene, or providing lifesaving medical care, these men and women are often the difference between tragedy and survival.

Here in West Michigan, first responders include local police officers and sheriff's deputies, firefighters — both career and volunteer — and emergency medical personnel who serve Mason, Oceana, Manistee, and Lake counties. Dispatchers, search-and-rescue teams,

the Red Cross and other trained community members also play a vital role in ensuring a rapid and coordinated response that saves lives, ensures safe passage and distributes care and hope.

From rural townships to lakeshore communities, these departments answer the call at a moment's notice. Their mission is clear: to protect lives, preserve property, and keep our communities safe — often at great personal risk.

This section is dedicated to honoring their service, sharing their stories, and recognizing the vital role they play in safeguarding the places we call home. It is our gesture to give some recognition and appreciation to those who serve out communities in Manistee, Lake, Mason, Oceana and Muskegon counties.

While it would be difficult to recognize everyone individually, this section contains a few local profiles as well as overviews of those agencies that come to save the day. True superheroes who don't fly (although some do as medical transports), who aren't faster than a

speeding bullet (but can certainly stop someone from firing a gun) or can't individually leap tall buildings in a single bound (but can come together as a team to administer help when needed).

These superheroes give up family time to do their part. They “run in when others are running out.” They take part in rigorous trainings and push themselves to limits that most of us could

not endure.

The “Honoring First Responders” is a way to say thank you and shine the spotlight on those who do their best to make our communities safe and make all of us feel protected.

— Lois Tomaszewski
Executive Editor
Shoreline Media

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Braden Kronlein inspired to serve his home community

BY SHANNA AVERY
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

A lot of times young people who graduate from college move far from home to try out their new career prospects, but for Ludington native Braden Kronlein, home is where the heart is. The 2023 Ludington graduate has been a Ludington Police Officer for a year and three months now, making a difference right in the community he grew up in.

From a young age, around the age of 10 or 12, Kronlein knew he wanted to go into criminal justice, but wasn't sure yet of an exact field. Then in the last few years he decided he wanted to be a police officer and work with the city police right in Ludington. He completed the police academy at West Shore Community College.

"I've been here my whole life, I don't plan on leaving," he said. "The main reason I want to do law enforcement is number one, to hold people accountable for their actions, you know, keep people in

line. Another thing is to protect and serve the community and keep everybody safe."

Duty driven, with a passion to help others, Kronlein explained what he likes about his job.

"I like traffic enforcement a lot, keeping down on speeders especially around the school. That's one of my favorite things to do. I enjoy the community events as well, getting to meet and interact with the community, because it's good to get a positive impact with the community. In order for us to be here, the community has to like us and work with us," he said. "The thing I like about the job is being able to hold people accountable for their actions."

On a typical day, Kronlein is ready to assist in whatever needs to be done, whether it is drug enforcement, speed enforcement, parking enforcement or anything else.

The Ludington Police Department has been a great fit for him.

"I love it, 100 percent. I don't plan on leaving. Everybody's great," he said.

"Eventually some day I'd like to work my way up in the department and get promoted, maybe do a detective position or drug team position or even digital forensics also sounds super fun. I'd like to stay in the department but obviously just kind of work my way up and play around with different things and see what I like and go from there," Kronlein said about future plans.

Kronlein agrees he lives in the perfect area for all of his interests when he isn't on the clock.

"I like hunting, fishing, and riding my jet ski around. I just like staying active outdoors and hanging out with my family. I also enjoy going down to Silver Lake Sand Dunes and riding side-by-side around. I just try to stay active, and have a good time. I like to swim and hang out in the water, with friends."

Kronlein encourages young people searching for careers to check into law enforcement.

"Law enforcement is a great field to go into. We need more cops out there," he said.



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Life EMS continues to expand services across West Michigan

STAFF REPORTS

GRAND RAPIDS — Life EMS Ambulance, a West Michigan-based provider of emergency medical services, has grown from a small startup to a regional leader in patient care and community support during its more than 40 years of service.

Founded in 1980 by Mark Meijer and Ken Morris, the company covers a 5,000-square-mile area across 10 counties, including Kent, Ottawa, Ionia, Newaygo, Mason, Oceana and Muskegon. Life EMS offers both emergency and non-emergency medical transportation, including special-

ized services such as bariatric, long-distance and behavioral health transports.

In Mason County, Life EMS operates from its station at **4910 West First Street in Ludington**. In Oceana County, stations are located at **3966 North Oceana Drive in Hart** and at **1616 M-20 in Shelby**, the latter opening in November 2024 as the county's third dedicated 911 paramedic response location. The company also maintains a service presence in Muskegon County.

The Shelby station was designed to provide enhanced coverage for residents in the eastern part of Oceana County. The Oceana County Board

of Commissioners toured the facility following their Nov. 14 meeting, guided by Jim Herrema, deputy director of northern operations for Life EMS Ambulance.

Herrema explained that the new station does not add ambulance crews but redistributes existing staff to improve efficiency. Previously, three two-person crews were stationed between two locations in the county. With the new facility, each crew now has a dedicated space to operate during their 24-hour shifts, allowing for "faster response times," Herrema said.

The 940-square-foot station features a kitchen and dining

area, a workstation, a relaxation space with recliners and a flat-screen TV, two bedrooms, and a restroom. An attached heated garage houses an ambulance and is equipped with laundry facilities. Life EMS maintains five ambulances in Oceana County, with three generally in use and two in reserve, according to Herrema.

In addition to its core ambulance services, Life EMS operates wheelchair and mobility transport, a personal emergency response system, and on-site medical coverage for community events such as school athletics and festivals. The company also manages a 24-hour dispatch center, staffed by

accredited professionals who coordinate calls and responses in real time.

Through a program known as Tandem365, Life EMS has expanded into community paramedicine, providing in-home care and working with hospitals and healthcare providers to reduce readmissions.

Education and training remain a central part of the company's mission. The Life EMS Education and Innovation Center offers CPR and first aid courses, EMT certification, and continuing education for healthcare providers.

Life EMS has been recognized as one of the first ambulance providers in West Michigan

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Life EMS Oceana Station

accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Ambulance Services and has also earned designation as an Accredited Center of Excellence by the International Academies of Emergency Dispatch.

The company has stepped in

to fill service gaps during times of transition in West Michigan’s emergency medical network. In 2024, when West Michigan Air Care ceased its helicopter transport service, Life EMS expanded its ground capabilities to handle critical patient transfers. It

also increased hiring and training efforts after Pride Care Ambulance ended operations.

Life EMS also offers a Life Care+ membership program, which provides households with a 90 percent discount on out-of-pocket costs for medical-

ly necessary ambulance transport. Membership also includes discounts on mobility transportation and emergency response systems.

“Our mission is not just to respond in emergencies, but to be a partner in health and

safety for the communities we serve,” the company states on its website.

Life EMS operates with a fleet of modern vehicles, hundreds of trained personnel, and an emphasis on innovation and community care.



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Half of a century of service: Pere Marquette Fire Department marks 50 years

STAFF REPORTS FOR THE PERE MARQUETTE

PERE MARQUETTE TOWNSHIP — Fifty years ago, Pere Marquette Township leaders gathered in a small township hall to form what would become one of Mason County's most relied-upon emergency response agencies. On April 8, 1975, the Pere Marquette Township Fire Department was officially established, and later that year, volunteers answered their first call — a barn fire on South County Line Road.

Among the original members was **Ross Kissell**, who at 75 years old still serves today as training officer and first responder. Kissell has held nearly every rank in the depart-

ment and embodies the volunteer spirit that has defined the agency since its first days.

"We formed when the township decided it was time to organize its own fire protection," Kissell said. "From the start, our focus has been on putting the community first."

Humble beginnings

The department's earliest operations were modest. Their first station was housed in a three-stall garage at the Mason County Airport, and the only way to refill the truck's water tank was with a garden hose.

Township records from March 1975 show Mason County Fire Chief William Sadler urged township leaders to recruit local volunteers and said the county would provide a fire truck and storage space at the

airport. In return, the township was asked to supply manpower to operate the unit. At the first organizational meeting, volunteers elected Henry Rasmussen as fire chief, Peter Mars as assistant chief, Dean Lasley as captain, and Kissell as secretary-treasurer.

Board members at the time unanimously supported the idea. "I believe we've got a re-

sponsibility to the taxpayers of the township, along with the people of the county," board member Wilbur Nelson said, according to township meeting minutes from 1975.

Growth and new stations

After starting at the airport, the department later moved to a building at Sixth Street and Pere Marquette Highway

before building its current station at 1040 S. Pere Marquette Highway.

In 1997, Pere Marquette Township joined Hamlin Township and the City of Ludington to form the **Western Mason County Fire District Authority**, a partnership that provides coordinated fire coverage, mutual aid, shared equipment and centralized maintenance.



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The authority is legally distinct from the three municipalities but serves all three, according to the township website.

Service today

The Pere Marquette Fire Department is now led by **Chief Scott Graczyk**. It includes about **20 volunteer firefighters**, several of whom are licensed as medical first responders or emergency medical technicians, according to township records. In addition to responding to fires, the department handles medical calls, motor vehicle crashes and assists neighboring agencies through mutual aid. Volunteers also conduct safety education programs and participate in continuing training.

Recent township board reports illustrate the workload:

- In May 2024, the department responded to **47 calls**,

bringing the total to **160 runs in the first five months of the year**, compared to 169 during the same period in 2023, according to township board minutes.

- In April 2025, Chief Graczyk reported **26 calls that month and 112 year-to-date**, compared to 115 calls in the same period of 2024, according to township records.

These figures show the department consistently manages **300 to 400 calls per year**, a significant demand for a volunteer force.

Major responses

The department frequently assists in traffic accidents and mutual aid calls across the county. One recent major incident came in **August 2025**, when firefighters responded

to a **fatal motorcycle crash on South Lakeshore Drive in Pere Marquette Township**. Emergency crews from Pere Marquette Township Fire Department, Ludington Fire Department, Life EMS and the Mason County Sheriff's Office worked the scene, according to a sheriff's office release.

A legacy of service

From a small garage with a garden hose to a modern station with specialized equipment, the Pere Marquette Township Fire Department has grown steadily while staying true to its mission.

Fifty years on, the department remains what it has always been: neighbors helping neighbors, volunteers answering the call, and a community that values its first responders.

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Pentwater Police Department Balances Small-Town Charm With Busy Summers

STAFF REPORTS

PENTWATER — In Pentwater, where the pace of life is measured by the lake breeze and the arrival of summer visitors, the local police department is tasked with maintaining order. Chief Laude Hartrum, 63, has led the Pentwater Police Department for 15 years after serving more than two decades with the Mason County Sheriff's Office and a short time in Isabella County. For him, policing in Pentwater is more than a job — it's a lifestyle.

A force for land and water

The village of about 850 year-round residents swells to more than 4,500 in the summer, with weekend crowds sometimes topping 10,000. The influx brings heavy pedestrian, vehicle and golf cart traffic to the lakeside community.

"Vehicular traffic downtown can get solid from about 10 a.m. until 9 p.m. in the summer, with people all looking for limited parking spots," Hartrum said. Festivals, art fairs, car shows and the Fourth of July celebration draw thousands more.

Hartrum oversees three full-time officers, four part-time officers and seasonal Public Service Officers — young

recruits who receive training in radio use, ticket writing and community interaction. These PSOs patrol on foot and by golf cart, helping visitors with directions or answering questions while monitoring parking and traffic.

Pentwater's golf cart convenience corridor, approved by the Michigan Department of Transportation, allows registered carts on most streets with speed limits below 35 mph. "We even have our own cart," Hartrum said.

Marine safety and diving expertise

Pentwater is the only lake in Oceana County with direct access to Lake Michigan, making marine patrol and water

safety a recurring part of the job. Hartrum, a certified diver and member of the Oceana County Sheriff's Dive Team, assists with tows, searches and recovery operations when needed. He often runs his own boat, the Defiant, on days county marine patrol isn't on the water.

Documented rescues underscore the department's role on and off the water. Village council records show Hartrum and Officer Amanda Payne were commended with a Life Saving Award for a Sept. 1, 2021 sailboat capsize rescue near the south side of the channel. The resolution passed 7-0 at the Oct. 11, 2021 council meeting, following a resident's letter praising the officers' "hero-

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ic efforts and response time.”

In another case, Pentwater Police, Pentwater Fire and EMS responded when a sunfish-style sailboard overturned off the Pentwater pier; the operator reached shore safely, according to local reporting.

Pentwater officers have also assisted in medical saves on land. In March 2023, a rapid response by community members, Pentwater Police, Pentwater Rescue and Life EMS led to a successful resuscitation at a school event; the patient recovered, according to the report.

Despite heavy seasonal boat traffic, Hartrum said most marine incidents involve dock bumps rather than open-water collisions. “Our boating accidents are usually more at a dock — they’ll bang into a dock or another boat,” he said.

A community-oriented approach

Pentwater Police handle typical small-town cases: shoplifting, larcenies, neighbor disputes and the occasional assault. But Hartrum says the majority

of people who come to Pentwater are there for relaxation and recreation.

“Folks come here because their families have been coming for generations,” he said. “They don’t come here looking for trouble. They come here to have their fun, and we’re grateful for that.”

The department partners frequently with the Oceana County Sheriff’s Office, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and neighboring fire/rescue agencies while maintaining a visible presence in the village.

Whether patrolling downtown streets or launching a boat into Lake Michigan, Hartrum said the mission remains the same: to keep Pentwater safe while preserving its reputation as a peaceful getaway.

“It’s like a big family here,” he said. “Everybody knows all the good stuff and all the bad stuff. We just want people to enjoy their time in Pentwater.”



Chief Laude Hartrum at desk.

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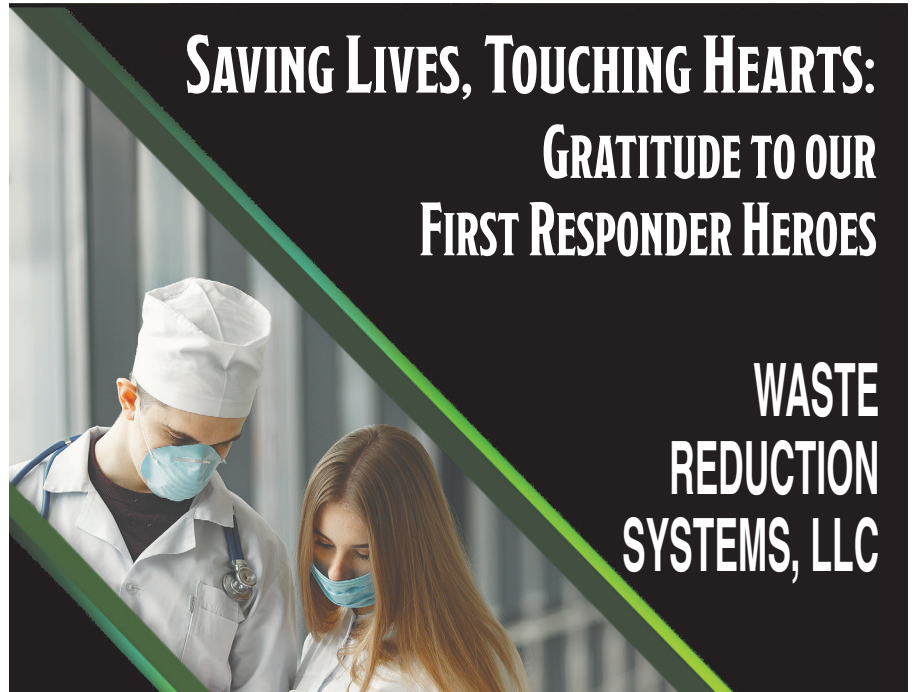
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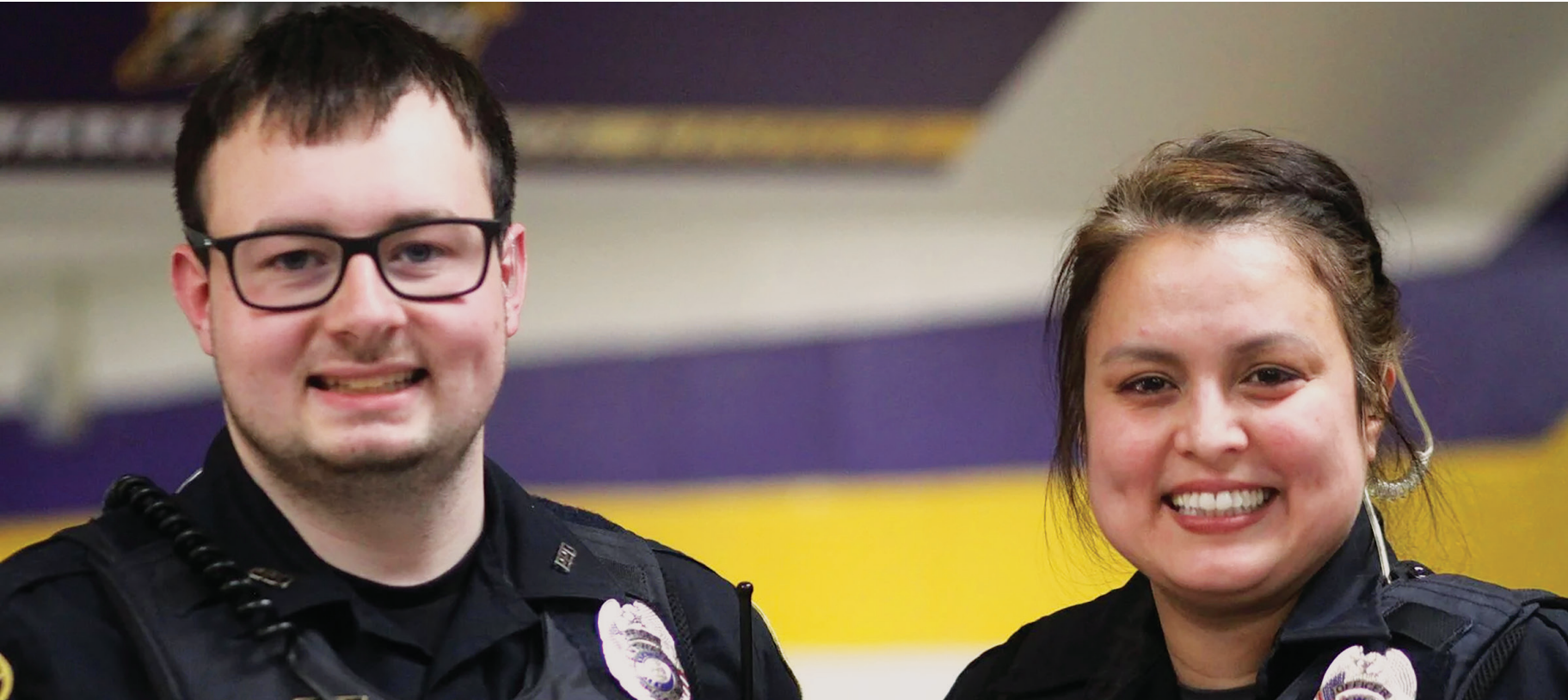
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Officers Mitchell and Tokarczyk of the Pentwater Police Department were present at the carnival handing out safety information for kids.

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Edward Forfinski gets his badge pinned to his uniform by Chief Christopher Jones of the Ludington Police Department.

Heroes in Uniform, Neighbors at Heart

THANK YOU!

A photograph of a fire truck with its lights on, parked at a fire scene with large flames in the background. A firefighter is visible near the truck.

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A photograph of a firefighter in a dark uniform and cap, kneeling down to interact with a young girl. The firefighter is holding a small, white, fluffy dog. The girl is looking at the dog with interest.

The logo for Padnos, featuring a red shield with a white "LP" inside.

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Detective Lieutenant Brandon Mahoney with current Chief Roger Squires of the Whitehall Police Department.



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'PEACE IN THEIR CHAOS': American Red Cross quick to support victims of disasters

BY DAVID L. BARBER
SHORELINE MEDIA CORRESPONDENT

Where emergency first responders go, so goes the American Red Cross (ARC).

Whether it's to fires, accidents or natural disasters, the ARC has a long-standing reputation for having the backs of area fire fighters, police, EMS personnel and others who respond so quickly and professionally to do what they've been trained to do – save lives, save property.

"We're there, whether it's an apartment complex catching on fire, or a family fire, we're out there helping the first responders – it's a holistic approach," said Tony Gerheiser, executive director of the West Michigan Chapter of the American Red Cross. "We're making sure we're helping first responders in any way that we can, and we're also there helping the families find a moment of peace in their chaos."

The West Michigan Chapter of the American Red Cross serves Mason, Oceana, Lake, Osceola, Newaygo, Mecosta, Muskegon, Montcalm, Ottawa, Kent, Ionia and Barry counties.

"It's been a busy year in Mason County, that's been a high-activity area, that's a lot," said Gerheiser. "Just looking at this year we've responded to 22 'events' – it could be home fires, it could be flooding, it could be wind damage, it

could be all kinds of different things. And if we look at the beginning this year we're looking at a total of 259 events (in our chapter area) ... about 300 families who have been helped by the Red Cross.

"When you have a home fire and you're there in your pajamas – you might be out there with no cell phone, no wallet, no identification – the Red Cross will be there to provide financial assistance, spiritual care, mental health support, help for those who need their medications, CPAP machines and different things like that ... we'll be there, right along with (the first responders) to help provide that family with care and comfort that they really need.

"In Mason County, a lot of the work is done through the generosity of our donors donating to make it happen, but also volunteers who provide that disaster relief and all the work associated with it who make sure their community is taken care of," he said.

According to the West Michigan Chapter home website, "... we aspire to turn compassion into action so that all people affected by disaster across the chapter receive care, shelter and hope; our communities have access to safe, lifesaving blood and blood products; all members of our armed services and their families find support and comfort wherever needed; and in an emergency, there are always trained individuals



Photo courtesy of The Red Cross

nearby, ready to use their Red Cross skills to save lives."

Gerheiser became executive director of the West Michigan Chapter two years ago. He joined the Red Cross in 2015 as a specialist in the Service to the Armed Forces program. Before joining the Red Cross, he was a squad leader for the Michigan Army National Guard and served in Afghanistan, Germany and Poland. He earned a bachelor's degree in public health from Central Michigan University.

"Any time we work in collaboration with our first responders it becomes really a team effort," said Gerheiser. "We try to work closely with our FEMA partners as well to make sure we're all there to provide the support effort that is necessary because first and foremost, first responders are (concentrating) on those who might need to be rescued from a home (fire), or if they're responding to a natural disaster – they're more focused on getting people out and getting people safe."

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“The Red Cross wants to engage with them in a meaningful way that might only be, ‘hey, here’s some coffee’ who we might be canteening for those first responders And we collaborate even further when you talk about preparedness programs ... engaging with our fire campaign ... engaging youth to some capacity, and engaging our community to make them better prepared so that way if there is a disaster, or whatever the circumstance might be to keep our community prepared.”

“The red cross is called in if we need to relocate people from a fire, when they can’t go back into their house,” said Captain Gary Walton of the Ludington Fire Department, “and that does happen.

“There’s a ladies auxiliary out of Fountain that will come in when we need them to get us water, sandwiches or other items (if we’re on site for a long time), and we have our own ladies who do the same thing.

“But mainly, the Red Cross is there to help the people who have been dislocated from their homes.”



Photo courtesy of The Red Cross

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Honoring

Our First Responders



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Nick Contereras, a fireman of the Mason County Rural Fire Authority, receives his tribute from Undersheriff Derek Wilson

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We want to say **THANK YOU** to all first responders for putting our community first!
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