

For immediate release

Estes Park Joins Colorado Puts First Responders First™ Initiative

Learn how to get involved on April 19 at Solitude Cabins & Lodge.

Estes Park is the first Colorado mountain town to join the Colorado Puts First Responders First™ Initiative. It was started this year by Kathryn Severns Avery, founder and executive director of Restoration Ranch Colorado, a 501(c)(3). The initiative focuses on health and wellness as a recruiting and retention tool for first responder agencies in Colorado.

“Agencies and organizations that respond to public safety issues are understaffed in Colorado,” she said. “We need to recruit high quality candidates from both in-state and out-of-state to alleviate the shortage. Creating a state-wide initiative to take care of the first responders who take care of us by focusing on their health and wellness is critical.” Her goal is to make Colorado number one in the nation for first responder health and wellness.

Avery first became aware of the shortage after opening a respite ranch in 2022 for first responders to honor her husband, Christopher. He was killed in 2020 after his car was struck by robbery suspects fleeing from police in Lakewood, Colorado. “I spent more than \$1 million buying and renovating a ranch property as a ‘thank you’ to the first responders community,” she said. “When only a handful of people came, I started digging to find out why.” The main reasons for lack of attendance at the ranch, which does not charge for first responders and their families to come, were understaffing, suspicion of her motives, and skepticism.

During her research, Avery also uncovered disturbing statistics such as more first responders died from suicide in 2022 than died in the line of duty. “I was appalled to learn the average age of a law enforcement officer’s first heart attack is 42. The average age at death of an officer is just 57 years old. Stress is certainly a factor in these statistics and there is clearly a crisis,” she said.

The Colorado Puts First Responders First™ initiative is supported by Restoration Ranch Colorado’s Valor Vacations® Program by providing first responders and their families with stays at participating locations at no cost. Room nights are donated by vacation rental owners and are utilized by first responder families that have been nominated and carefully selected for the program. Having the opportunity to get away to rest, recover and most importantly, have fun, with loved ones is critical for the mental health, and therefore retention, of our first responders.

A kick-off meeting with Avery, city officials, and interested vacation property and business owners is scheduled for April 19 at 1 p.m. at the Solitude Cabins & Lodge. For more information, call Steve Kruger at (970) 215-8680. “It is right and fitting that Estes Park is the first mountain community to join the initiative,” Avery said. “Chris and I spent many happy hours vacationing here.”