While frontline workers have been looking after the public, it’s #FirstRespondersFirst that has been looking after frontline workers.

Written by N.C. Maisak
Photography courtesy of #FirstRespondersFirst
Collaboration has become a keystone of the pandemic, with people working together to come up with creative solutions to get through what can only be described as challenging times.

Companies switched gears to start making masks when they were in short supply; celebrities persuaded their fans to make record donations to charities; and in a move that made mega-headlines, arch-rivals Merck and Johnson & Johnson agreed to jointly produce the latter’s single-shot COVID-19 vaccine.

Some two weeks after America’s initial lockdowns, it was this same can-do spirit that led to the formation of #FirstRespondersFirst, an initiative conceived by Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Thrive Global, and the CAA Foundation that as of March 2021 had raised some $9 million to provide frontline healthcare workers with physical and psychological resources during the pandemic.

Although the founding partners operate in different sectors, their missions complement each other, making their philanthropic pairing a perfect fit.

Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health educates global health leaders, bringing scientific breakthroughs from the laboratory into people’s everyday lives. Thrive Global is a leading behavior-change tech company helping individuals, corporations, and communities improve their well-being and performance through its behavior-change platform, storytelling, and corporate services. And the CAA Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Creative Artists Agency, harnesses the power and reach of the entertainment industry to create positive social change.
"There is such tremendous power in partnerships," says Michelle A. Williams, the dean of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "We have married our complementary areas of expertise to raise awareness of this emerging crisis, raise and distribute funds in a strategic manner, and develop mental health resources and partnerships in an evidence-based manner."

Deborah Marcus, an executive in the CAA Foundation, says the founding partners were able to get #FirstRespondersFirst up and running quickly at the beginning of the pandemic by "bringing existing nonprofit partners, corporate sponsors, healthcare leaders, influencers, and media partners to the table. We came together and looked at our respective Rolodexes to see who could support our efforts."

She notes that the initiative also leveraged CAAs entertainment ties to enlist artists and athletes such as Olivia Wilde, Jennifer Lopez, Shonda Rhimes, Carmelo Anthony, and Trevor Noah to support fundraising and publicize the effort.

Film producer Sandy Climan, who was a key executive at CAA for many years, has been a part of #FirstRespondersFirst since its inception. As an alumni of both Harvard’s medical and business schools, he’s known Williams for years and has acted as an adviser to her on numerous occasions.

"It was fast and furious," Marcus says. "No single entity could have achieved what we did collectively."

The call to action started with the name, which was proposed by CAAs Brand Studio.

Marcus notes that it "expands the definition beyond typically associated groups such as fire and paramedic workers to declare urgency and prioritization of support for the entire healthcare workforce critical to our public health in the time of COVID-19."

Thus, while the world’s focus was on providing doctors and nurses with scarce personal protective equipment, notably N95 masks, #FirstRespondersFirst took a broader approach by including all those who are risking their own safety in response to the pandemic—EMTs, hospice workers, community health workers, nursing home caregivers, custodial and medical administrators, medical technicians, social workers, and environmental services staff—to its mission.
And it added mental and physical health care, along with other overlooked basic needs such as housing, temporary accommodations, childcare, and healthy food, to its goals.

“As the coronavirus began its spread to countries throughout the world, many of us were being asked to serve the public health by stepping back—staying home, sheltering in place, and otherwise minimizing our contact with the outside world—while first responders were stepping forward,” says Arianna Huffington, the founder and CEO of Thrive Global. “Quickly, it became clear how essential it was for those on the front lines to commit to taking care of themselves and build up resilience.”

The setup is straightforward. #FirstRespondersFirst is a fund of the Entertainment Industry Foundation, a 501c3 that acts as the fiscal sponsor for the initiative. The founding partners jointly decide where the donations go with governance oversight from it.


#FirstRespondersFirst has also formed strategic partnerships with Johnson & Johnson, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes Foundation, which was founded by the family of Breen, the New York City frontline physician who died by suicide in April 2020.

Additionally, the partners have assembled a leadership council whose notable members include Carmelo Anthony, Barbara Pierce Bush, Ray Chambers, Juliet de Baubigny, Julio Frenk, Antoine Fuqua, Ann Lee, Nathalie Rayes, and Joth Ricci.

Noting that more than 500 health workers lost their lives to the 2014-15 Ebola epidemic in West Africa and hundreds of others suffered long-term PTSD and other after-effects because of it, Williams says she “felt a deep responsibility to draw attention to these unique stressors and to care for our caregivers in whatever ways we could. But I also recognized that we needed a completely new approach—and that we needed help amplifying our academic public health voice.”

The initiative differentiates itself by taking what Marcus calls “a whole-human approach” to supporting frontline healthcare workers. That includes the use of Thrive Global’s Microsteps—science-backed, too-small-to-fail steps that help first responders build habits and take action to prioritize their well-being.
“These small steps are to support and sustain them as they confront this crisis, reminding them to take care of themselves, connect with others, and recharge their batteries so they can maximize their impact,” Huffington says.

In one Microstep, for example, healthcare workers ask themselves why they entered the field and are advised that “if you joined because you want to help people, remembering that fact can help you to move through challenging moments with more resilience.”

Marcus, Williams, and Huffington say the stories of those helped by #FirstRespondersFirst illustrate the inspiring impact of the initiative.

A frontline worker in Seattle, who used one of #FirstRespondersFirst and Bright Horizons Childcare Hubs, related that “since the kids have been going to the center, I can sleep at night. Just knowing that when I’m at work, they’re in a safe environment and having fun—it creates a relief for me. I feel so much more positive now. It took a lot of pressure off my shoulders.”

A traveling nurse from California, who was deployed to a hospital in New York City and whose stay at Marriott’s Renaissance New York Times Square Hotel was financed by #FirstResponderFirst, said that “I would not have been able to do this without the hotel accommodation. I am grateful as are my patients and fellow healthcare workers who are staying alongside me.”

And a healthcare worker at Mount Sinai in New York City said that the “#FirstRespondersFirst accommodation gave me the opportunity to rest after shifts without worrying about my family who are safe at home. Also, since the commute from the hospital to the hotel is much shorter, I am able to rest before my next shift starts while I work three to four nights in a row.”

Williams, Marcus, and Huffington say that #FirstRespondersFirst is primed to carry on its mission post-pandemic by continuing to prioritize clinician well-being and reducing professional burnout.

“The urgency of this crisis has not yet passed, and we know that even when it does, the impact will be long lasting for all of us and in particular for our first responders,” Huffington says. “We will continue to focus on helping them continue their live-saving work but also create a support system to help them deal with the trauma and stress they may experience long after they see their last COVID-19 patient. To complement this work, #FirstResponderFirst will take a systems approach to clinician well-being in order to help accelerate a culture shift that engages healthcare institutions in the work of creating and maintaining workplace cultures that prioritize mental health support and employee well-being.”

Williams hopes that #FirstRespondersFirst encourages “leaders across multiple industries to make enduring, proactive commitments to the mental and physical well-being of every last one of our frontline workers, from doctors and nurses to home-health aides and custodial workers.

The initiative, she says, will serve as a successful model for creative, collaborative partnerships.

“Corporations, universities, foundations, government: All must now work together not only to get us through to the other side of this crisis but also to tackle future public health crises,” she adds. “The era of siloed activism is over.”