

After COVID-19 recovery, first responders get back to work

April 28 2020, by Stefanie Dazio, Michael R. Sisak and Jake Bleiberg



In this April 23, 2020, photo FDNY paramedic Alex Tull, who has recently recovered from COVID-19, prepares to begin his shift outside EMS station 26, the "Tinhouse", in the Bronx borough of New York. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

The new coronavirus doesn't care about a blue uniform or a shiny badge. Police, firefighters, paramedics and corrections officers are just a 911

call away from contracting COVID-19 and spreading it.

With N95 masks hanging off their duty belts and disposable blue gloves stuffed in their back pockets, they respond to radio calls, make arrests and manage prisoners. But their training never covered something quite like this—what has been called an "invisible bullet."

It's sickened thousands of America's [first responders](#) and killed dozens more.

But many have recovered, and they're going back to work—back to the crime scene, back into the ambulance, back to the jail. Going back to this deadly pandemic's front lines.

They go with a lingering cough and lost weight. They toss and turn at night, wondering if the claims of immunity are true. They fear that picking up extra overtime shifts may expose them, and their families, to additional risks.

And then they pull on their uniforms and go back to work.

Some of their stories:

THE RISK

HOUSTON—In Deputy Ravin Washington's squad car, risk rides shotgun. The threats she faces on her solo patrols are usually more immediate than reports of some new unseen virus.

On the beat in northwest Houston, Washington, 28, has been in fights and drawn her gun. In 2017, three months after she finished the police

academy, her partner at the time was shot in the leg.



In this April 23, 2020, photo FDNY paramedic Alex Tull, who has recently recovered from COVID-19, prepares to begin his shift outside EMS station 26, the "Tinhouse", in the Bronx borough of New York. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

But last month, she was following up on a robbery call when it suddenly felt like someone was sitting on her chest. By the time she navigated her cruiser to her sister's apartment, she could barely keep her hands on the wheel. She had no idea what was wrong.

Certainty came a few days later after a nasal swab that felt like it poked her brain. On March 25, Washington tested positive—one of the first of

about 180 Harris County Sheriff's Office employees to be sickened.

In lonely isolation, her temperature spiked. Her stomach roiled. She lost her sense of taste and could barely rise from bed for days.

"People don't want to be around you," she said. "People don't want to touch you."

When she finally healed, she worried about getting sick again—about whether her colleagues would want her back.

She returned to patrol this month and found the situation suddenly reversed. Her colleagues gave her hugs. "People feel like, 'Hey, you have the antibodies. You're the cure,'" she said.



In this April 23, 2020, photo FDNY paramedic Alex Tull, who has recently recovered from COVID-19, prepares to begin his shift outside EMS station 26, the "Tinhouse", in the Bronx borough of New York. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

Back on patrol, Washington has the familiar weight on her hips of a Taser, handcuffs and gun. But her safety also depends on gloves and a mask.

"It's like you're risking your life even more now."

GUILT

NEW YORK—Paramedic Alex Tull of the New York Fire Department feels out of breath after walking up a few flights of stairs and has a cough that just won't quit. After some recent chest pains, an X-ray showed lingering inflammation in his lungs.

As he goes about his days treating coronavirus patients in the Bronx, he thinks about his own battle with the disease and his rush to return to duty late last month before he was fully healed.

At the height, about a quarter of the city's 4,300 EMS workers were out sick. Nearly 700 fire department employees have tested positive for the coronavirus and eight have died, including three EMS workers.



In this April 23, 2020, photo FDNY paramedic Alex Tull, who has recently recovered from COVID-19 poses for a photo in the Bronx borough of New York. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

Tull, 38, says he felt guilty convalescing at home for two weeks, flipping through Netflix and Hulu between naps as his colleagues risked their lives. He wondered: "Why did this have to happen to me? I want to be out there. I want to get out there and help."

But it wasn't just a matter of loyalty for the 10-year fire department veteran. A policy put in place as the virus ravaged the ranks mandated that personnel who no longer showed symptoms return to work as soon as possible.

"I definitely went back to work earlier than maybe I should have," Tull said.

Without definitive proof that he's immune from spreading or contracting the disease, Tull fears his nagging cough might infect his partner or their patients. And with little more than a [face mask](#) and gloves for protection, he worries he'll come down with the virus again.



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"Is my body ready for round two? I don't know. It is scary," Tull said.

THE HOTBOX

AURORA, Ill.—Chief Kristen Ziman spent hours in a cramped conference room strategizing on ways to keep her 306 [police officers](#) safe from the coronavirus.

Digital roll calls, solo squad cars, detectives running cases remotely—anything to keep them out of headquarters and away from each other.

Turns out, they needed to stay away from the chief.

Ziman, a patrol commander, her wife—a detective on the force—and Aurora's mayor all contracted COVID-19 around the same time. They most likely passed the virus during those planning meetings.

The rank-and-file, however, is fine.

"If we had to be the sacrificial lambs," Ziman said, "putting these plans in place to keep our officers safe, then I will gladly take it any day."



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The chief recorded videos from her home, sending them to the officers as part of routine operations plans. She wanted them to comprehend the pandemic's reality on the streets of Illinois' second-largest city.

"This wasn't one of those abstract concepts that's happening to someone else," she said. It was happening to some of their own.

The officers responded with text messages of well-wishes, and a new nickname for the station's third floor—the home of her office and the infamous conference room—that makes Ziman laugh even through all

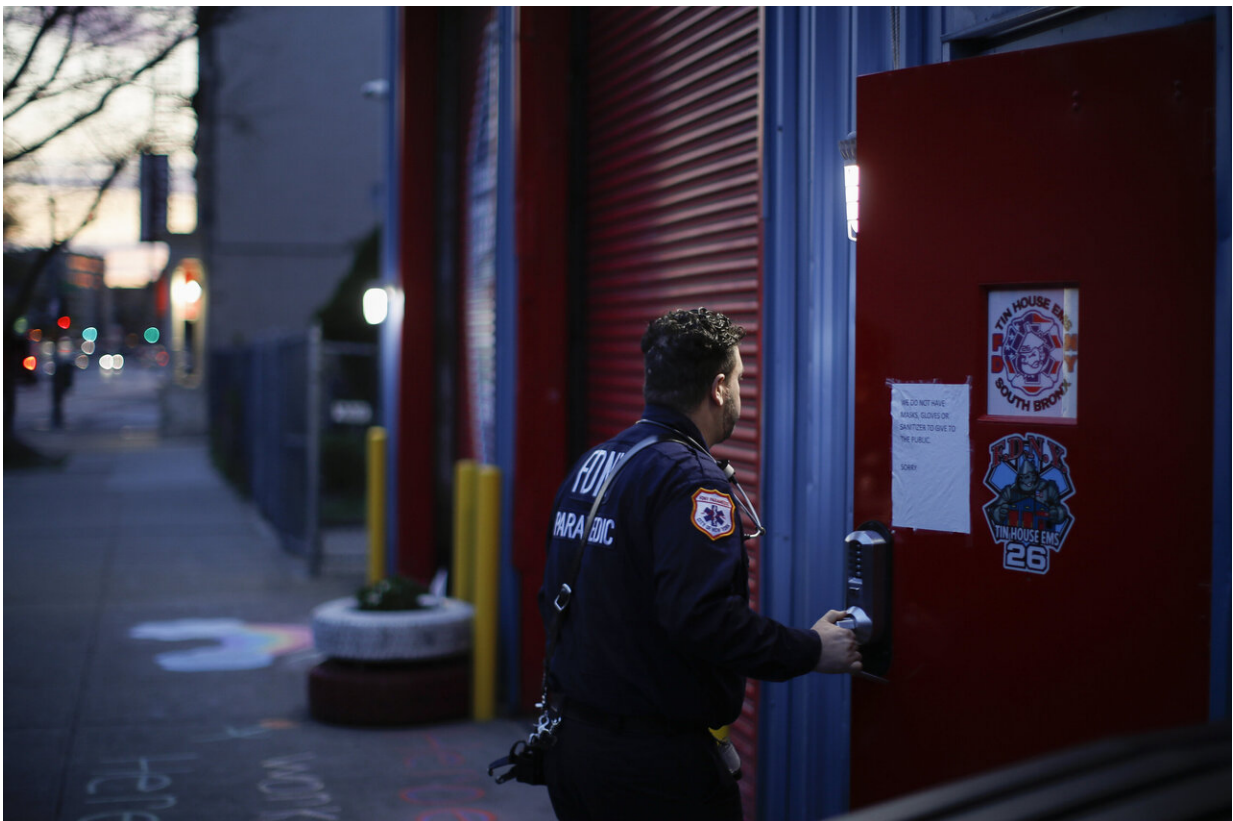
this.

They're calling it "The Hotbox"—and avoiding it altogether.

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ON THE SIDELINES

NEW YORK—Sgt. Cary Oliva was frustrated watching the news of his coronavirus-stricken city from his sick bed. The 31-year-old New York Police Department officer longed to be back at work helping with what was fast becoming one of the deadliest disasters in its history.



In this April 23, 2020, photo FDNY paramedic Alex Tull, who has recently recovered from COVID-19, prepares to begin his shift outside EMS station 26,

the "Tinhouse", in the Bronx borough of New York. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

"I felt like I was on the sidelines," he said. "I was pretty eager to come back as soon as possible, as long as it was safe."

In all, more than 4,600 employees at the nation's largest police department have tested positive for the coronavirus. Nearly 2,900 have recovered and returned to full duty. At least three dozen died.

Oliva went back April 6 and immersed himself in a new police mission: educating the public about [social distancing measures](#) that experts say are vital to reducing the spread of infection. Protective mask on his face and hand sanitizer nearby, Oliva spends his afternoons cruising by takeout restaurants and other businesses looking for gaps in social distancing protocols.

"I dove right back into it," he said.

THE LINE

LOS ANGELES—In jail-speak, it's called "the line."

For correction officers, it means any duty that requires working directly with inmates. Custody assistant Sonia Munoz's line is a 184-bed inmate hospital ward at the Twin Towers jail, with its beige walls and powder blue doors. It's where she most likely contracted the [coronavirus](#). And passed it along to her younger sister and her father.



In this April 17, 2020, photo Harris County Sheriff's Deputy Ravin Washington wipes the microphone inside her patrol car before starting her patrol in Spring, Texas. Washington tested positive for COVID-19 in mid-March and returned to patrol on April 15, after recovering at home. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

Right now, Munoz, 38, is safe. She's 10 pounds lighter, her thick uniform belt is tightened to the last notch, but she's been transferred to an office gig, where she can line up three bottles of hand sanitizer on her desk and work alone.

Still, the line is there.

Any overtime shift could bring Munoz back. Her mother, 3-year-old nephew and 94-year-old grandmother escaped illness last time, but they

may not be so lucky again.

It's something her 27-year-old partner, Christopher Lumpkin, worries about.

On March 18, he became the first member of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, which oversees the nation's largest jail system, to test positive for COVID-19. He likely passed it to Munoz and three other custody assistants. More than 60 sheriff's personnel county-wide and at least 28 inmates have tested positive for the virus.



In this April 17, 2020, photo Harris County Sheriff's Deputy Ravin Washington wipes down her computer inside her patrol car before starting her patrol in Spring, Texas. Washington tested positive for COVID-19 in mid-March and returned to patrol on April 15 after recovering at home. (AP Photo/David J.

Phillip)



In this April 17, 2020, photo Harris County Sheriff's Deputy Ravin Washington, left, has her temperature checked by administrative assistant Kim Sumner before starting her patrol in Spring, Texas. Washington tested positive for COVID-19 in mid-March and returned to patrol on April 15 after recovering at home. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



In this April 17, 2020, photo Harris County Sheriff's Deputy Ravin Washington logs onto her computer inside her patrol car before starting her patrol in Spring, Texas. Washington tested positive for COVID-19 in mid-March and returned to patrol on April 15, after recovering at home. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



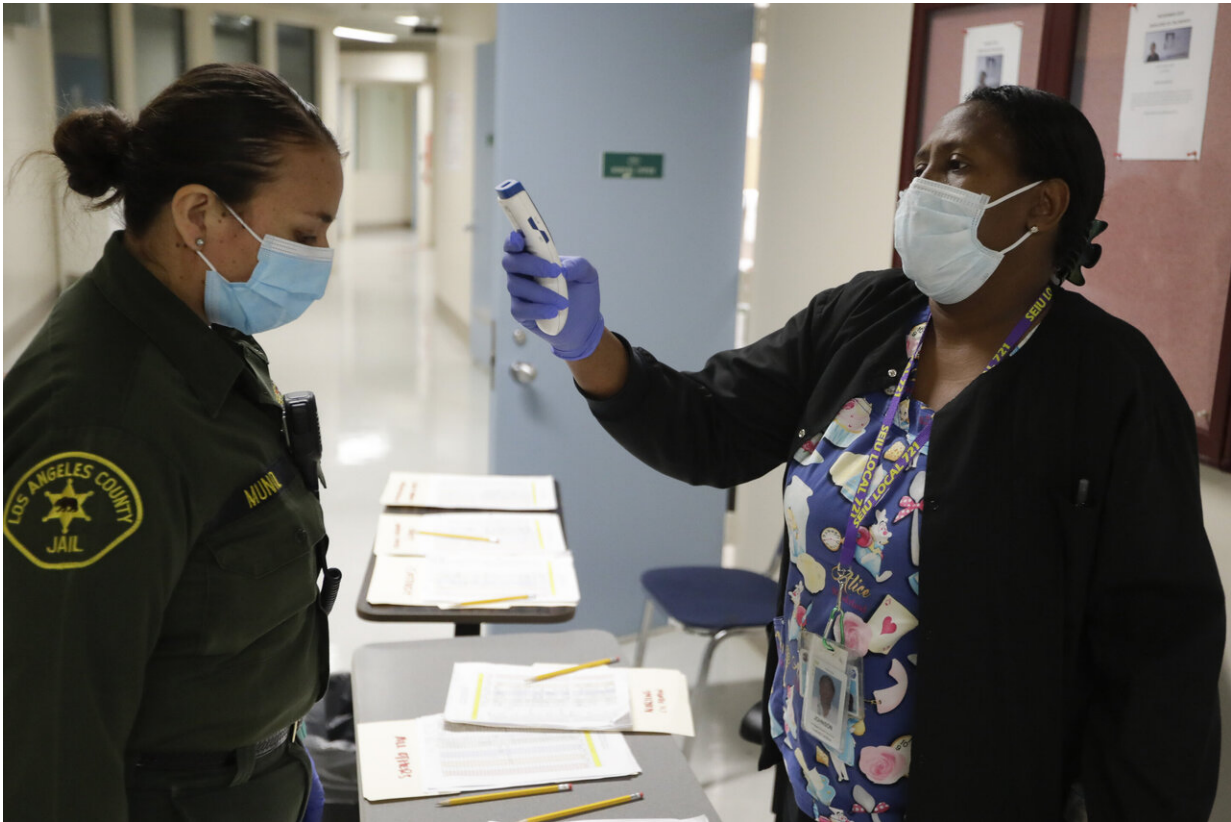
In this April 17, 2020, photo Harris County Sheriff's Deputy Ravin Washington poses for a photo outside her patrol car before starting her patrol in Spring, Texas. Washington tested positive for COVID-19 in mid-March and returned to patrol on April 15 after recovering at home. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



In this April 16, 2020, photo a gloved hand points to a holding cell at the hospital ward of the Twin Towers jail in Los Angeles. Across the country first responders who've fallen ill from COVID-19, recovered have begun the harrowing experience of returning to jobs that put them back on the front lines of America's fight against the novel coronavirus. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson)



In this April 17, 2020, photo Harris County Sheriff's Deputy Ravin Washington logs onto her computer inside her patrol car before starting her patrol in Spring, Texas. Washington tested positive for COVID-19 in mid-March and returned to patrol on April 15 after recovering at home. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



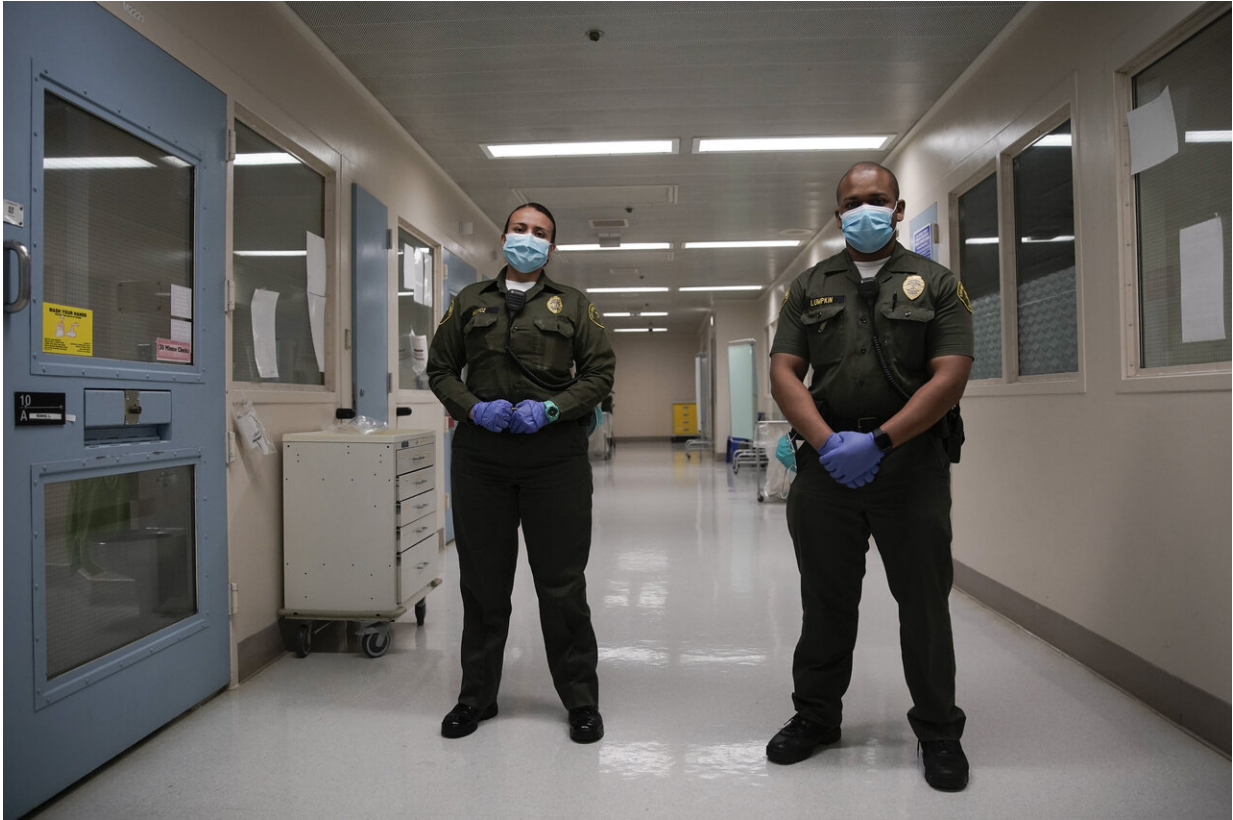
In this April 16, 2020, photo Sonia Munoz, left, custody assistant, gets her temperature taken at the hospital ward of the Twin Towers jail in Los Angeles. Across the country first responders who've fallen ill from COVID-19, recovered have begun the harrowing experience of returning to jobs that put them back on the front lines of America's fight against the novel coronavirus. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson)



In this April 16, 2020, photo Christopher Lumpkin, a custody assistant, poses for a picture at the hospital ward of the Twin Towers jail in Los Angeles. Across the country first responders who've fallen ill from COVID-19, recovered have begun the harrowing experience of returning to jobs that put them back on the front lines of America's fight against the novel coronavirus. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson)



In this April 16, 2020, photo Christopher Lumpkin, right, and Sonia Munoz, custody assistants, walk in the hallway of the hospital ward at the Twin Towers jail in Los Angeles. Across the country first responders who've fallen ill from COVID-19, recovered have begun the harrowing experience of returning to jobs that put them back on the front lines of America's fight against the novel coronavirus. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson)



In this April 16, 2020, photo Sonia Munoz, left, and Christopher Lumpkin, custody assistants, poses for a picture at the hospital ward of the Twin Towers jail in Los Angeles. Across the country first responders who've fallen ill from COVID-19, recovered have begun the harrowing experience of returning to jobs that put them back on the front lines of America's fight against the novel coronavirus. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson)



In this April 16, 2020, photo Christopher Lumpkin, left, and Sonia Munoz, custody assistants, talk in the hallway of the hospital ward at the Twin Towers jail in Los Angeles. Across the country first responders who've fallen ill from COVID-19, recovered have begun the harrowing experience of returning to jobs that put them back on the front lines of America's fight against the novel coronavirus. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson)



In this Monday, April 20, 2020, photo Aurora, Ill. police chief Kristen Ziman smiles as she poses for a portrait at her office in Aurora. Across the country first responders who've fallen ill and recovered, like Chief Ziman, have begun the harrowing experience of returning to jobs that put them back on the front lines of America's fight against the novel coronavirus. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)



In this April 16, 2020, photo Christopher Lumpkin's gloved hands are shown during an interview at the hospital ward of the Twin Towers jail in Los Angeles. Across the country first responders who've fallen ill from COVID-19, recovered have begun the harrowing experience of returning to jobs that put them back on the front lines of America's fight against the novel coronavirus. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson)



In this Monday, April 20, 2020, photo Aurora, Ill. police chief Kristen Ziman works in partial silhouette at her office in Aurora. Across the country first responders who've fallen ill and recovered, like Chief Ziman, have begun the harrowing experience of returning to jobs that put them back on the front lines of America's fight against the novel coronavirus. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)



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In this Monday, April 20, 2020, photo Aurora, Ill. police chief Kristen Ziman smiles as she poses for a portrait at police headquarters in Aurora. Across the country first responders who've fallen ill and recovered, like Chief Ziman, have begun the harrowing experience of returning to jobs that put them back on the front lines of America's fight against the novel coronavirus. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

Using Facebook Messenger, Lumpkin and Munoz traded stories and symptoms, bedridden in their quarantined homes as the virus spread outside.

"I will pray for you guys as well," Lumpkin wrote.

Now, Lumpkin is recovered and back on the line. He changes his gloves

and sanitizes his hands each time he works with an inmate and keeps an extra mask hanging off his duty belt.

Munoz takes similar precautions in her office, separate from the inmates.

But she can't avoid the line forever.

"I have to go back to the lion's mouth."

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