

Kim Shirley-Williams

## **Leaning on a Trusted Circle**

By David Smale

When you're in the military or serve as a first-responder, trust is a huge factor in your daily life. Military personnel have to trust the other people in their unit to execute their training so they can do what they're trained to do. For first responders, often their very lives depend on their partner having their back.

That's the basic premise of The Battle Within (TBW), an organization that helps former military personnel and first responders cope with the sometimes-hidden trauma of their careers.

"It's so effective because they are putting like-minded people together," said Kim Shirley-Williams, a former participant and now a mentor for TBW. "We all experience similar things, so we innately know each other's stuff; nothing's really going to shock anybody. You have that trusted circle, and then you do have the mentors who are also from those professions."

Because of her advocacy, Shirley-Williams is the June recipient of the "Blue KC Answering the Call" award, sponsored by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas City, benefitting The Battle Within.

Shirley-Williams began her career with the Kansas City Police Department (KCPD) as a 9-1-1 call-taker in 1996. She moved into dispatch a year later, where some patrol officers encouraged her to do "ride-alongs." She decided to go through the police academy and ended up serving as a KCPD patrol officer for four years. From there, she moved into investigations. She retired from a 27-year career on the force in July 2025.

That retirement lasted four days. She came back as a civilian wellness specialist and a peer support coordinator. She had been part of the peer support team since it began about 10 years ago, and that's where her heart was.

"Peer support is important because you're not talking to a supervisor, necessarily," Shirley-Williams said. "You're talking to somebody who is your peer. Those peers are not therapists or clinicians, they're just people who care, who have gone through some additional training, and also have access to a bunch of resources."

In her role with peer support, she was always looking for resources that could help police officers deal with job-related stress. Recently, she partnered with KCPD emotional support K9 "Gracie." And after investigating The Battle Within, she was impressed.

“You have to have resiliency and mental toughness in these roles, but you’re also human,” she said. “When you see things that are horrible and not what you’re supposed to ever see, you are going to have human reactions. We try to say, ‘We want you to be tough when you need to be tough, but then when you step away from that horrible scene, now it’s time to be human, and now it’s time for us to take care of you.’”

But when Shirley-Williams went through a personal tragedy, she went from advocate of TBW to receiving help. Her 14-year-old son, Truman, died of suicide in 2023, and she found herself needing help. Her reaction was isolation, but she recognized that wouldn’t work. She went through *The Battle Within* in November 2025.

“I had to take my own advice, and allow people to help me,” she said. “I had to learn how to ask for help, because my initial reaction was, ‘I got this, I’m tough, I’m okay.’”

“I was not okay. I needed my people, and I needed therapy. Once I realized I couldn’t do this by myself, I let people come in and help me.”

Like a lot of the officers she helps in her peer-support role, Shirley-Williams knows that being tough doesn’t mean you don’t need help.

“You don’t just go out and have drinks and get a slap on the back and say, ‘Toughen up, buttercup. Now get over it.’ How’s that working? Now, we’re better at proactively checking in with people, and we’re better at reactively checking in with people after things happen.”

She knows that you never completely get over trauma, but her approach is even more about helping people deal with the trauma. And with her own personal trauma, she’s also actively working on the prevention side. She volunteers at Children’s Mercy mental health family advocacy programs and with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

“I don’t want this to happen to anybody else’s family.”