

County Public Safety Staff Honored at Banquet

By Hector Flores

The Charlotte County Public Safety Department celebrated bravery, lifesaving efforts and outstanding service during the annual Public Safety Appreciation and Recognition Banquet Aug. 1. The evening recognized personnel who exemplify the department's mission of being Community Focused, Excellence Driven.

Lt. Jefferson Mendel, River Silva and Kelly Lechleidner were awarded the Medal of Valor. Lt. Michael Brucci and Michael Pietraniec received the Medal of Bravery. The Medal of Valor and Medal of Bravery are among the highest honors a first responder can receive, recognizing exceptional acts of courage in the face of extreme danger. On May 20, 2025, Charlotte County Fire & EMS crews responded to a fully engulfed home on Barre Drive with multiple people trapped inside. Through coordinated teamwork and bravery, members risked their lives to rescue victims from the burning structure, actions that reflect the very best of public safety.

Dakota Brittain was named the Firefighter of the Year Louis Chieffo was named the Firefighter-EMT of the Year. Caleb VanHelden was named the Paramedic of the Year. Battalion Chief Michael Seneca was named Officer of the Year. Lt. Felix Hernandez received the CARES Award. Dawn Johnston received the Keystone Award.

Phoenix Awards were presented to those who played a vital role in the successful resuscitation and recovery of a cardiac arrest patient: Fabian Alvarez, Lt. Brendan Betancourt, Dakota Brittain, Adriano Cabrera, Wendy Chermansky, Louis Chieffo, Michael Cohee Jr., Devonne Davenport, Fabrice Dufrene, Lenar Gabdrakhmanov, Lt. Ryan Gage, Robert Garrick, Jack Hahn, Cole Hall, Mitchell Hardesty, Juan Hernandez, Lt. Justin Hessinger, Joshua Huff, Maksim Martinson, Vincent Maugeri, Lt. Charles McCollum, Max Minucci, Agustin Olivera Hernandez, James Ritch, Joshua Smith, Karina Suarez, Juan Viteri, William Walker, Christian Weatherhead, Robert Whetsel, Jeronimo Yepes-Ospina.

"These awards reflect not only moments of extraordinary valor and bravery, but also the dedication our personnel bring to the job every day. They tell the story of who we are," said Public Safety Director/Fire Chief Jason Fair. "Whether it's rushing toward danger, providing critical medical care, or ensuring operations run smoothly behind the scenes, each honoree represents the very best of public safety."

Congratulations to everyone honored during this annual ceremony that highlights the dedicated work of our Public Safety Department personnel who risk their lives every day to protect and rescue members of our community. It is a privilege to recognize their bravery and selfless service.

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