



Pursuit of Excellence

2026 Innovative Ideas Essays

Community Outreach: First Responders

Chapel Lawn Funeral Home and Memorial Gardens, Crown Point, Indiana

Kuiper Funeral Home, Highland, Indiana

To our way of thinking, there isn't much that compares with a warm hug from a cuddly Teddy Bear. Especially when it includes the opportunity to say "thank you" on 9/11's National Day of Service and Remembrance to first responders and armed services personnel. That's why, when the team at Chapel Lawn and Kuiper Funeral Homes was asked if we wanted to participate in Operation Gratitude's National Day of Service, we had a group of eager volunteers ready to jump at the chance.

Preparations began on August 20, 2025, with Team Leader, AJ Nuest, attending the Team Leader Webinar hosted by Brennan Avants, Operation Gratitude Manager of Corporate Events. He guided the attendees through step-by-step instructions on how to motivate our teams and run a successful event, as well as emphasizing the various deadlines it would be important for us to remember. An event resource guide, tip sheet and even several tutorials were included in the presentation, along with helpful hints to coordinate snacks, create excitement and recruit additional volunteers.

Once completed, we sent out our Event Approval Notification and waited on pins and needles for our Operation Gratitude goodies to arrive.

That first week of September, our wish was granted, and we received a very large box filled with pre-assembled Battalion Buddies - the Teddy Bears given to children of deployed service members – along with craft paracord lanyards, and even special postcards we could use to write letters to soldiers overseas.

With the company-wide event only a few days away, AJ spent any spare time she had going over the assembly instructions, as well as weaving and re-weaving one of the paracord lanyards in preparation to teach everyone else the zipper stitch technique. And that practice proved useful the morning our volunteers assembled, with a full table of funeral directors ready to take on the challenge.

But we didn't stop there. Snacks were served as we opened our delivery of Battalion Buddies and got busy stuffing and dressing them in their special camouflage jackets. It was such a fun project, made even more so by knowing each bear would warm the heart of a child whose parent was away from home on duty. Before giving them our own parting hug, we made sure each bear received a tag that read, "I'm your Battalion Buddy and I'm here to keep you company while your mom or dad is away. I'm so excited to join your family!"

Lastly, the group moved to the table filled with paper, pens, postcards and markers, as well as Operation Gratitude's Letters of Gratitude Guide. Our volunteers got to work writing notes to service members, some of whom pulled from personal experience after retiring from the armed forces themselves.

But the best part was knowing each message would eventually land in the hands of someone as a gesture of our gratitude. A symbol that we hadn't forgotten the sacrifices they made and were hoping to be their reminder of home.

Operation Gratitude makes this possible. Every year, they transform the tragedy of 9/11 into a day when we all work together in remembrance to perform a powerful act of unity and service. Over the past twenty years, this organization has sent out more than four million care packages meant to boost the morale and resilience of our service members. Participation is easy for such a far-reaching impact, and we could not recommend partnering with them more.

Copeland Funeral Service, Beauford, South Carolina

In 2011, we sponsored our first annual Fire Service Bar-B-Q for ALL career and volunteer fire service personnel in Beaufort County. The annual Bar-B-Q is held during Fire Prevention Week in October. The event is held at Lady's Island Fire Department Headquarters, Lady's Island, South Carolina. There are twenty fire departments in Beaufort County. A few weeks before the Bar-B-Q, we send an invitation to all the Fire Chiefs in the county to let them know of the date of the event and ask them to provide us with a count of the personnel who will be eating.

Prior to the event, the funeral home will order and pay for all food and supplies. Our menu consist of half of a bar-b-q chicken, potato salad baked beans, bread, ice tea and cake for desert. The day before the event we will deliver our supplies to the fire station. We will send someone to go, about an hour away, to pick up the chicken and ice them down. The day of the event we arrive around 05:30 and by 06:00 our first cooking of the chicken is on the grills. We use two grills and cook approximately 70-75 half chickens per cooking. Chief Bruce Kline, Chief Lady's Island Fire Department, and Chief Josh Horton, Fripp Island Fire Chief, and I do the grilling. While we are grilling, others are setting up tables and chairs, cutting the cake and placing in containers. Most of these dinners will be take out, so we plate all the food as well. Copeland Funeral Service logo was added to the carry-out containers.

In 2013, (our third year), we included all communications, Fire Commissioners, and Emergency Medical Services staff persons. We now include personnel with the Beaufort County Sheriff's Department- on duty and in the vicinity, Coroner's Office, and Emergency Management. Our first year, there were approximately 150 dinners served. This past year we served 270 take out and have been as high as over 350 take out plates.

This is a service provided by our funeral home and is done without any cost to our friends in public service. This has been a very positive outreach for our funeral home. We have received a large number of "thank you" from the departments and individuals. In March 2012, Copeland Funeral Service received a plaque from the Beaufort County Fire Chiefs Association.

We are committed to continuing with this appreciation dinner.

Flanders Powell Funeral Home, Pembroke, Georgia

Funeral homes serve the communities that they are a part of in many different ways. Not only do we take care of the deceased and their families, but we provide support throughout the area on a daily basis through contributions to area schools and sports teams and relationships with local law enforcement.

One of the ways that we can help support the local community is to form relationships with our police officers, firefighters and other county officials. These relationships foster support for the funeral home and staff within the community and aid in flawless communications throughout all agencies.

At Flanders Powell Funeral Home, one of the ways we accomplish this is to have a barbecue yearly on September 11th to honor the local sheriff's deputies, police officers, bailiffs, firefighters, paramedics and EMTs. A hot meal is provided complete with cookies and cakes as choices for dessert. We have numerous picnic tables set up so that everyone may be seated in a nice shaded area, enjoy their lunch and have conversation among themselves.

For those that may not be able to attend the event at the funeral home because of work or being called away to an emergency, we offer a plate to take with them so that they may enjoy the meal at their leisure.

At the end of the day, any food that is left over is packed up along with plates, utensils and drinks. We deliver all of this to the local fire department so that they will have a good dinner in the overnight hours at the station.

Our cookouts assist us in forming lasting relationships with, not only law enforcement but other first responders and the community as a whole. These bonds allow us to have a personal relationship with those that we work side by side with every day within our city. We are united in brotherhood through these bonds and a trust is built within the community that solidifies our willingness to serve the area along with our local first responders as pillars of the community, offering our unwavering support at times of need.

We are honored to continue to be a part of the Pembroke area and privileged to be called upon to serve our community with dignity, honor and personalized services. We strive to memorialize every individual that is entrusted to our care to the highest standard and utmost attention to detail. Documentation Required: In addition to your essay, you must submit supporting documentation (e.g., photographs, advertisements, newspaper clippings, flyers, etc.).

Heath Funeral Chapel & Crematory, Lakeland, Florida

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Palmetto Funeral Group, Fort Mill, South Carolina

**Palmetto Funeral Group (Bass-Cauthen Funeral Home and Cremation Center),
Rock Hill South Carolina**

Palmetto Funeral Group (Whitesell Funeral Home), Rock Hill, South Carolina

Palmetto Funeral Group, Indian Land, South Carolina

The Fort Mill 10-13 Club is a civic organization based in Fort Mill, dedicated to supporting the law enforcement community and fostering a strong sense of unity among those who serve. Comprised primarily of retired police officers and firefighters from New York City, the organization brings together individuals who share a lifelong commitment to public safety and service. In addition to its retired members, the club also unites retired military personnel and active law enforcement officers, all of whom are bound by a common mission: to support and uplift members of the law enforcement community and their families.

The Fort Mill 10-13 Club works diligently to fulfill its mission through a variety of efforts, including membership dues, merchandise sales, fundraising events, and charitable donations. These initiatives provide critical resources that directly benefit law enforcement officers and their families within York County communities. Whether offering financial assistance during times of hardship or simply reinforcing a network of support, the organization ensures that those who protect and serve are not forgotten.

A central component of the club's outreach is its annual Support Our Heroes 5K, which serves as its signature fundraising event. This event not only promotes health and community involvement but also transforms participation into meaningful, life-impacting support for families in need. Through events like this, the organization strengthens the bond between the community and its law enforcement members, fostering mutual respect and appreciation.

At the heart of the Fort Mill 10-13 Police Association is a deeply rooted mission: to honor and support law enforcement officers, first responders, and their families—particularly those who have lost a loved one in the line of duty. By delivering compassionate assistance, encouraging fellowship, and engaging the public through charitable and educational initiatives, the organization plays a vital role in preserving the legacy of fallen heroes while supporting those who continue to serve.

Looking ahead, the vision of the Fort Mill 10-13 Police Association is to expand its reach beyond York County and become a nationally recognized organization. With a continued focus on compassion, service, and community engagement, the association aims to stand as a trusted source of support for law enforcement officers across the United States, strengthening communities where respect and mutual support remain core values.

Support from local partners has been instrumental in advancing the organization's mission. Palmetto Funeral Group has played a key role as a sponsor of the annual 5K run and golf tournament, and has also contributed by speaking at one of the organization's dinners. Such partnerships highlight the importance of community collaboration in ensuring the success and sustainability of initiatives that honor and support those who dedicate their lives to public service.

Tetrick Funeral Services, Blountville, Tennessee

Oakley-Cook Funeral Home & Crematory, Bristol, Tennessee

As has been the tradition of Tetrick Funeral Services, for over 15 years the funeral home has had a hot dog lunch in honor of first responders. This included the Johnson City Police Department, Johnson City Fire Department, EMS and 911 dispatch. In addition to the lunch, Tetrick Funeral Services has always given a \$500 check to the police department with them designating to us what they choose to be the donation to go to. The Junior Police Academy has always been the choice because this is not a program with a line item in the City budget but is totally run by donation. The Junior Police Academy is geared toward area youth between the ages of 14 - 18. The program focuses on youth and young adults who have an interest in the law enforcement profession. It is designed to take the mystery out of police procedures and policies while informing and educating cadets (participants) with police officers and their role in society. Cadets will experience what it is like to go through the police academy and, although not as comprehensive or demanding, learn the same skills. An investigator with the police department oversees this program.

The funeral home has also always given the Johnson City Fire Department a \$500 donation, given through the Firefighters Association, so the firemen are directly involved in having the donation go to their choice of need. Money has been given to a firefighter's fund to help with his cancer treatment and another year the funeral home paid for the black bunting the fire department wanted to wrap a fire truck used in a firefighter's funeral/burial service but the majority of the money was designated to start a fund to go towards funding for the official uniforms for the Honor Guard to wear when conducting burials or participating in events where first responders participate. The City of Johnson City had nothing designated to provide for this needed expense until our latest City Manager came on board. Upon learning that the firemen did not have Honor Guard uniforms, she immediately line itemed the amount to finish paying for the uniforms.

Due to the nature of the donations, WJHL-TV always covered the presentation of the donations and told about this on the 6 o'clock and 11 o'clock news.

Not wanting anyone left out who was eligible for the meal, the funeral home packed and delivered meals to EMS and 911 dispatch because EMS was constantly on the road and 911 dispatch staff could not leave their post.

In 2025, Tetrick Funeral Services wanted to change things a little and bring the appreciation lunch to another level. Laura Graham contacted Kick Back Jack's restaurant's manager and asked if the restaurant would like to co-partner with us to bring the level of food served above what has been done in the past. The restaurant manager was in 100% but said he would have to send a request to the corporate office to get their permission to participate in the event. Within a few days, the corporate level responded a resounding YES and Kick Back Jack's donated 100 orders of a combination of grilled and boneless wings along with several sauces for dipping. The invitation was emailed to all of the entities involved along with news of Kick Back Jack's involvement to all entities. The feedback we received through several first responders was they were really looking forward to the lunch with Kick Back Jack's donation of so many wings.

On the morning of the event, everything went haywire. One fireman came to the funeral home to tell Laura Graham that a huge fire had broken out and all stations were called out to help. He said he didn't know how many firemen would be able to attend. He was told not to worry. If he would see how many meals would need to be delivered to the firefighters, we would take care of getting them where they needed to go. Then a phone call came from the Manager at Kickback Jack's and he said that due to the bad weather that day, he was experiencing a good number of his employees calling in that they couldn't get to work so he was going to be working the floor during the lunch hour rush. Someone was sent to the restaurant to pick up their food to serve with ours. We were very disappointed that he wasn't going to be able to attend to help serve the food and see the appreciation of the first responders who were able to attend.

Carryout lunches were packed and delivered (about 150 lunches) so our first responders could enjoy a lunch and the food was put out to serve whoever was able to attend in person with hopefully several be there to view the monetary donations. We estimate that with all of the drama that day, that we had over 75

first responders able to attend in person. The wings were a great hit with everyone and we were so appreciative to Kick Back Jack's coming along side of Tetrick Funeral Services to make this a more memorable appreciation lunch for our hardworking, serving first responders.

The checks were distributed at the service. Firefighter's Association and Police Department both had representative from their respective divisions to receive the checks and once again Tetrick Funeral Services was better able to acknowledge our appreciation to the area first responders due to the generous donation of food from Kick Back Jack's restaurant.

The entire staff rallied and came together to make it a memorable day for the first responders by delivering food to each fire station, EMS, and 911 along with having food to be served from the funeral home i