



**American Red Cross**  
Southern California Region

# 2026 *Inland Empire Heroes Awards*

Celebrate the Hero Within!

Tuesday, March 17, 2026  
Ontario Convention Center

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# Strengthening the Blood Supply Through Innovation

*This year's Inland Empire Heroes Awards will benefit Red Cross Blood Services through the purchase of noninvasive hemoglobin sensors.*



Every two seconds, someone in the United States needs lifesaving blood. From children battling cancer to trauma patients fighting for survival, people facing medical emergencies rely on the American Red Cross to provide a safe and readily available blood supply.

To strengthen this supply and enhance the donor experience, the Red Cross is investing in **noninvasive hemoglobin sensors**—innovative health screening devices designed to improve the comfort and ease of blood donation at drives and donation centers nationwide.

While the donation process itself remains the same, the way vital signs are measured, such as hemoglobin levels, has changed. The new noninvasive device replaces the traditional fingerstick with a ring-shaped sensor that gently fits over a donor's finger to measure hemoglobin concentration as part of their health screening. For many donors, the finger prick is one of the biggest barriers to giving blood. Fear of needles, discomfort, and anxiety can discourage even the most willing donors from returning.

By making the donation process easier, faster, and more comfortable, your support will help recruit and retain more local blood donors and strengthen our blood supply when it's needed most.



Learn more



Please consider donating today.  
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76278 or donate online.



will match all donations made at today's event up to \$10,000.

When you donate to the American Red Cross, your donation is used efficiently. An average of **90 cents of every dollar** the Red Cross spends is invested in humanitarian services and programs. The American National Red Cross is registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Contributions to the American National Red Cross are tax-deductible to the extent permitted by law. The Red Cross' tax identification number is 53-0196605.

# Event Program

## Registration and Networking

### Presentation of Colors

Yuhaaviatam of San Manuel Nation Honor Guard

### National Anthem

Evie Williams

Evelyn-Grace (Evie) Williams is a 10th grade, second-year advanced choir student at Hillcrest High School in Riverside. As a musical theatre performer, Evie has been cast in 23 mainstage shows. She has earned multiple prestigious scholarships, performed at community ceremonies and parades and taken the stage at major events such as the Junior Theatre Festival in Sacramento. In addition to her theatre work, she is part of her church's adult Praise Team.

## Introduction and Welcome

### Award Presentations

**Animal Welfare Hero:** CALFIRE Division Chief John Crater

**Disaster Services Hero:** Frank Kams

**Good Samaritan Hero:** Freddy Aguirre

**Gift of Life Hero:** Captain Gustavo Araiza

**First Responder Hero:** Deputy Christopher Chermis  
and Deputy Shawn Owens

**First Responder Hero:** Deputy Fire Chief Gregory Lyle

**Service to the Armed Forces Hero:** Brian Barber, *Mission FISH*

**Youth Hero:** Carter Sliney

**Corporate Hero:** Fresh Up

## Closing Remarks

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### Thank you to our 2026

### Inland Empire Heroes Selection Committee

Andrew Behnke | Tempe Essell | Dora Mejia

Ed Monie | Danny Renko | Laura Tolbirt | Rachel Watkins

## Event Emcee



**Chip Yost**  
*Event Emcee*

Chip Yost started as a reporter with KTLA in 2007 and has since covered some of the biggest news events of our time. He was at the Vatican when Pope Francis was elected. He was at the 2016 Republican and Democratic National Conventions. He has reported live from hurricane zones in Florida, Texas and Hawaii, and from mass shooting scenes in Uvalde, Parkland, Dallas, Orlando and San Bernardino.

Chip also serves as KTLA's Orange County Bureau Chief, where he has covered wildfires, mudslides and the "snitch scandal" that derailed the prosecution of the man responsible for the worst mass shooting in county history.

Before joining KTLA, Chip worked as an investigative reporter at KUSA in Denver and a general assignment reporter at KOLD in Tucson, KYMA in Yuma, and KGET in San Diego. Chip's reporting has earned him numerous awards, including the duPont Silver Baton, Emmy and Golden Mike.

Chip received his master's degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York and his bachelor's degree from the University of Cincinnati College of Business, where he majored in marketing and real estate.

# 2026 Inland Empire Heroes Honorees



## **Animal Welfare Hero** **CALFIRE Division Chief John Crater**

In September 2024, the Airport Fire burned more than 23,000 acres across Orange and Riverside counties, destroying or damaging nearly 200 structures. During this devastating fire, CALFIRE Division Chief John Crater not only performed heroic duties to safeguard people and property but also worked to save the life of a beloved dog belonging to a man trapped in the fire.

Division Chief Crater drove through active flames, spotted the homeowner and urged him to evacuate. When the man asked if he could bring his dog, Division Chief Crater guided both to safety. Due to his bravery and selflessness, the man and his dog were safely evacuated and escaped the flames unharmed.

Presented by



## **Disaster Services Hero** **Frank Kams**

Frank Kams, Emergency Services Coordinator for the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, has improved public safety through the development of advanced disaster-evacuation technology and the modernization of fire evacuation mapping. By collaborating with fire agencies, GIS analysts, and regional partners, he helped create updated sound

mapping products that have dramatically improved public communication and responder coordination. This platform has significantly increased the accuracy and speed of evacuations, ultimately improving efficiency and potentially saving lives. The software has proved vital during local wildfires, from the Line and Bridge Fires to the devastating fires in Los Angeles. Frank's work has substantially impacted regional preparedness, interagency coordination and the safety of communities facing increasingly severe wildfire and flooding threats.

Presented by





**Good Samaritan Hero  
Freddy Aguirre**

Freddy Aguirre and his wife, Valerie, were driving when they saw a vehicle accident. A severely injured man ran toward them, and with no other cars around, the Aguirres immediately stopped their RV to help him and the three additional occupants of the vehicle. Freddy told Valerie to call 911 as he jumped out and grabbed a strap. Freddy sat the victim down, applied a tourniquet

and maintained pressure until paramedics arrived. The man was airlifted for further medical care. Firefighters and a police officer credited Freddy with saving the man’s life.

Presented by  **SAN ANTONIO  
REGIONAL HOSPITAL**



**Gift of Life Hero  
Captain Gustavo Araiza**

Captain Gustavo Araiza of the Palm Springs Police Department (PSPD) is committed to saving lives through regular blood and platelet donation. As a member of PSPD’s Command Staff, he consistently leads by example — always the first to sign up and donate at the department’s frequent blood drives. With AB+ blood, one of the rarest types, he recognizes the

critical impact his donations can have. Captain Araiza’s consistent participation and encouragement has inspired many colleagues to become donors. Through his leadership and his example, the PSPD’s blood drives have grown in terms of both participation and impact, collecting lifesaving blood and helping patients in need.

Presented by  **American  
Red Cross**



## **First Responder Hero Deputy Christopher Chermis and Deputy Shawn Owens**

In December 2025, Deputy Christopher Chermis and Deputy Shawn Owens responded to a house fire in Victorville and learned an occupant was still inside. Without hesitation, Deputy Chermis forced entry through heavy smoke and heat, crawling into the burning home to search for victims while Deputy Owens prepared for extraction. Deputy Chermis located an unresponsive woman, briefly retreated for air, then reentered to bring her to safety. Deputy Owens provided immediate care as Deputy Chermis attempted to search for additional victims, but the rapidly deteriorating conditions ultimately prevented further entry. The rescued woman survived due to the deputies' heroic actions.

Presented by  Altura<sup>®</sup>  
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## **First Responder Hero Deputy Fire Chief Gregory Lyle**

In May 2025, a domestic terrorist attack occurred at the American Reproductive Center in Palm Springs. After a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device detonated in the clinic's parking lot, firefighters rushed to the scene and got to work extinguishing fire and evacuating civilians from the surrounding areas until everyone was withdrawn for fear of a possible secondary device. Unwilling to place others at risk going back into the area but wanting to address the concern to protect the clinic's embryos, Deputy Fire Chief Gregory Lyle and FBI Bomb Squad Chris Melzer volunteered to go themselves. After convincing the FBI to allow entry, Chief Lyle and Agent Melzer navigated the heavily damaged building to locate cryogenic tanks and attempted to restore power. With support from multiple agencies, the team ultimately reestablished electricity, preserving the embryos.

Presented by  J.J. Roofing



## **Service to the Armed Forces Hero** **Brian Barber, *Mission FISH***

Marine Corps Veteran Brian Barber transformed his own struggle with PTSD and depression into a mission to help others heal. After discovering peace and connection through fishing, Brian founded Mission FISH: Fishing, Interacting, Sharing & Healing in 2015, a 100% volunteer-supported nonprofit dedicated to providing recreational fishing therapy to veterans, active-duty service members, first responders and Gold Star families. More than 5,000 participants have benefited from the program, which blends recreation, community and access to mental health support in a stigma free environment. Brian's deeply personal commitment has created a powerful ripple effect across the Inland Empire, offering hope, camaraderie and renewed purpose to those most at risk. His leadership continues to help save lives and strengthen the military and first responder community.

Presented by 



## **Youth Hero** **Carter Sliney**

Carter Sliney, 13, has made a meaningful impact across Yucaipa through his compassion and community service. Recognized by Smiles 4 Seniors as their youngest honoree, he creates and delivers handmade cards to local senior centers, offering moments of joy and connection to older adults who may feel isolated. His commitment extends further through the “blessing bags” he assembles for unhoused individuals and local stray animals, filled with essential food and supplies. As a volunteer with the Yucaipa Animal Placement Society, he also assists with daily tasks and serves as their mascot, Yappy, helping promote pet adoption at community events. Carter's dedication to helping others continues to strengthen his community.

Presented by 



**Corporate Hero  
Fresh Up**

Fresh Up has been a Red Cross partner for the past four years, donating over \$250,000 in WingStop meal voucher cards to encourage blood donations in San Bernardino and Riverside Counties. Their support has boosted donor turnout, helping address critical blood shortages and strengthening community engagement around lifesaving blood collection efforts. This long-term commitment reflects their dedication to community preparedness and response.

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## WE SUPPORT OUR LOCAL HEROES

With gratitude, Altura recognizes the extraordinary individuals who make the Inland Empire a stronger, brighter place.



Check out our Impact Report: [AlturaCU.com](https://www.AlturaCU.com)



Congratulations to the 2026 Inland Empire Heroes for their outstanding courage.

DoubleTree by Hilton Claremont is grateful for your bravery!



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Congratulations to this year's  
honorees! You are true heroes in  
our communities!

Don & Donna Luginbill  
congratulate the 2026  
Inland Empire Heroes!



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# Regional Leadership

## American Red Cross Southern California Region | Leadership Team

**Sean Mahoney**, Regional Chief Executive Officer

**Malinda McDonald**, Chief Operating Officer

**Glenn Maddalon**, Regional Chief Development Officer

**Debbie Leahy**, Regional Disaster Program Officer

**Daniel Beighley**, Regional Service to the Armed Forces Director

**Christine Welch**, Regional Communications Director

**Debbie Pari**, Regional Volunteer Services Officer

**Becky Firey**, Executive Director (Orange County)

**Lois Beckman**, Executive Director (Riverside County)

**Yvette Baysinger**, Executive Director (San Bernardino County)

**Ann Anderson**, Director, Women, Infants & Children (WIC) Program

### **Board of Directors Riverside County**

Louise Borda (Chair)

Tempe Essell (Vice Chair)

Alan Brimmer

Patti Cheselske

Lashon Halley

Claude Hazan

Peggy Hernandez

Mike King

Martin Li

Brenda Lorenzi

Edward Monie

Diane Mar Wiesmann

George W. Wilkins

### **Board of Directors San Bernardino County**

Andrew Behnke (Chair)

Dora Mejia, PsyD (Vice Chair)

Michael Ramirez (Past Board Chair)

Eric Colunga

Amber Hidalgo

Shelby Nelson

Edward Ornelas

Danny Renko

Laura Tolbirt



## #IEHeroes



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Hero videos from today's event will be shared at  
YouTube.com/SoCalRedCross



Photos from today's event will be shared at  
Flickr.com/SoCalRedCross

**Nominations are accepted year-round at [redcross.org/ieheroes](https://redcross.org/ieheroes)**

## **American Red Cross**

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*Thank You!*

## Valued Community Partners



**American  
Red Cross**

## Mission

The American Red Cross prevents and alleviates human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors.

## Diversity Vision Statement

The American Red Cross aspires to be an organization fully committed to diversity and inclusion by creating and maintaining a diverse, high-performing workforce of employees and volunteers who reflect all communities we serve; by cultivating a collaborative, inclusive and respectful work environment that empowers all contributors; and by leveraging diverse partnerships — all of which helps to ensure culturally competent service delivery supported by effective community leadership and engagement.