

Enhancing Officer Wellness and Resiliency

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Abstract

Officer wellness and resiliency continue to rise as a significant concern within the profession of law enforcement and corrections, especially during these volatile times in which many are leaving the profession without completing an entire career. Unfortunately, too often, those that are fortunate to retire experience a diminished quality of life. All the significant external challenges to the profession require active personnel to meet. Unfortunately, studies illustrate alarming trends within these professions that require measures to address. This study intends to define the significant challenges facing the profession and its members through addressing the challenge where the most significant organizational transformation is required, with the leadership. Positive change, embracing a new culture of understanding, compassion, and commitment by one's leadership, and practical and proven support mechanisms go a long way in fostering the necessary support to develop an agency's personnel into resilient guardians of these noble professions.

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Law enforcement and corrections are some of the most challenging professions within modern society as the responsibilities placed upon those entrusted with the duties and responsibilities are immense. One requires officers to be counselors, mentors, leaders, social workers, guardians, often without the appropriate tools and support to maintain effectiveness, especially in an environment filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) (Anderson, Gisborne, & Holliday, 2012, pp. 5-9).

Both professions have inherent dangers. Many aspects of the job require a high level of diligence and vigilance from officers throughout their shifts. The constant need to function at a peak performance level is physically and mentally exhausting. The primary job duties, though essential, often contribute to physical and emotional stress, which can compromise an officer's ability to serve and protect effectively. Incessant exposure to cumulative stress and traumatic events can wreak havoc on this nation's public servants' bodies, minds, and lives. Maintaining their health and safety often requires a delicate balancing act.

This environment affects an officer's mental health, affecting one's ability to address the profession's current issues. Of the several challenges facing law enforcement: active shooter response, public transparency and public perception, officer recruitment and retention, immigration and sanctuary laws, and police use of force and de-escalation (Cappitelli, 2018) drive the requirement to adopt measures for an organization's leadership to demonstrate authentic and genuine concern for those in their charge.

An inability to drive a change in the organizational culture will continue to support various adverse psychological events, often induced by the mismanagement of stress, upon the profession's members. With a systemic inability to positively address the profession's challenges,

the increase in anxiety, a driving force for workplace stress, is seen in levels up to five times greater than in the general population (Lilly & Curry, 2020). This event drives a level of dissatisfaction in which up to 55% of members contemplate quitting daily or weekly (Shultz, 2020).

The routine exposure to some of the worst humanity can do to itself (Coates, 2019) creates significant tolls upon a member of the profession, and society gives little concern to the individuals' well-being and mental health. A culture that exists within the profession that promotes a warrior attitude with little regard to the effects upon the few willing to engage in the profession. This warrior attitude is a learned behavior initially experienced during law enforcement educational requirements and reinforced through agency training. What is the warrior mindset? In its most restrictive sense, it refers to the mental tenacity and attitude that officers, like soldiers, are taught to adopt in the face of a life-threatening struggle. In this context, the warrior mindset refers to a bone-deep commitment to survive a bad situation no matter the odds or difficulty, to not give up even when it is mentally and physically easier to do so (Dahlinger, 2014).

Addressing the culture to counter the profession's systemic issues is essential, especially in an environment where individuals desire to serve significantly over time. Through research, one identifies various programs that exist within organizations to decrease the stigma and build wellness through peer support, counseling, training, and most importantly, leadership support to assist those in need. Many of the programs in place have proven effective. In combination with professional mental health resources, the process of improving officer wellness and desired longevity in remaining in service and having a wholesome life after service is best supported.

Challenges Facing the Profession

One subjects law enforcement and corrections officers to numerous items that take the traditional external stressors to another level when internal or personal inputs exacerbate situations. Members of the profession inherit a culture of a warrior with unbending characteristics. This culture often contributes to the erosion of one's ability to react and manage the numerous negative and positive inputs on an individual's ability to maintain a healthy status quo.

According to The Guardian, corrections officers (COs) have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at more than double police officers and the general public rate. Recent statistics found that 34 percent of COs suffer from PTSD, compared to 14 percent of military veterans (Feld, 2018). One can consider PTSD taboo, as staff fears that the diagnosis can negatively affect their careers. Nevertheless, according to a study by a New Jersey police task force, the suicide rates of COs are twice as high as other law enforcement officers and the general public. Additionally, according to the American Addiction Center, COs have the highest mortality rate of any other occupation, including the highest rates of divorce, alcoholism, and domestic assault (Feld, 2018). Many COs live only 18 months after they retire, as their life expectancy is 59 compared to 75 for the national average. Under-staffing is a significant problem leading to prison assaults. However, hiring and retaining qualified, capable officer is a problem all its own. Geoffrey Klopp, president of the Correctional Officers Association of Delaware, said that raising salaries to a competitive level for COs could attract qualified applicants (Feld, 2018).

This analysis focuses on the effects of the negative outputs or main self-destructive behaviors that erode one's ability to have a long and successful career and a healthy post-career.

The items of particular interest are suicide, alcohol or substance abuse, domestic violence or divorce, and physical health concerns or issues.

Stress-Induced Self-destructive Behavior

When one looks at the behavior patterns with the most remarkable effects and challenges to the members, three challenges are of primary concern to safeguard its personnel. First, suicide, alcoholism, and divorce rates are some of the highest within society as the profession is such a small portion of the population.

Within professions as diverse as law enforcement and corrections, the solution to the challenges lies within, most notably, with the leadership. However, true servant leaders, with a passion and commitment to developing their subordinates, committed to transforming the culture to understand the structure of the past profession is not sustainable in the future.

Through engagement with their personnel, leaders can create immediate changes in the overall well-being of their personnel. This enhanced attention to the primary concerns of the profession tackles the challenges. In addition, it creates mechanisms to best support one's personnel from the onset of service, being proactive and utilizing advances in technology and processes best accepted by most of the workforce.

Suicide. When one puts people in a high-stress profession coupled with the stigma and roadblocks to seeking help, individuals often feel there is no way out. Suicide continues to be one of the most significant challenges to the profession. Unmitigated stressors upon members of the profession lead to many taking their own lives annually. As of September 2021, the law enforcement profession reported 99 officer suicides (BLUE HELP, 2021).

According to a University of California, Berkeley Study in 2018, correctional officers are at high risk for depression, PTSD, and suicide. The study, which focuses on California state

prisons, and a survey conducted in 2017 showed that 10% of correctional officers said they had considered taking their own life. Among adults in the US, about 3% reported having suicidal thoughts, while retired correctional officers, according to the study, reported a rate of 31% (Barr & Thomas, 2019). In addition, according to the study, about 1 in 3 are dealing with PTSD or depression. Additionally, about half of the correctional officers surveyed reporting that they feel unsafe at work.

Alcoholism. One finds alcohol abuse to be at a higher rate than in the general population. Rates of alcohol consumption are 55% higher. In conjunction with the new statistics about abuse, create an entirely new subsection of personnel in the profession with a problem. The problem centers around the stigma of self-care, a machismo attitude of denying there is a problem with coping. Studies show that one uses alcohol to the point of abuse to dull the issues or problems.

Those doing research have debated the many reasons why police officers have an elevated alcohol consumption. Most researchers believe there are two main underlying issues. Those being social and work stress issues that cause the increase in drinking. These stressors could include poor community relations and administrative problems (Ranes, 2015). Most officers will admit they feel the need to drink to “fit in”. This particularly comes into play when we understand and realize that police officers spend large amounts of their off-duty time with other police officers (2015).

There is general belief that people suffering from these stressors have not found an appropriate way to process their trauma so instead they turn to drugs or alcohol as a way to cope. The lack of training or awareness on how to deal with these issues further supports the theory that officers consume more alcohol to put the pain and suffering behind them.

According to research published within the Journal of Criminal Justice, conducting regular critical incident debriefs and implementing day to day coping activities has greatly reduced the problem drinking behaviors associated with traumatic events (Swatt, Gibson, & Piquero, 2007). This is where an agency's employee assistance plan (EAP) comes into play. Having an EAP in place to assist employees with little problems before they turn into large problems, benefits everyone.

Officers who do not deal with the stressors or anxiety in a proper way most likely with professional treatment will be adversely affected by decreased work productivity, increased mental health issues and social dysfunction (Ranes, 2015).

Divorce and domestic violence. Divorce and domestic violence continue to plague a profession that should not be an issue through its function. As society has now come to the knowledge that domestic violence is a severe preventable crime, one expects those responsible for protecting others are not prone to violating the law. However, domestic violence by law enforcement officers has become a controversial topic among researchers, professionals, and the media.

Domestic violence by law enforcement and corrections officers includes, but is not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse. The extent of domestic violence by law enforcement officers is still unknown because police officers hold a special place in society, assuming they will always obey all laws and regulations. A study on the extent and nature of domestic violence by officers that 4.8 percent of the officers admitted that they engaged in domestic violence and that 7.4 percent reported having been a victim of domestic violence (Klein & Klein, 2000).

Additional studies illustrate that 54 percent of the officers surveyed knew of an officer who engaged in domestic violence. This study also showed that 10 percent of respondents admitted that they had engaged in acts of violence toward a spouse or intimate partner, including slapping and punching (Ryan, n.d.). Two studies by Neidig and his colleagues showed a domestic violence rate of 40 percent within the survey group of regular officers and a 24 percent domestic violence rate with individuals of a higher rank (Neidig, 1992).

Culture Change with Organizational Leaders

Police and corrections leaders need to lead by example. They need to be physically present and as close to the officers as possible to mitigate ongoing harm at the moment. They should be nimble, adapt in real-time, and focus on making connections, keeping relationships alive, and seeking out disconnected and withdrawn.

The reality is that everyone is struggling at some level at this time. The art is for leaders to have the skillset and desire to recognize changes with those in their charge. This mentality starts by leading by example.

As leaders, if we expect our officers to seek mental health treatment, we must be willing to do so. Moreover, leaders should be transparent and honest about it, which will normalize seeking mental health treatment. This attitude change would be a paradigm shift for many departments, but any change to an organization requires legitimate and real buy-in from the leadership of that organization. By making mental health and wellness a regular part of police operations and the department's culture, police leaders can increase the comfort that members of their agency have with mental health professionals. In addition, when leadership sends a consistent message of support, individual and agency response to crises will improve, leading to an agency that thrives (Lexipol, 2020).

Change in any organization is difficult as people enjoy the status quo and are reluctant to change; the more significant the change, the greater its reluctance. Therefore, when considering any sizeable cultural change such as employee wellness programs or mandatory guided therapy sessions, it is imperative that one has open conversations with all affected employees and creates a well-thought-out change management plan. If put into the proper perspective, employees will accept change if they see it as improving performance or objectives (Harrington, 2019).

Department mission and vision statements often go unchanged for decades while the community standards, expectations, and officer needs have changed drastically. We are all witnessing a significant change concerning community engagement and officer wellness, and resiliency. As one has increasingly vilified the expected behaviors of the job, the profession has lacked the necessary tools or resources to cope effectively. As we strive to enhance officer wellness and resiliency, we must align our organizational values with our behaviors. When organizational values, missions, and goals mean different things to different individuals, organizations decrease alignment, co-activity, and understanding of what the organization is trying to achieve (Long, 2019).

By investing in officer wellness, law enforcement agencies can improve trust and community relations. Evidence shows that the individual actions of police officers have the most significant impact on a community's perception of police legitimacy. As seen with the Stockton Police Department, officer wellness goals connect with its emphasis on procedural justice and police legitimacy, or what it calls principled policing organizational theory (Rego, 2020).

When officers deal with adverse reactions to stress better, they employ procedural justice in their community better. Procedural justice is individuals' sense that police handle the procedure of a situation justly. The creation of positive outcomes results when citizens feel they

have a voice during the incident and believe that the officer is neutral, respectful, and trustworthy. In turn, this leads to more positive community contacts, fewer negative interactions, and less stress. In addition, less officer perceived stress results in an increased perception of job satisfaction that promotes a higher quality work environment (Rego, 2020).

Self-management, Awareness, and Personal Wellness Development

Within a profession as diverse as law enforcement and corrections, the solution to the challenges lies within, most notably, with the leadership. However, true servant leaders, with a passion and commitment to developing their subordinates, are committed to transforming the culture to understand that the past structure is not sustainable in the future (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2021, pp. 171-172).

Generally speaking, police and correctional officers are reluctant to seek help as they are like many others who work in the helping professions; officers are used to being the helpers—not looking to someone else for assistance. One of the most severe consequences of this attitude toward seeking help is the sad fact that more police officers have died by suicide than were killed in the line of duty for the last three years (Schlosser & Kudrick, n.d.). Officer wellness programs, including suicide prevention efforts, are designed to help police officers maintain optimal mental health; these programs also encourage officers to seek professional help when warranted. Unfortunately, one of the significant barriers to officers seeking help from a mental health professional is the stigma around the concept. Addressing a previously undiscussed aspect of that stigma carries the hope of increasing the likelihood that police officers seek mental health treatment.

Through engagement with their personnel, leaders can create immediate changes in the overall well-being of their personnel. This enhanced attention to the primary concerns of the

profession tackles the challenges. In addition, it creates mechanisms to best support one's personnel from the onset of service, being proactive and utilizing advances in technology and processes best accepted by the majority of the workforce.

4 Pillars of Individual Wellness and Maintenance

While law enforcement agencies implemented numerous wellness programs throughout the nation, a key component to its success is assigning the right person to the management position. Understanding the importance and value behind embracing comprehensive wellness programs is essential in developing value to the system and process ((Edmonds, 2018). By assigning a role model, or individual trusted and believed, to head up the health and wellness program, credibility towards its actual value is enhanced.

Wellness programs should embrace the four physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual pillars to best provide for their personnel. By addressing each of these components, law enforcement professionals can maintain the high bar of wellness required to attain the position, as the focus needs to be on continued effective service through and after retirement (Edmonds, 2018).

A wellness program can no longer focus on just the physical fitness aspect. By remaining fit physically through the ability to push, pull, or throw weights around in a room, has positive results. Nevertheless, by focusing solely on the physical fitness of oneself, one may find oneself lacking in the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a well-rounded health and wellness program.

Comprehensive wellness programs describe mental fitness as never stopping learning about being a better law enforcement officer and spouse or family member (Edmonds, 2018).

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Remaining engaged in learning, personally growing in one's knowledge and wisdom supports being a well-rounded and grounded professional in an ever-changing world.

Maintaining emotional fitness is when a law enforcement officer can be vulnerable around the people who love and have their best interests in mind. Developing self-awareness of how one can address challenges in their personal and professional life is essential. As illustrated within this research, the availability of self-awareness apps and programs assists in growing one's self-awareness. Understanding one's contributions to life challenges are vital as one must understand the other end of this spectrum and continue to practice remaining tactically invulnerable to those who do not have one's best interest in mind (Edmonds, 2018). Valuing and supporting those close and supportive of an individual's calling to the profession and its challenges is essential in countering the factors that will continue to attack and attempt to erode one's resiliency.

Enhancing one's spiritual fitness does not necessarily mean balance in religion but instead tuning in to one's moral compass. Spirituality has always been part of humanity and one's place in society (Edmonds, 2018). As a professional, the answering of a higher calling to service promotes the need to maintain one's moral compass, continually seek magnanimity, and commit to a life of values and character.

By being well-balanced in these four pillars, one develops the mechanisms to develop balance to maintain a fruitful and productive career. Management of challenges systemically through one's career enables one to be better able to enjoy longevity in their careers and, more importantly, be supportive of an ability to enjoy their well-deserved retirement.

Peer Support Programs

Law enforcement agencies and corrections personnel faced numerous circumstances in the past couple of years, from COVID-19 to the civil unrest that has plagued our Metropolitan communities and our nation. Unfortunately, these circumstances have left many victims in their wake. These victims include those who have been directly affected by illness and their loved ones. Also included are the first responders that dealt directly with the pandemic and the law enforcement officers who dealt with the civil unrest.

Implementation of peer support groups is beginning to evolve within some law enforcement communities. Some organizations understand the toxicity of the "suck it up" culture and its exacerbated the profession's challenges. Realizing the officers' exposure to repetitive trauma on a day-to-day basis has long-lasting effects not only on their careers but, more importantly, in their personal lives (Greco, 2021).

When implementing a peer support program in one's agency, members of the program can be from licensed positions and unlicensed positions. A program coordinator chosen from amongst its members must be well trusted. The administration chose their program coordinator within the Crow Wing Sheriff's Office due to his psychology background before entering his law enforcement career. Peers chose the other members of the program.

The members who expressed interest in becoming part of the peer support team provided letters of interest. The members then took a survey of whom they believed they could trust with confidential information. The top three members of the office that were chosen and agreed to be part of the program's team.

This peer support team works closely with a psychologist that has contracted with the Sheriff's office. The office requires its members to attend one mandatory meeting annually with

the psychologist. Each member is also allowed six other meetings with the psychologist as needed. The feedback received from the members has been positive, and they look forward to their meetings throughout the year. Additionally, these benefits are not limited to agency employees but also the members' spouses.

The members of the peer support team continue to attend ongoing training and peer support team development. This in-service activity continues refining one's skills and assists them with their professional maintenance to avoid staleness and burnout (Ridgeway, 2021).

Employee Assistance Program

An employee assistance program (EAP) is an intervention-based program designed and implemented to assist employees in various aspects of both work and personal life. This program can offer employees services to aid and promote healthier lifestyles and a better work-life balance (Johnston, 2021). These programs generally offer masters-level experienced counselors who can work collectively with employees to identify their areas of concern or existing issues and determine the best resources available to assist in coping or correcting the issues at hand. EAPs can also assist in managing workplace conflict and resolution. The program aims to encourage employees and those around them to seek help before minor problems worsen (2021).

EAPs guide employees and employers. The program provides a high level of support in addressing issues including but not limited to: Marital problems, substance abuse, high-risk activities, self-destruction, financial struggles, family issues, crisis and trauma, suicide, and career burnout (Johnston, 2021).

The design of EAPs is primarily to help individuals of an organization, but they are also beneficial to employers. Businesses that utilize EAPs have reported positive outcomes, including increased job satisfaction and improved employee retention, which are two of the biggest

challenges that law enforcement agencies currently face and that many other employers see regularly (Johnston, 2021).

Developing and implementing an EAP. For agencies currently without an EAP in place, bringing this on board could be a long and daunting task for the organization. The positive engagement by the organization's leadership creates the internal support processes necessary to ensure successful implementation. Several variables need addressing when planning for this type of change, making the program complete, confidential, inviting, and appealing to employees to attract their interest (Johnston, 2021).

The various tasks and requirements require the agency to ensure the right personnel is engaged in the process. The development of a committee that includes supportive leaders throughout the organization, including members of the Human Resources Department, is also needed to adopt the appropriate system.

Agencies must determine their requirements and weigh them against adopting an internally or externally controlled process. While some organizations are large enough to support the internal process, the external models continue to be the primary program due to the increased perception of privacy as individuals run the program not from within the rank and file (Johnston, 2021).

The implementation of any program requires the buy-in from key executives, city or county councils and administrators, or commissions to create the funding support for the chosen program, whether it is internal or externally managed. Transformative and visionary leaders, fully supportive of the vision and intent, are required to promote the messaging and theming to garner those required to fund and support the desired program.

As with any new program, one requires a positive change to promote its use within the organization. Through periodic reviews and surveys, the organization and program coordinators can adjust systems and products as required to gain the best effect needed in genuinely supporting the employees (Johnston, 2021). As seen within other organizations, ensuring one's privacy is paramount in getting the personnel to participate in the program. The promotion of positive experiences by leaders, whether formal or informal, drives the program's acceptance and creates the required change mechanism in promoting self-awareness and early intervention in managing challenges in one's life.

Use of Media Applications

The use of social media applications is becoming more and more prevalent. The applications that one can download to members' smartphones can provide them the care they may need at a moment's notice. Accessing these applications on their smartphones can also remove the stigma that they may feel when needing help. Using these systems, one creates a support mechanism to their self-awareness and resiliency to understand better when they are falling into crisis or need more professional support.

Anonymous self-services support countering some of the stigma associated with seeking help. Programs such as these intend to enhance one's ability to manage challenges earlier in life or career. Additionally, through self-help, individuals may be more apt to seek additional help or support once the value of self-help applications is genuinely noticed and appreciated.

Of particular note is Lighthouse, a social media application specifically designed to provide first responders and those that support them with anonymous access to existing health and wellness programs in their area. Through the website www.lighthousehw.org, one receives a

program that is readily accessible via the internet and smartphones, literally putting assistance at one's fingertips (Lighthouse.org, 2021).

Cordico Wellness Apps, another social media application, is confidential, available 24/7, easy to use and customized for law enforcement agencies of every size. These apps provide law enforcement with powerful wellness resources, self-assessments, peer support, instructional videos, geo-mapping of vetted providers, one-touch calling, and on-demand tools targeting critical incidents, depression, insomnia, marital problems, trauma, suicide risk, and much more. "This is a great win," said Police Chief John Carli. "It combines the best national wellness resources with the best local resources and peer support and puts these tools directly in the hands of officers" (Lexipol, 2021).

Mentorship Programs

Recently the number of retirements and members of law enforcement leaving the profession has had a profound impact on agencies throughout the nation. As a result, retaining quality officers/deputies has become a large part of an administration's day-to-day duties.

Taking a new officer/deputy that is currently going through the field training officer (FTO) process and providing him/her with a mentor assists with managing the stressors of today's climate when beginning their law enforcement career. Too often, newly assigned officers, for a variety of reasons, are reluctant to be open and transparent with their FTO due to the assigned work relationship. Within particular agencies, one noticed that promising recruits, without a positive outlet to verbalize fears and concerns, too often are left with leaving for an inability to address the concerns, as one can view it as retribution.

Becoming a mentor is very consistent with that of becoming a member of the peer support team. A mentor is an individual assigned to teach, help, or advise the less experienced

officer/deputy. The members of the agency that become mentors should have proven themselves as informal leaders within the department. An informal leader is a leader who can provide positivity in their work and share their knowledge with others, especially new employees.

The mentor's responsibilities are to assist the mentee with mapping out a career plan, building self-confidence, and guiding to personal and professional challenges that the mentee may share. The meetings between the mentor and mentee are highly confidential. Confidentiality is paramount between the two so that one establishes trust. The only time one shares information with the supervisor is if the safety and well-being of the mentee, the public, or another member of the office are at risk (Crow Wing Sheriff's Office, 2021).

Conclusion

The profession needs strong leadership that is compassionate, supportive, and sympathetic. To help smash the stigma, all leaders, from top to bottom, need to be engaged. All must remain clear with the mission and purpose. This profession is a righteous mission, and right now, it is under attack, which undermines the resilience of those on the front lines. The more all can do at all levels, from recruitment to retirement, to best support the righteous mission of serving and protecting, requires being there for those who need help.

Organizations and leaders must constantly review and implement changes to training and expectations to enhance officer productivity, wellness, and resiliency. The environment that law enforcement agencies work in is volatile, complex, and uncertain, requiring adaptive decision-making for successful outcomes. Dugan (2019) states, "Effective leaders are compelled to continually improvise, innovate, and adapt to our changing circumstances deliberately."

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