

## **Law Enforcement Employee Wellness**

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### Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to identify the issues that affect employee wellness, and what programs or actions a leader within the organization can take to improve employee wellness. An increase in police suicides nationwide demonstrates the need for proactive employee wellness programs. There are many factors that impact the physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological wellbeing of police officers as it is recognized as one of the most stressful jobs in the United States. As discussed by Gilmartin (2002) and Violanti (2007) research showed police officer's suicide rate is 3 times the national average, and male police officers have a suicide rate 8.3 times that of homicide, and 3 times that of work-related accidents. This study will seek to identify causes of police suicides. It will also examine factors, if any, that can help reduce police suicides. We will explore programs that can be used to improve overall employee wellness. The development of employee assistance units, peer support groups, and other formal and informal programs have proven very successful. The Law Enforcement profession needs to continue to seek outside resources, mental health professionals, and real commitment organizationally for these programs to be used by police personnel. As Law Enforcement leaders we will also seek to identify ways to break the stigma associated with seeking assistance for cumulative trauma and overcome barriers to treatment. The elimination of the stigma and shame of suffering from mental health disorders must be at the forefront of this discussion. To do anything less, is simply unacceptable.

### **Law Enforcement Employee Wellness**

Law Enforcement is a difficult profession and one in which few who begin are fortunate enough to see through to a full retirement. According to Violanti (2014), policing has long been one of the most stressful occupations in the United States. Inherent stressors include threats to the officer's physical or psychological well-being giving them the highest potential for cumulative psychological trauma (Violanti, 2014). Not many professions demand that an employee goes from an innocuous public contact to a fatal collision, then mediate a domestic violence incident or a family dispute. Additionally, police officers are expected to act within the law, remove their personal feelings and conform to the expectations placed upon them by the organization, community, and their peers. As a result of these stressors, and repeated exposure to traumatic situations, Law Enforcement officers are at a higher risk of experiencing cumulative psychological trauma and suicidal ideations.

The Law Enforcement profession has historically failed to focus on the development of skills to survive the emotional aspects of a police career rather than the development of skills to survive physical assaults (Gilmartin, 2002). The profession has bred a culture that carries a stigma associated with seeking professional assistance for job-related stress and cumulative trauma. Many police officers will not openly admit they were bothered by a call for service or incident, and would rather seek other unproductive ways to cope. This can be detrimental to the officer's personal health, social, and professional lives. As Gilmartin (2002) noted, the suicide rate for police officers is three times the national average. This is a shocking reality that Law Enforcement leaders have ignored for far too long. There are many methods for Law

Enforcement leaders to have an impact on employee wellness to reduce the probability of police suicides, and ensure their employees have long, fruitful careers.

### **Literature Review**

There are several studies that identify the problem of police suicide. The data show that those in the Law Enforcement profession have a higher risk of suicide than those in a non public-safety profession. A study by Violanti (2007) focused on male police officers, due to Law Enforcement being a disproportionately male dominated profession. Violanti (2007) found that male police officers have a suicide rate of 8.3 times that of homicide and 3 times that of work-related accidents. Compared to municipal workers, male police officers had a 53 percent increased rate of suicide over homicide (Violanti, 2007). The two questions Law Enforcement leaders should ask themselves are: what factors are contributing to a significant increased risk of police suicides? Is the police agency doing enough to address or reduce these factors to impact overall employee wellness?

To understand the risks associated with police suicide, one must first understand the dynamics, and the culture of the profession. In addition to risk of assault, injury, and exposure to traumatic situations, organizational practices can be the source of employee stress. Among these stressors are the authoritarian structure, lack of participation in decisions affecting daily work tasks, lack of administrative support, a punishment-centered philosophy, and unfair discipline (Violanti, 2007). Internal stress caused by the agency's work environment can also be a significant factor leading to increased risk of police suicide. Additionally, the culture of the Law Enforcement profession can prevent officers from seeking help. As discussed by Violanti (2014), officers often have difficulty in expressing emotions namely because there is a lack of an

outlet to vent feelings outside of work, mental health risk factors include a lack of diversion from their police role, inadequate social support networks, and emotional exhaustion.

Police officers are exposed to traumatic events regularly, with little or no time to process or decompress from these events. The police culture can also lead officers to feel the need to be impenetrable. In turn, these officers do not expect to feel vulnerable. When they do feel vulnerable it brings feelings of shame, fear, and a heightened sense of danger (Violanti, 2007). Furthermore, when these feelings are shattered, there is an increased likelihood of suicidal ideations. As discussed by Violanti (2014), police officers can experience critical incidents capable of eliciting acute and chronic posttraumatic stress reactions repeatedly over the course of their decades long careers resulting in cumulative trauma. With little to no support, department induced stress, coupled with cumulative trauma, and a culture that does not encourage addressing these issues, police leadership needs to be pro-active in reducing factors contributing to police suicides.

As Gilmartin (2002) asserts, there does not appear to be a systematic recognition by agencies of officers and the emotional toll of police work, and its contributing affect on self-destructive behavior. This self-destructive behavior can impact the employee's physical and emotional health. They can engage in unhealthy activity such as chronic alcohol use and risky behavior such as gambling or extra marital relationships. A well-rounded employee wellness program will seek to affect overall employee wellness, which includes addressing police officer's off-duty health. Police officers can also experience stress at home, shut down emotions toward their families, leading to detachment, feeling powerless, helpless, and depressed (Violanti, 2007). Police suicide risk factors can dramatically increase for employees who are

experiencing job-related stress, as well as family, financial or marital problems. Therefore, Law Enforcement employee wellness programs should not be shortsighted, and should seek to address the entirety of issues that affect their employee's health and wellness because of the profession.

### **Mental Health Treatment Stigma in Law Enforcement**

Barriers to mental health treatment within the Law Enforcement profession are significant. Despite some agencies' efforts to increase access via peer support and confidential treatment options, the rate at which officers actually utilize these resources remains well below the number of officers who could benefit. Jetelina et al. (2020) surveyed 434 officers and found that 38 percent reported experiencing some form of recent mental illness such as anxiety, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideations. Among these officers experiencing mental illness, only 17% had sought recent treatment, leaving 83% untreated. The reasons for not seeking treatment were also surveyed. They included lack of awareness of the mental illness, concerns about confidentiality amongst their employers, the stigma that mental illness would render them unfit for duty, and that they should be able to handle any situation they face without it leading to mental health difficulties.

Fox et al. (2012) conducted a study of an urban police department and found similar results. Among 150 surveyed officers, 52% reported symptoms of mental illness, including PTSD, depression, and alcohol abuse. Among these officers, only 46% had ever sought mental health treatment. Self-reported barriers to treatment included a lack of confidentiality, perceived negative impact on career, stigmas related to mental health treatment, with only a small percentage reporting that they were unsure how to access treatment.

Research consistently shows that access to mental health treatment is not typically the largest barrier associated with Law Enforcement seeking mental health treatment. Rather, fears associated with the treatment itself tends to be the largest inhibitor to officers seeking treatment; including stigma, perceived prejudice against those who seek treatment, and other potentially negative consequences that may result. The consequences of not seeking treatment are significant, not only for the individual but also for the organization. Individually, the consequences include increased stress, depression, suicide, family conflict and divorce, reduction in work performance, and many others. For organizations, the consequences of not treating mental illness among employees are also significant. Fox et al. (2012) determined that in comparison to officers not experiencing mental illness, those experiencing mental illness had significantly more difficulty in managing their time, performing physical tasks, interacting with people, and completing tasks. Studies have yet to examine in-depth how mental illness among officers may correlate with use of force, citizen complaints, and violations of policy. However, the issue of officers having difficulty interacting with others and/or completing tasks are often the basis of internal affairs investigations and regularly lead to disciplinary or liability issues within departments. Additionally, negative contacts with the public can ultimately lead to an erosion of public trust.

To address the stigma and fears of negative consequences resulting from seeking mental health treatment, Law Enforcement agencies need to take proactive steps to ensure these barriers are eliminated. To do so, the concerns identified in the research as barriers must be addressed. Agencies can begin by addressing any underlying issues in policy that may discourage seeking care. This may include references to fitness for duty that are overly broad and may impact

perception of mental health treatment as well as requirements to provide prescription information to the department even in situations where it does not impact performance. Second, the department must actively encourage employees to seek mental health treatment if needed and make this a regular part of the conversation. The frequent reminders at all levels of the department, will demonstrate the department's acceptance of those who may need treatment, and the ongoing encouragement serves of a reminder of this support. To the extent possible, open discussion by those who have sought, and benefitted from treatment should be encouraged. Lastly, departments can re-examine their policies on mental health treatment or evaluation after critical incidents. Encouraging or even mandating group or individual evaluations after significant incidents, as defined by policy, removes the stigma of employees seeking this treatment on their own. If they are required, or at minimum strongly encouraged, to attend an individual or group debrief of a critical incident with a psychologist, over time, the stigma of mental health treatment will be reduced.

### **Wellness Programs**

#### **Peer Support Teams**

The quickest response by a department to an employee suffering from mental anguish after a critical incident is the use of a peer support team. Peer support teams can trace their lineage to a psychiatric hospital, Bicêtre Hospital in Paris, where the governor of the hospital, Jean Baptiste Pussin, saw that employing recovered patients as hospital staff created a unique connection between patient and staff (Davidson et. al., 1999). The peer support staff could relate to what the patients were going through and per Davidson et al. (1999), the staff was, gentle, honest, and humane.



Unfortunately, peer support teams would not find their way into Law Enforcement until the 1990's. After 21 suicides over a two-year period, the New York Police Department (NYPD) created a peer support team of 50 officers to help address the gap between the officers and psychological services (Coventry Police Department, 2021, para. 1). The NYPD recognized officers were not utilizing psychological services because of the “fear of being stigmatized and disciplined or having career goals disrupted.” (Coventry Police Department, 2021, para. 1). Nowadays we are seeing more police agencies creating peer support teams. Most teams are part time and voluntary. Services provided by peer support teams are extended to not only the employee, but also the employee's immediate family. Just like the former patients of the Bicêtre Hospital in Paris, peer support staff can relate to the stressors that officers are faced with. Officers seem to be more willing to speak peer to peer after exposure to a traumatic incident.

### **Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)**

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) have been around since the 1940's. EAP is the most common form of employee wellness and support programs. EAP is sponsored by the employer and offers other assistance such as finance, and marriage counseling. Johnson (2012) states that EAP has been underutilized due to the “dual client relationship” (para. 4) John Darr went on to say that EAP professionals have a “delicate balance between serving the needs of the employee and goals of the employer” (para. 1).

It should not be shocking to hear that Law Enforcement officers have trust issues. As Johnson (2012) stated, it is the “nature of the beast,” and “Cops are lied to, in-turn they do not believe anyone is being truthful. Police culture centers on trust and solidarity. Trust is not something given freely to others, especially those seen as outsiders” (para. 12). Hopefully with

the recent revelations that celebrities such as Michael Phelps and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, have publicly acknowledged their battles with mental illness, and how they have sought professional help; we will see more and more Law Enforcement professionals taking advantage of EAP.

### **Department Mandated Mental Health Checkups**

The battle with the stigma of EAP use has led some Law Enforcement agencies to implement mandatory mental health checkups. For example, the Plymouth, Minnesota Police Department implemented the Check Up from the Neck Up program, which requires officers to meet with a mental health practitioner at least once per year (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019). Other agencies like Las Vegas Metro and Lansing, Michigan are following Plymouth’s lead. However, agencies contemplating implementing a program such as mandatory mental health checkups need to move forward cautiously. If not done right, Law Enforcement officers will view the program as obligatory and will not take it seriously. There will be a lack of trust, and fear that if the officer reveals problems they could be placed on modified duty or removed from special assignments.

As an organization, senior leadership needs to look at the big picture that providing professional help could save lives. As noted Police Executive Research Forum (2019), Dr. John Mann of Columbia University Medical Center wrote:

Police work is stressful. And you can’t reduce the stress that officers have to work under, because that’s the job. They take risks that the average person does not have to take. But police officers will respond to treatment for depression like everyone else does. As psychologists, our goal is to keep the ones that we think are a suicide

risk out of depression. The suicide risk drops dramatically when people's depression gets better. And when a depressed person is feeling cheerful and okay, they can cope with stress the same as anybody else. Our goal in treatment is to make them as resilient as the person who hasn't had recurrent episodes of depression. (p. 34)

### **Wellness Tools**

Recently, wellness tools such as the Cordico Shield Mobile Wellness Application, and the Crisis Text Line have found their way into Law Enforcement agencies. These tools are easy to use, and confidential for both officers and their families. These self-help tools reduce the stigma of seeking mental health as discussed earlier in this paper. The Roseville Police Department has contracted with Cordico Shield to provide support and services to our employees. Cordico Shield gives officers access to a wide range of wellness programs, and services on their phone or other mobile device. For example, the "Wellness Toolkit" in the application includes information about family support, financial fitness, healthy habits, psychological first aid, marriage guidance, and other topics. (Cordico Shield, 2021).

Although the Cordico Shield Application allows anonymity, the Roseville Police Department noticed their officers were not taking advantage of the program. They then decided to mail a 3x5 card designed by Cordico to the spouses of their officers explaining the program. As a result, they started seeing the usage of the Cordico application increase. Similarly, the Crisis Text Line provides convenient access in a 24/7 text-messaging program where trained counselors respond to Law Enforcement professionals that text "Blue" to 741741. As stated in

Police Executive Research Forum (2019), the counselors are trained in reflective listening, collaborative problem solving, and crisis management.

### **Leadership and Employee Wellness**

The ability to have positive influence within any organization is the leadership challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is particularly true for Police Chiefs and command staff across the country – when dealing with employee mental health disorders. Of particular concern for all Law Enforcement agencies globally is the inherent need for employee wellness support programs and the well-being of our personnel, both professional staff and sworn. Law Enforcement is still faced with unprecedented anti-policing rhetoric, calls for defunding, and other social-economic uncertainties that undermines the policing profession. No wonder suicide is the leading cause of death for police officers and continues to rise annually. Police officers are retiring at record numbers and younger officers leaving Law Enforcement for other careers have become the norm. According to Police Magazine (2020), the Mayor of Seattle stated, “we are losing an unprecedented number of officers, which makes it even more critical that we recruit and retain officers committed to reform and community policing that reflect the diversity and values of our city” (para. 4). During these challenging times, leaders must demonstrate authentic and legacy leadership traits. Policing must confront these issues with integrity while providing a shared vision of optimism for our employees, community and other stakeholders.

Moreover, we must renew our focus on employee wellness in a purposeful way. It starts with employee wellness programs, support groups, and deliberate and meaningful actions from within the organization to deal with police suicide.

During Command College, police personnel from all ranks learned the value of developing the anti-fragile employee through the National Command & Staff College, MAGNUS training curriculum (2020). The development of the MAGNUS officer mindset is a personal acceptance of the virtuous values placed upon police officers as public servants. The desire, development, and skills of a MAGNUS officer require intrinsic motivation to achieve wellness. This will bring personal resiliency, anti-fragility and foster personal well-being. In addition, this will help develop internal emotional coping skills to achieve an overall balance with work and family life. This new way of leadership will influence a positive culture that enhances teamwork while minimizing organizational conflict.

### **Early Intervention and Prevention as a part of Employee Wellness**

The proactive approach to risk mitigation starts with the leadership mentality with all employees, regardless of classification or rank. Organizationally, we must instill that everyone is a leader. Every employee brings value with a shared vision of responsibility, trust, and a caring attitude to the workplace. These are important leadership and management principles that are key to early intervention.

The use of a risk management matrix is a vital tool for early intervention. According to Graham (2017), risk management considerations as part of early intervention strategies include the following:

- The need for organizations to seek continuous improvement.
- The need to hire the best people.
- The ability for supervisors to spot issues before they become problems.
- The organization's ability to have a healthy respect for the dangers and risks they face.

- The ability to establish performance metrics and accountability.

The ability for an organization to learn from its mistakes is critical to intervention and it is part of the cultural change. These principles allow for mistakes while understanding learning from those mistakes is part of accountability. More importantly, risk management strategies can be effective as an early warning system that allows for intervention for monitoring critical incidents and other high stress incidents. The development of key Emotional Intelligence (EI) skills allows for early intervention, counseling, and other performance enhancing training. In addition, the development of EI skills within law enforcement will lead to better interactions both internally and externally. Thus, reducing employee conflict, citizen complaints, absenteeism and other workplace issues.

The ability to learn, grow, and make mistakes provides employees an atmosphere where a sense of trust, respect, and understanding is evident. This is not an easy culture to develop within any organization and is extremely difficult within Law Enforcement. As leaders in 21<sup>st</sup> century policing, we must create these cultures within our organizations if we are going to develop, mentor, and coach a culture of caring within Law Enforcement. Admittedly, times are rapidly changing and the Law Enforcement culture of the past must change as well. We must value our employees and it starts with their well-being. We achieve this through effective employee wellness programs.

### **Effective Communication is Essential to Employee Wellness**

The stigma of police mental health disorders, PTSD, and suicide require a commitment and demonstrated openness by all police professionals, from Chief to Rank and File. Effective communication is critical to conflict management and team building. To bring true awareness

and acceptance to the unique challenges of our profession – communication will be critical. The openness and sincerity from all police executives will set the tone, period. In recent times, public safety professionals have embraced open lines of communication, which have allowed agencies to embrace two-way organizational communication, allowing for openness, transparency and trust building. This openness has proven to have a profound impact on employee wellness and well-being. This transparency and openness is helping to remove the stigma and build trust so employees feel supported and understood when they are seeking professional services to deal with mental health challenges. By providing timely, confidential support services internally or externally, police personnel feel a sense of empowerment, understanding and trust. In essence, this is a critical part of the succession planning process.

All Law Enforcement leaders must realize that effective communication is critical to their organization, community and employees. Law Enforcement professionals must develop a real understanding and appreciation for employee mental health disorders. Support for employee wellness begins when there is no judgment, and actions are congruent with our words. Collectively, all ranks must show a genuine willingness to support each other, without judgment. This understanding opens employee communication that influences organizational wellness and employee well-being. These are important human factors that enhance anti-fragility within our workforce.

### **Conclusion**

All Law Enforcement leaders, regardless of rank, must understand the mental, psychological, cognitive, and emotional trauma experienced by all police professionals. Police suicides are 3 times the national average due to a variety of sources of stress involved with the

Law Enforcement career. The Law Enforcement culture includes a stigma associated with seeking assistance for mental health issues, which is likely a contributing factor to police suicides. As Law Enforcement leaders, we can impact and change the culture of our organizations. Treatment without judgment is the foundation for a thriving and successful organization. The key to all employee wellness starts with awareness and understanding.

Another important factor that must be considered is human fatigue and the effects on the mind, body and spirit. Sleep deprivation is exacerbated for law enforcement because of the physical demands from the job, rotating shifts, special assignments, and court to name a few of the challenges associated with Law Enforcement. According to Rajaratnam et al. (2011), a study found that of the 4,957 participants, 40.4% screened positive for at least one sleep disorder, most of whom had not been diagnosed previously. Fatigue and sleep deprivation is the leading cause of officer wellness, medical issues, job performance, lack of critical thinking skills, and poor judgment during critical incidents. According to Conroy (2021), the importance of developing de-escalation skills so you are not vulnerable to an Amygdala Hijacking. The development of impulse control, social responsibility, problem solving, and stress tolerance are vital skills to minimize and avoid an Amygdala Hijacking.

Certainly, personal development or versatility skills are critical throughout the organization. To survive a 30-year law enforcement career requires officers to embrace these professional and personal leadership challenges. As Chamine (2012) stated, what could be more important than one's mission, purpose and meaning? This supports the emotional intelligence leader that uses relationship management and versatility skills that help teams to interact successfully. In turn, personnel will see better outcomes through clear communication, conflict



management and trust within teams. The key is understanding through emotional intelligence, which provides for the caring and respectful, intervention without judgment. This ability to support all employee's well-being will have a direct link to organizational success, employee satisfaction and a resilient workforce. If Law Enforcement organizations are unable to maintain a healthy and supportive workforce, the morale of all employees will suffer over time. The only alternative is to actively engage your employees through proven employee assistance programs, mental health professionals, and other leading wellness programs that have shown promise to assist, cure, and overcome employee mental health challenges. The key is respect, communication and confidentiality so employees feel supported with a true caring for their well-being.

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