

Officer Wellness

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Abstract

When individuals sign up to pursue a career within the law enforcement realm, they are seldom told about the silent dangers that plague the profession. These silent dangers are identified as stressors that target officer wellness, in multiple facets, including physical wellness, mental and emotional wellness, family wellness, and financial wellness. Officer wellness is a significant issue that affects law enforcement officers and their communities. All too often, officers respond to violent and gruesome calls, for instance, homicides or traffic crash fatalities, and aren't provided an avenue to decompress and debrief these incidents to alleviate the strain they cause on mental health. Moreover, long hours, rotating shiftwork, and mandatory overtime an, and does, steal time from officers to place focus on physical wellness, thus resulting in their physique diminishing and the formation of habits that are damaging to overall wellness (Mental Health First Aid, 2023). As agency leaders, we must employ leadership styles that emphasize the necessity for officer wellness in all capacities. The goal of this capstone is to provide agencies with resources to develop programs that promote physical, mental and financial wellness in order to create progressive and deep culture change.

Introduction

The physical, emotional, and mental wellness of a police officer is as important as the gear and weapon they are assigned. We outfit officers with ballistic vests, uniforms, a squad car, and a weapon, but sometimes fall short of outfitting our officers with techniques and training to maintain and improve wellness. Many departments nationwide have recognized this and begun implementing robust wellness programs. These programs include mandatory wellness check-ins, peer support, and physical fitness programs just to name a few. While these programs are beneficial, we are still seeing a record number of officer suicides each year. 782 police officers have committed suicide since 2019 (Blue Help, n.d.). More officers die by their own hands than are killed by an offender. Leaving this unchecked is detrimental to every law enforcement officer and their families. Officer wellness should be a top priority for any agency, regardless of size.

In law enforcement, stressors can come from many factors. External factors can include financial and marital/family issues. Internal factors can include perceived low compensation, poor leadership, poor training, and being overworked. Officers are subjected to calls for service that involve the worst of the worst. These calls can weigh heavily on an officer and reaching out for help sometimes doesn't feel like an option. Unfortunately, there is still a negative stigma attached to asking for help. Officers believe they could lose their badge, be labeled as weak, and have other negative effects for simply asking for help. Some Officers begin to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs leading to addictions exacerbating the problems (Davis, n.d.).

Self-management is an important part of overall wellness. Anderson (2017) states, "The 4 keys to optimum energy management are nutrition, exercise, deep relaxation, and restful sleep". Officers work a varying schedule that includes night shift, mid-shift, and dayshift hours. Some work a schedule where they switch between dayshift and nightshift hours on a set rotating schedule. This schedule can add fuel to an already burning fire. Additionally, overtime can

exacerbate the problem. These things can negatively impact the mental well-being of not only the officer, but their family as well. Creating a routine that accommodates for good eating habits and allows for more rest time, would be beneficial to officers and their families.

While implementing a wellness program is the point of this capstone, we also need to ensure we are preparing officers for what they are going to face on the street or the situations that Dugan (2017) defined as VUCA - “volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity”. We do this by ensuring our training is effective and encompasses challenging scenarios and truthful feedback. This training must be realistic and give officers and leaders experience in handling tough situations in a safe environment. The training must include the ability to make decisions, even if it is the wrong one, and then provide honest feedback. This training will provide students with the knowledge to fall back on when they deal with real-life situations. During this training, it will be imperative to stress the importance of after-action reviews and peer support.

Credibility of the Process

Credibility is viewed as the cornerstone of effectiveness (Long, 2017). As agency leaders who want to bring about change regarding physical and mental wellness, credibility must be established and sustained. McKnight (2011) asserts that, as leaders, we too must perform the tasks and mission we ask of subordinates. This philosophy serves as a foundational basis for establishing credibility within an organization. As leaders, we must want to see positive, long-term changes in overall officer wellness, but how we do get there? Leaders must live out these changes to begin a culture shift. We must remain physically fit, mentally well, and financially stable to uphold the trust and respect of subordinates. If we fall short in this area, we have lost the trust of subordinates, and they will not believe in the reason for change. Contrary, if leaders establish and sustain their credibility, the message is believed and transformed into practice ultimately leading to a progressive cultural change.

Credibility is a pivotal component surrounding the implementation of wellness programs, so long as agency leaders participate in the movement. Leaders must believe in the necessity for change which will birth inspiration and forward thinking. This inspiration will serve as the catalyst in bringing awareness and change to the overall wellness of law enforcement officers. When exploring causes affecting officer wellbeing, toxic leadership is at the top of the list. Toxic leadership is defined as behavior that will have a negative impact on an agency (Watt, 2017). Some of the characteristics of toxic leadership is an erosion of trust, reduced effectiveness, breakdown in communication and a reduction of commitment and retention. Toxic leadership will bring down morale and cause disinterest in the overall commitment to the department's mission statement. With the reduction of morale, low production will follow.

Human Factors

Leaders within the law enforcement profession are charged with allocating resources and programs for their officers to ensure proper physical and mental wellness. Moreover, these leaders must first understand human factors and the impact they carry within officers. According to Harrington (2017), human factors are simply the consideration of how our brains interact with our bodies and decision-making abilities amidst stressful incidents. When studying these human factors, Harrington urges leaders to develop four main areas to mitigate human factors. These developmental areas are described as situational awareness, stress and performance, effective communication in high-risk situations, and leadership skills (Harrington, 2017). Harrington (2017) stated that when law enforcement professionals properly integrate and consider human factors, they can respond and handle critical incidents more effectively. The three (3) human factors that carry the greatest influence are physical conditioning, the effects of fatigue, and the effects of stress (Harrington, 2017). Physical fitness is paramount given the high demands of the

law enforcement profession. Because of the physical and mental taxes in the field, agency leaders must establish a profound priority regarding officer wellness.

As leaders, we should devise plans for the mental and physical wellness of officers within our agencies. Agencies should emphasize the skill of energy management for improved health and performance. Anderson (2017) describes energy management as the preventive approach to managing stress. Moreover, if a person can head off stress accumulation in mind and body by nourishing, strengthening, and resting themselves physically, then they will have a greater reserve of energy to cope resourcefully with more difficult or demanding situations (Anderson, 2017).

Mental Wellness

Law enforcement organizations and society, in general, seemed to have placed a stigma regarding mental health issues. Officers who were exposed to trauma and other detrimental difficulties can be seen as weak if they let these images affect their mental health. This has led to officers suffering from severe mental illnesses, leaving the force, and sadly, far too many have taken their own lives. The mental health crisis within law enforcement has become a pandemic. We, as organizational leaders, must take steps to diminish the mental health stigma and help our officers cope with issues that affect their mental well-being.

Given these stressors, legislators acknowledged the need for mental health and officer wellness for the profession. This acknowledgment resulted in the adoption of the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act of 2017 (DOJ, 2017). This Act was signed into federal law in January 2018. This act recognizes that law enforcement agencies need and deserve support in their ongoing efforts to protect the mental health and well-being of their employees. Furthermore, the Department of Justice states that good mental health and psychological health are just as essential as good physical health for law enforcement officers to be effective in

keeping our county and communities safe from crime and violence (DOJ, 2017). This act required the Department of Justice to submit a report to Congress on mental health practices and services in the U.S. Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs that could be adopted and utilized by federal, state, local, and/ or tribal law enforcement agencies. This report contained recommendations to Congress on the effectiveness of crisis lines for law enforcement officers, the efficacy of annual mental health checks for law enforcement officers, the expansion of peer mentoring programs, and ensuring privacy considerations for these types of programs. The Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) office was tasked with conducting eleven case studies and publishing their findings (DOJ, 2017). These case studies were primarily to address officer's psychological health and well-being. This research focused on ten police departments and one call-in crisis line. It also observed their peer support programs and their effectiveness therein.

Solutions

After federal legislation was enacted, several states began following suit with state-specific legislation. For example, Alabama State Legislators introduced and adopted Act 2018-416, which launched a statewide Peer Support Program specifically designated for first responders and communication officers (ALLEAPS, 2017). The newly launched program is titled Alabama Law Enforcement Alliance for Peer Support, or ALLEAPS. The Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (ALEA) and ALLEAPS provide toll-free peer support phone numbers that are available to all emergency personnel, and their families (ALLEAPS, 2017). This toll-free number is readily available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, all year long. Once a call is received it is then dispatched to the respective region and results in the activation of peer support personnel. Moreover, Alabama Statute 36-21-14 was enacted and provides all emergency responders with privileged and confidential communications with a peer who has been formally

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trained and appointed by their Chief or Sheriff as a Certified Peer Support Member (ALLEAPS, 2017). ALLEAPS prides itself on making contact with the officer experiencing crisis within thirty minutes after the initial call; and to provide a consistent and effective standard of care for those who answer the call and protect others (ALLEAPS, 2017).

ALLEAPS offers support and resources for those who need help with family issues, financial matters, suicide prevention, intervention, and follow-up, alcohol and/or substance abuse problems, as well as other personal concerns. The State of Alabama is divided into seven regions and has two coordinators assigned to each region for quicker responses.

Leaders can implement change and create a culture of positive emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is being able to manage your emotions and understand the emotions of others around you. According to Roberson (2017), “80-85% of complaints have to do with how the officers made the citizen feel”. This information shows that an officer with strong emotional intelligence would also have fewer complaints. Fewer complaints result in lower stress levels and help in overall wellness.

Leaders need to identify issues and make honest efforts to combat negative reviews of new programs. Leaders should involve every level of leadership in the process and solicit feedback and buy-in from each member of these change groups. Incentives should be in place for officers who follow wellness programs, as this not only benefits the individual officer but the department as a whole. Leaders must also realize trust plays a role in this process. When talking about mental health check-ins leaders need to look for assistance outside the department with a 3rd party vendor that puts anonymity as a high priority. Allowing for off-site attendance would aid in this. This will allow officers to trust that what is said in these meetings stays with the vendor and will not get back to any member of the department. That being said, leaders need to understand that it is not any of their concern what is talked about during these meetings. Of

course, any admission of harm to self or others would fall under the mandatory reporting but that would also need to be addressed before the meeting.

Physical Wellness

In order to implement a physical fitness program in a law enforcement agency, it will require that it begins with the agency leadership. “Leadership is an individual influencing a group of people to achieve a common goal,” (Normore, 2017). As leaders, we tend to focus on supplying our personnel with equipment such as ballistic vest, firearms, less lethal devices and vehicles. What can often be forgotten about is the physical requirements of our profession. Improving the physical wellness of our employees can have a ripple effect on several things in the organization.

Nearly every use of force situation requires an officer to go hands-on with a subject. If officers are not maintaining physical fitness levels, then they may not be able to appropriately handle these types of situations. According to statistics released by the FBI’s Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) program, 43,649 officers were assaulted while performing their duties in 2021 (LEOKA, 2023). Of the 43,649 officers assaulted in 2021, 35.2% (15,369) sustained injuries. Being physically fit can help reduce injuries and will also reduce the amount of time officers are out of work because of these injuries. In addition, it also reduces the amount of overtime paid to other officers who have to cover shifts for the officers who are out of work due to injuries. It can also reduce the amount of workman’s compensation paid which can often be a strain on the agency budget.

Physical fitness can also help with stress management. Stress is going to happen in law enforcement. Having ways to reduce that stress is key to the success of each officer. Physical fitness is one way to do that. If officers are having trouble managing their stress, this can lead to them making errors in their decision-making and potentially excessive force complaints. Physical

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fitness can be used as an outlet to manage stress. In a study conducted by the Mayo Clinic, (2023), research shows that stretching can help improve flexibility, and, as a result, the range of motion of your joints. Better flexibility can decrease the risk of injury, increase muscle blood flow, and improve the ability to complete daily activities. Stretching 2-3 times a week for 5-10 minutes per day is a small amount of time to reduce the risk of injury and improve a person's overall wellness. This does not require any equipment and can be done anywhere.

In *Parker v. District of Columbia* (1988), Parker sustained serious injury rendering him a paraplegic after being shot by an officer of the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department. As stated in the court's brief, the officer resorted to the use of his gun because he was physically unable to subdue Parker by less drastic means. The case found that the officer's physical condition was deficient because the District of Columbia was deliberately indifferent to his physical training program; as a result, Parker was awarded a substantial monetary award.

If we plan to implement a physical fitness program, then we must also expect pushback from some who do not feel it is necessary. Being able to manage conflict is a test of a true leader. We will need to start with why they need to maintain physical fitness. Some of our goals for this are to reduce officer injuries, reduce health issues, and increase the life expectancy of our officers. We may even need to sit down with some of the officers and have a one-on-one conversation as to why it would be important to them. Not everyone will have the same reason for why it is important. As leaders, we must find out those different reasons.

Solutions

Incentives are a good way to get employees on board with your physical fitness plan (BOS, n.d.). Since everyone will not begin at the same fitness level, it is best to create a program that will fit everyone. One option is a point-based system. If employees go to the agency gym or attend agency physical fitness training, then they receive one point. Once an employee reaches

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fifty points, they receive a free day off. Once they reach one hundred and fifty, they get a one percent pay raise. Another option is an annual fitness test. Set goals that are attainable by all ages, genders, and fitness types. If they pass the test, then they too can receive a one percent pay raise. If employees reach all of these goals in the year, then they can earn a free day off and a two percent pay raise. Another option is to provide healthcare discounts. If employees get an annual physical, then they can receive a discount on their health insurance premiums. Some agencies will also use physical fitness in their promotion processes. If two employees are evenly matched but one has met physical fitness standards and one has not, they will promote the one who has met the standard.

There are many ways that our employees can maintain their physical fitness. They can attend an agency gym, a home gym, or a private gym. There are CrossFit, yoga, and even meditation options. Giving your employees options will show that you are invested in their physical wellness. Attending physical training with them shows them that you are an authentic leader and willing to do what you are asking them to do.

Financial stresses

As we know being a police officer can be a stressful job. Harrington (2017) states, “The stress an officer encounters can define the ability of officers to make decisions during stressful events.” Financial stress is one of those human factors. We know stress can lead to substance abuse, high divorce rates, and poor physical fitness. Another area of stress that goes unnoticed is financial stress. Financial stress is any stress that you feel as a result of your financial situation. Not only can financial stress mean not making basic financial obligations due to lack of funds, but it can also mean recklessly spending money as a means of therapy creating a financial burden on the officer. Financial stress can lead officers to work more secondary employment to pay bills adding to increased physical stress, (Harrington, 2017).

Financial stress is a slippery slope for any person. We know that 79% of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck, 62% of Americans have less than \$1,000 in savings and 21% don't have any savings (Daugherty, 2022). This is even more significant for a law enforcement officer. Since most law enforcement officers are in a position of trust, an officer who is feeling financial hardship can be susceptible to corruption. Financially strapped police officers can lead to poor decision making, such as taking bribes or not arresting criminals for money. On the flip side, you may have officers who due to the stresses of the job, spend their money recklessly which is a term called retail therapy. Retail therapy is when an individual spends money for no reason other than to spend money. Some officers have said that trips to go shopping would coincide with hard worked shifts. At first, the purchased items would start small, but they would progress to larger purchases using more credit. Eventually, the debt would increase until the officer is working paycheck to paycheck, leading to longer work hours and secondary employment. In some extreme cases, it may lead officers to file bankruptcy.

Most police officers have access to high-security areas or are given a high level of trust, to deal with large sums of money (Britton, 2022). Perceived financial compromise, such as bankruptcy, could be detrimental to an officer's career due to the heightened temptation and access to substantial amounts of currency.

Solutions

Wellness programs can be useful in helping officers who are stressed. Wellness programs are phenomenal resources that can offer financial counseling along with mental health and substance abuse issues. With financial counseling, officers can develop steps to stabilize their financial situation. Following a wellness program would at least give the officer guidance to erase poor financial decisions. A wellness program could start by creating a budget. An example would be a zero-based budget allowing you to distribute money based on needs, eliminate

unnecessary expenses, and determine what is necessary. They can also create an emergency fund that would cover the unexpected. Next, figure out their debts and develop a plan to reduce their costs. Set aside money for retirement this will stabilize their future financial situation. These are just some of the solutions to help officers reduce stress and clear themselves from financial debt. But to be successful, the core issues of why the officer is stressed must be addressed or the behavior will not end, leading to a return to financial irresponsibility.

Conclusion

The wellness of officers needs to be top priority for all law enforcement agencies. Implementing programs with reward-based incentives can increase employee participation and in turn, increase their overall wellness. If we deploy agents of change consisting of officers from all ranks, we will see increased success. Having authentic leaders that lead by example and speak highly of our programs that adapt to the needs of the members of the department will result in more buy-in and use of the programs. As we institute our deep culture changes, we are also increasing the morale of the agency. This creates a better work atmosphere and a better product delivered to the public we serve.

We will provide our employees with a physical fitness program. It will be completely voluntary, and incentive based. Our goal is to increase their overall physical wellness while at the same time reducing officer injury and the need for excessive workman's compensation claims. If our employees are less likely to become injured, then they will be able to work for their entire career instead of having to retire early or switch jobs due to their health. This allows us as leaders to keep our staff around longer and better succession planning for the future of our agency.

The next thing we will do is implement our peer support program. We will provide our employees with resources that assist with mental wellness, substance abuse, and even financial planning. We will ensure that they have everything they need in order to be successful. Providing

our employees with unlimited resources can reduce their stress and anxiety. In turn this will allow them to perform better in their daily activities and ensure the success of our agency.

As we implement our programs, we will assign program leaders that will monitor the programs and make changes as necessary. We will select leaders who are not only authentic, but able to lead based on the variable situations and transform if needed. They will be able to adapt to the many variables that each program requires. Leaders must use versatility skills to design a plan that includes perspective from all groups who have a vested interest, use this plan to make the transition, work as a group to overcome resistance and celebrate achievements. A continuous evaluation of the plan and its outcomes is necessary to ensure we are receiving the results that were intended. If needed, leaders need to empower the group to make necessary changes in order to reach the intended goals.

The incentives that we are willing to offer our employees are more paid time off, decreased insurance premiums, and additional pay. Giving our employees more time off allows them to have more family time at no additional cost to them or the agency. Decreased insurance premiums allows our officers to not incur the stress that often comes with medical bills. Pay incentives will often be the most enticing to our employees. Though they will require prior approval, as an agency if we are spending less on workman's compensation claims, then we can use that money to pay our employees to engage in our wellness programs.

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