

Wellness and Resiliency: Building and Maintaining Strong Mental Health and Resiliency Throughout a Law Enforcement Career and Beyond

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Abstract

This body of work examines the importance of building a strong foundation focused on the significance of mental health and resiliency throughout a law enforcement officer's career and into retirement. The law enforcement profession has been plagued for centuries with the culture that asking for help, admitting one is experiencing issues, or obtaining professional counseling or intervention is a sign of weakness. Only recently has there been transference in this way of thinking, but the law enforcement profession is far from shifting the negative paradigm associated with mental health and wellness within its own ranks. More progressive agencies across the nation have implemented programs focused on building wellness and resiliency, but many agencies still turn a blind eye to the issues that are killing officers every day in the United States. This paper will explore research from a resiliency perspective, as well as ways in which leadership can work to influence organizational change aimed at improving individual and agency response to officer mental health and wellness.

Wellness and Resiliency: Building and Maintaining Strong Mental Health and Resiliency Throughout a Law Enforcement Career and Beyond

This past year has been perhaps one of the most challenging times in the law enforcement profession. The public outcry for police reform has never been louder and more visible. Riots, public demonstrations, and the call for defunding the police have all had far reaching effects across our society and have cut deeply into many law enforcement agencies across our Nation. However, there has been little conversation in law enforcement command structures, or even at the line level, of how this negative public sentiment is affecting the mental health and wellness of our first responders. As a profession, first responders have been silent victims of the damage caused by constant exposure to critical incidents and human tragedy, which many could rarely fathom. Yet, the profession has done very little to train its first responders at the commencement of their careers on ways in which to process the cumulative stressors and exposure to the horrific things that humans inflict upon others and themselves. Instead, first responders cope with these traumatic exposures by stuffing their emotions in order to deal with the next call for service because that's what they have been trained to do instead. This unhealthy reaction to stress and trauma processing is cyclical throughout the career of a first responder and manifests in ways that are damaging to one's health, relationships, and job performance.

There have been numerous studies conducted which conclude that the number one cause of death for police officers is suicide. Each year, nearly 200 police officers commit suicide, a number that is very disheartening and likely under reported. As leaders in law enforcement, we owe it not only to our first responders, but also to the communities we

serve to pay better attention to the mental health and wellness of those in our organizations. “The safety of our communities is inherently connected to the health and wellness of the first responders serving them. Every first-responder agency needs to provide the most professional, ethical, and effective services, while every first responder needs to serve without suffering from trauma, post-traumatic stress, low resiliency, addictions, depression, or low motivation” (Willis, 2019, p. 1).

The paradigm shift related to the mental health and wellness of first responders must start with leadership – leaders who believe in the mission, not those who are change agents solely for political purposes or personal gain. In the book *Extreme Ownership*, authors Willink and Babin discuss the principle of believe. This principle is applicable to this discussion because it will take this type of leadership to change the deeply entrenched stigma that prevents so many first responders from having the courage to ask for help. “If a leader does not believe, he or she will not take the risks required to overcome the inevitable challenges necessary to win. And they will not be able to convince others – especially the frontline troops who must execute the mission – to do so. Leaders must always operate with the understanding that they are part of something greater than themselves and their own personal interests. They must impart this understanding to their teams down to the tactical-level operators on the ground. Far more important than training or equipment, a resolute belief in the mission is critical for any team or organization to win and achieve big results” (Willink & Babin, 2017, pp. 76-77).

Erasing the negative stigma associated with first responder mental health will take the work of all within the law enforcement profession, regardless of rank and regardless of sworn or professional staff work status. The trauma and stressors associated with the

law enforcement profession don't just negatively impact police officers and their families, but also other positions within the organization such as public safety dispatchers and professional staff that provide all of the necessary support services within an organization. Although dispatchers and professional staff may not be exposed to the inherent and immediate dangers that officers face in the field, often the impact of critical incidents are felt by all in the organization in different ways. Hence, mental health and wellness programs and services must be made available to all within a law enforcement organization, inclusive of these employees' family members. All inclusive and comprehensive wraparound mental health and wellness programs and services will not only create healthier employees, but also healthier families – the support systems that are so vital to building and sustaining resiliency across a first responder's career.

The relationships first responders have with their peers, co-workers and families play an important role in building resiliency and overall spiritual wellness. “We should not be surprised that without nurturing, discipline, and healthy relationships, complex emotional creatures like us will have emotional and mental health problems” (Enter, 2006. p. 11). A comprehensive wraparound mental health and wellness program should be one that implements the following considerations.

Comprehensive course curriculum that teaches police academy recruits skills that will allow them to break the hyper vigilance cycle with tools to process stress and trauma in ways that are healthy and lead to resiliency. The course should focus on teaching skills of personal time management and goal setting. “The first step clearly is to teach officers to maintain control of their personal lives. Taking and maintaining control of one's personal life sounds like such a basic concept that it should go without

saying...The everyday real-time demands of the profession, plus the biological rollercoaster, push personal time to the back burner; it becomes of secondary importance” (Gilmartin, 2002. p. 112). This course should blend with other police academy curriculums such as tactics, firearms instruction, and investigations to teach police recruits how to develop the practice of self-care, self-awareness, and debriefing, which will lead to first responders making healthier choices and having healthier and more supportive relationships.

First responders, dispatchers, and professional staff employees should have easy access to confidential counseling services for their individual mental health needs, as well as the needs of their families. Counseling services should include access to mental health professionals, as well as family and marriage counseling services. Creating opportunities for first responders to access these services at any time will allow individuals to become accustomed to talking through their stressors and trauma, rather than stuffing their emotions, which manifest in unhealthy behaviors.

Individual organizations should create peer support programs wherein volunteers within the organization are selected and trained to provide personal and individualized support for others within the organization. These peer support services, although not intended to replace professional psychiatric or psychological counseling, will help to break down the negative stigma about the importance of mental health and wellness in the law enforcement profession. Having department personnel of all levels, both sworn and professional staff, in the peer support program opens the lines of communication about issues that impact first responders, their families, and their peers. This communication practice provides a safe space for others to express their feelings and

emotions with those whom they can relate and will play a valuable role in shifting the paradigm regarding mental health and wellness in law enforcement.

The program should include a focus on department-wide critical incident debriefs, not just for the purpose of evaluating tactics and response to such incidents. These debriefs should provide a safe space for those involved to express their personal experiences and emotions for the good of their spiritual wellness. “All humans are social creatures who thrive on engaging with others and sharing information. First responders, in particular, need an outlet for expressing outwardly whatever is within them – and that includes processing critical incidents, stress, or trauma. Holding in these experiences only increases your anxiety, depression, fears and distance from loved ones. Whether you communicate with a peer, a chaplain, a colleague or friend, a life partner, a therapist, a support group, or anyone else who gives you support, you’ll find that continuous, truthful communication is essential to maintain the wellness of your spirit” (Willis, 2019, p. 33).

A police chaplain program is important in keeping employees connected with their faith and spiritually. It provides yet another resource for police department personnel and the community to process trauma and stress. Connecting to one’s spirituality can also be accomplished through the use of meditation and mindfulness. Offering police department personnel services and outlets to practice meditation, mindfulness and other healthy stress outlets such as yoga and gym memberships is another option for promoting overall employee wellness.

Conclusion

Reducing police officer suicide starts with breaking the stigma surrounding mental health that has plagued the law enforcement profession since its inception. It will take servant leaders and transformational leadership practices that implement the principles of extreme ownership to break the deeply entrenched thoughts, beliefs, and responses to accessing mental health and wellness resources without the fear of being viewed by others as “weak.” When law enforcement leaders take the initiative to explore and implement programs aimed at truly providing for the health and wellness of their organizations, they must do so in ways that include those on the frontline in the process. Allowing the time and the space for personnel to express their needs and assist in developing these mental health and wellness programs will create buy-in at the ground level.

Transformational leadership is dependent upon relationships wherein the leader takes on a nurturing and service-oriented role (Anderson, Gisborne & Holliday, 2017). As it pertains to shifting the paradigm of first responder mental health and wellness, the change agents must initiate such changes for the overall good of the organization and its members. “The values of the leader, as the most influential person in the organization, are going to be reflected in the organizational culture” (Anderson, Gisborne & Holliday 2017, p. 326). This means that the change agents must emulate the values they express, believe in the mission, and be genuine in their words and actions needed to implement change.

The programs and resources mentioned in this body of work must become entrenched in the everyday culture of a law enforcement organization if we, as a

profession, are going to proactively work to shift the paradigm and reduce the negative impacts of first responder exposure to the stressors and traumas they will inevitable face throughout the course of their careers. Only armed with the right tools: early education, access to resources, and a culture that embraces the importance of mental health and wellness, can the law enforcement profession as a whole reduce the incidents of police suicide and assist first responders in making it through their careers with their health, family, and spiritually intact.

References

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