

**Officer Wellness**

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### **Abstract**

In today's litigious environment it is more important than ever that we promote a complete, all-encompassing strategy to achieve officer wellness and ensure optimal performance from all team members. We must provide the tools and methods as leaders to those in our care to enable and encourage their peak performance, while mitigating risks for both officers and the communities we serve. This capstone will address the need for law enforcement agencies to promote a comprehensive approach to ensuring the health, wealth, and wellness of their officers. It will provide a multifaceted overview of studies as well as a plan of action for agencies to address this important issue by using the leadership skills and theories discussed during the National Command & Staff College. It will provide a multifaceted overview of studies, as well as a plan of action for agencies to address this important issue by using the leadership skills and theories discussed during the National Command & Staff College. We will address multiple components of the issue of officer wellness to include physical conditioning, proper nutrition and sleep, financial wellness, and lastly mental health and substance abuse, that affect officers' performance on the job and interpersonal relationships both on and off duty.

## **Officer Wellness**

The well-being of every officer is critical to their survival in the face of adversity. Officers must constantly adjust and adapt to new challenges. This capstone project was the result of a collaborative effort by four distinct law enforcement departments from throughout the state of Louisiana. Our joint efforts focus on the human elements connected with law enforcement officers, which frequently result in mental instability and, in some cases, death. The significance of this research is that it will aid in the development of appropriate tools and training to fight this persistent issue in law enforcement and guarantee that officers live long, meaningful lives after retirement. If an officer fails to consider human factors, it might lead to mental agony or death over time.

We will start by discussing the consequences of lack of physical fitness. Secondly, we will discuss consequences that will arise from the lack of proper nutrition and sleep. Then, we will illustrate how the officer's financial stability is impacted, leading to officers working longer hours and extra duty. In the fourth component, we will articulate the officer's mental stability and review substance misuse and addiction, as well as how it pertains to law enforcement. Next, we will examine officer suicide and how law enforcement officers are at a higher risk of suicide than the general population. Finally, we will present leadership responsibilities and discuss how law enforcement leaders can do more inside their agency to support officers with their overall well-being.

## **Literature Review**

### **Physical Fitness**

A person who desires to become a police officer understands that she/he must meet certain requirements during the hiring process. During the hiring process, a

candidate is required to partake in a written test before he/she is allowed to move forward, which is then followed by a physical fitness test. The physical fitness test is typically Agency-specific to ensure the candidate meets physical fitness requirements that were set to move forward in the hiring process. After being exposed to this type of requirement, a person may begin to wonder if it is truly important for an officer to be physically fit. As an Officer, being physically fit is an essential job function and important to overall success. The motto of most Agencies is to “Protect and Serve” and if you want to be in a field that serves the public, the public has the right to expect that the people who have taken an oath to serve and protect have the physical ability to do so. Remsberg (1980), stated, “Let’s face an unfortunate truth; most officers are in terrible shape. The longer they've been away from the academy, the worse condition they're likely to be in. In most departments, physical training is strictly voluntary, and little is said about poor condition.” (p. 390). Besides the Academy, most Agencies do not require officers to maintain their physical fitness or agency fitness standards, and if they do have these programs in place, it is generally a water-downed version to ensure everyone is able to pass the requirement.

The Federal Bureau of Investigations conducted a study that revealed that 80 percent of law enforcement officers are classified as overweight (Shell, 2005). When you look at this number, we as Law Enforcement officers should become alarmed. How is it possible that officers are so much overweight? The truth is that Officers are normally working 12 hour shifts which they are confined to their unit. Most officers end up working long or odd hours, working less than desirable shifts, opting for overtime to increase their bring home pay, or choosing to work part-time jobs to supplement their

income which prevents them from having the time to prep a healthy meal. All these factors will decrease the chance that the officers will have the desire to engage in an exercise program, not realizing that an exercise program would better equip them to participate in extra duty hours and shift work.

As an Agency, it is important to create and implement a physical fitness plan for their employees. The Agency's plan will need to be strategic and creative to ensure there is buy-in. Some of the employees will automatically oppose the plan for several reasons, but it should be presented as a positive step for the Agency as a whole. In 2012, the Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Office realized the need to create a healthier Agency by encouraging people to be a healthier version of themselves by promoting officer wellness through physical fitness. During monthly recertifications, employees were required to complete a physical fitness test that generated an average score. The initial idea was that if an employee was not able to obtain a 20%, they would be required to complete remedial training in an attempt to improve their score. If they were not able to show improvement, the employee would be removed from an enforcement position and transferred to a non-enforcement position until they were able to show improvement. After some time and statistics obtained, the reality of transferring people out of an enforcement position due to their physical fitness score did not happen. Employees were not buying into the idea due to them knowing that other employees who were not physically fit to pass the test were obtaining doctor excuses to excuse them from the activity. The Agency still requires a yearly physical fitness test, but there are no repercussions for those who cannot maintain the standard. The Sheriff then offered a volunteer-based program where employees would partake in the same physical fitness

test but based on the score would be eligible to receive extra incentive pay on their paychecks. Even with the incentive pay, this program was not taken advantage of by most officers, but the program remains in place at this current time. The Agency has also recently completed the construction of a gym within one of the administration buildings which allows employees the opportunity to engage in exercise at no cost to the employee.

Officers who participate in some sort of physical fitness not only allow themselves to meet their job requirements, but it also has several other benefits. Some of those benefits allow an officer to enhance recovery time from an injury, provide an outlet for relief from stress, reduce healthcare costs, reduce depression, and allow for a comfortable life after you retire.

### **Nutrition**

According to MacKenzie-Shalders et al. (2020), stated, “Law enforcement personnel have been recognized as having a high risk for several lifestyle-related health conditions which, in combination with the nature of their work (sedentary roles interspersed with intermittent high-intensity activity, shift work, and a high stress-load), can have a negative impact on their health.” Law enforcement officers must maintain a certain level of physical fitness to maximize their concentration, performance, and safety.

As a result, while nutrition strategies that promote good health are important, a broader focus that includes nutrition strategies that optimize nutrition for performance is also required. Without a good nutrition regimen, it is almost difficult for a law enforcement officer to accomplish health and fitness goals. The human body needs food for fuel and will not function if you do not eat a well-balanced diet. When you understand how the body turns food into fuel, it is much simpler to stick to a good nutrition regimen.

Water, carbohydrates, proteins, and vitamins are the fundamentals. Water is the most essential nutrient in the body. Water is vital for maintaining body temperature, flushing out impurities, and transporting nutrients. Also, but not drinking enough water can cause you to become dehydrated. Dehydration can contribute to tiredness, dizziness, or lightheadedness on the job (“Dehydration”, 2019). Carbohydrates are also vital for health and fitness. They provide energy to the body. Complex carbs, also known as starches and fibers, are abundant in foods such as breads, grains, cereals, pastas, fruits, and vegetables. Fiber is essential to the body. If you consume more carbohydrates than your body can store, the excess is stored as fat. Proteins are also required for the development and repair of all body tissues. Proteins are not an effective source of energy, and they are only utilized for energy in severe circumstances if carbs or fat are not available. Vitamins are necessary substances that control biological processes. They assist in a variety of cell processes. Vitamins do not provide energy, but they do assist your body in producing energy.

These days, police officers are much like the rest of the community. The days are simply too short. Everyone seems to be in a rush all the time. That is a typical day in the life of a police officer. This explains why they eat so much fast food. Fast food has a lot of fat, but it is convenient to order via the drive-through window so officers may drive and eat at the same time (Suminski, n.d.). A fast-food restaurant allows a person to remain in their vehicle. You do not even have to get out of the patrol car, which adds to your lack of physical exercise. Also, the risk of a heart attack increases for two hours after eating a high-calorie, high-fat meal, especially if a person is overweight. Understanding how the body uses food and picking the proper meals and portions are the

keys to eating for fitness. An officer can simply opt for healthier options at fast food places.

When officers make the changes to their nutrition, sleep habits and physical fitness it cannot be for just a short period of time, it needs to be a lifestyle change. Changes in lifestyle (clarity of purpose, values, goals, plans, and activities) frequently follow greater control and balance of energy resources, resulting in increased performance and vitality. If the programs are to generate sustained higher energy and performance, these lifestyle modifications must be maintained and promoted (Anderson, 2017).

### **Sleep Deprivation**

Sleep deprivation is not unique to law enforcement; nevertheless, the specific pressures associated with law enforcement exacerbate the repercussions of sleep deprivation. Many law enforcement officers work some or all of their days off to make ends meet or to supplement their income. For some, it is a matter of financial survival. Others are concerned about priorities. It is not surprising that some police officers suffer from sleep disorders due to constantly changing schedules, overtime, and overnight shifts. Sleep problems, which are generally associated with poor health, performance, and safety outcomes, are twice as common among police officers as they are in the general population.

Sleep is required for maintenance and repair of the entire body system. Melatonin, a hormone generated during the natural circadian rhythm while sleeping, boosts immune cytokine function and aids in infection resistance (Nunes, 2014). People who frequently fail to acquire appropriate amounts of restful sleep may suffer from cumulative sleep



deficits. Consider a person who needs eight hours of sleep per night but loses two hours of sleep each day over a four-day period. At the conclusion of the fourth day, that person has a total sleep debt of eight hours, which is the equivalent of losing an entire night's rest (Nunez, 2020).

As commonly experienced within the law enforcement profession, extended work weeks, excessive overtime, and multiple consecutive shifts contribute to a variety of health and safety issues related to sleep deprivation and fatigue. Sleep deprivation dangerously hinders an officers' ability to analyze situations and assess risk correctly, make proper decisions, and proceed towards safe outcomes. Agencies must try to educate their employees while using control mechanisms aimed to increase human performance and minimize risk factors. Mitigating the negative consequences of tiredness in the 24/7 operational environment is critical, especially in workforce populations where errors can mean the difference between life and death (Scism, n.d.).

The inability to execute the following duties is common among law enforcement officers affected by sleep deprivation.

- control their mood or their behavior
- Recall the sequence of events
- effectively communicate
- comprehend difficult situations
- perform a risk assessment and accurately predict the results

### **Financial Wellness**

One aspect of officer wellness that is often overlooked in many training programs and officer development initiatives is that of financial wellness. Bethune (2015) reports

that regardless of how well or poorly the market has performed over the last several years, money and financial matters have persisted to consistently be a top stressor amongst American families, with as many as 72% of people polled reporting feeling stressed about money at least once in the last month. Bethune (2015) goes on to note that generationally, millennials and generation x members report financial stress at even higher numbers at 75% and 76% respectively. This encompasses the 18- to 49-year-old age bracket and represents the majority of those currently serving as peace officers.

Many other aspects of wellness such as mental state, fatigue, and even physical health can be affected if an officer does not have a healthy, stable financial foundation. Dugan (2019) describes what he refers to as counter VUCA tactics, an acronym representing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. While we may typically assume this refers to a tactical situation, the same counter VUCA tactics and adaptive decision-making techniques can be utilized regarding finances by leaders providing training and education to personnel as well. It is all too common for officers to exercise poor financial decision making due to lack of education, which results in them working increasingly more and more hours of extra duty details or secondary employment. These extended hours can soon produce fatigue and accelerate burnout in an employee, making it difficult to maintain antifragility and creating hazardous working conditions. This can all be avoided with prudent financial planning.

While many often point to the fact that law enforcement officers do not enter this profession to become rich, with the competitive salaries and benefit packages offered by many departments in today's times, it is certainly possible to be financially healthy and fiscally comfortable once a basic grasp of financial wellness is achieved. Ramsey (2007)

provides a viable example, “If you keep a \$495 car payment throughout your life, which is ‘normal,’ you miss the opportunity to save that money. If you invested \$495 per month from age twenty-five to age sixty-five, a normal working lifetime, in the average mutual fund averaging 12 percent (the eighty-year stock market average), you would have \$5,881,799.14 at sixty five.” (pp. 172). Considering many law enforcement officers have take home vehicles, as well as a deferred compensation plan that is matched by the employer, this is a very obtainable goal that many officers have simply never been educated about, missing an incredible opportunity for legacy building and significant impact on both the quality of life at retirement and the potential to pass wealth and wellness to future generations.

We believe in order to achieve financial wellness for our officers, we as leaders need to take a multifaceted approach to ensure financial wellness for those in our care. Our first step must be to suspend our own frame of reference, and never assume that we know what another individual knows. While certain generational groups may assume that tasks such as changing a tire, balancing a check book, or investing into a retirement or rainy-day fund are skill sets that are common knowledge, more technologically inclined employees may not be as familiar with these life skills but are perhaps more adept at more tech savvy skill sets. It is important that we adopt their frame of reference and ascertain an effective means of communicating to them the importance of financial wellness, and educating them on the topic in an authentic, effective manner.

We believe a basic course on fiscal responsibility, budgeting, and money management could be included in a new officer’s orientation or field training process and would be of great benefit both to the officer, and ultimately to the department as well, as

stable, well rested, and content officers lead to a less hazardous workplace, risk mitigation, and improve employee retention.

It is imperative that this introduction to money management also include a comprehensive explanation of all departmental benefits, deferred compensations programs, and retirement planning. Topics such as creating a basic monthly budget that covers expenses and bills with salary (not depending on detail money or overtime for recurring expenses), the importance of an emergency fund, and debt elimination are basic topics that officers need to be provided information on to be set up for successful financial health and wellness. This initial education on financial matters should include not only the basics regarding budgeting, retirement planning, investing, and taking advantage of programs such as employee matches on deferred compensation, but also legacy planning in regard to establishing a power of attorney and creating a will listed designating beneficiaries to all transferable benefits and assets.

In our observation, while human resources may often provide a list of benefits to new hires and may go over some of the highlights with new employees, it is important we make sure the material has been received by personnel, understood comprehensively, and the importance of proper planning and engagement of the benefits understood through clear, concise communication and coaching.

While we believe formalized training and education would be invaluable to employees, especially at the beginning of their careers, I believe the success of a departmental wellness program would be greatly accentuated by complementing the initial education and training objectives by designating financial mentors within the department to ascertain continuous growth and accountability over an employee's tenure

at the department, and assist personnel in their continued journey for financial wellness over the course of their career.

### **Mental Health**

In Module # 5, an article entitled, “Capturing the moment: Counter- VUCA Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” is introduced and defined as the concept of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA) to policing. In essence, VUCA is chaos, and it falls on police to understand it, prepare for it, mitigate it and minimize the disruptive and destabilizing effects of it (Javidi & Ellis, 2015).

To attempt to understand the complexity of a Police Officer’s life is to break it down in days. The police officer on any given shift will become face to face with VUCA several times and expected to deal with it and achieve a positive outcome. The complexities often involved in this is quite frankly, an extraordinary mathematical equation that has been worked on since the beginning of time, with many answers suggested, many hypotheses proposed, but no laws confirmed. And in the meantime, the police officer is tasked with solving problems, other people’s problems. But what about the officers’ problems? What if the officer turns into the problem? Who helps him or her?

In 1937, line of duty deaths where statistics were first collected by the FBI and published in the annual Uniform Crime Report (UCR) publication, Crime in the United States (Blue H.E.L.P. 2020). Today, Law Enforcement Agencies can submit that information along with accidental deaths, ETC, to the FBI where it is published annually on FBI.gov. This collection of information is massive. It should be noted that there has been no national counting of the act that takes more officer’s lives in the United States than any other, suicide.

In 2019, Blue H.E.L.P., a nonprofit organization that has been collecting law enforcement suicide information since 2016 reported 236 officer suicides in 2019. One author in our group now shares his experience by using “I”. The question I have had for several years has been why? Why does a police officer voluntarily decide to take his/her life? From a personal perspective I have always been amazed (yet appreciative) that more police officers do not. It is not normal for a human being to consistently be exposed to a vast array of negativity for long periods of time and not be negatively affected by it.

Speaking from personal experience, when I first became a police officer in 1991, it was unpopular to express deep intimate emotions, which was perceived as weakness. As a young officer I was almost immediately exposed to the horrors that humans can do to each other; and the only thing I could express were the “war” stories that I would swap with my fellow officers about the scenes and those involved. The stories were almost worn like a badge of courage and honor, especially with the older seasoned officers. That was it; I was a police officer and I had arrived. Unfortunately, the time would come where the stories would not help - not in the context in which they were told. As time went on, I experienced bouts of depression, hopelessness, and self-doubt; moments where I questioned my faith and certainly people. Although I was not suicidal, I knew that many of my symptoms were precursors to it; and quite frankly my quality of life was in a progressive decline. During this time with four children and a divorce later I made a decision. Ironically, earlier in my pre-police life, I worked as a psychiatric Technician for a local police department, as well as a local psychiatric hospital. What I did not realize was that during that time I was privy to observing things that were planting seeds in me and did not even realize it. Part of my responsibilities as a Psychiatric technician was to

accompany patients to alcohol anonymous meetings. My decision was based largely on what I had long forgotten what I observed at these meetings. I observed diverse groups of people get together, without judgement, and simply talk and share their alcoholic experience to stay sober. This blew me away. What a simple concept; people sharing their similar experiences to help one another. That day of change was based on that concept; and although I was not quite yet an alcoholic, I decided to talk to someone. This decision would change my life and I have since become an advocate for change. There is hope.

To date, nonprofit groups such as Blue H.E.L.P., the Police Executive Research Forum, and the International Associations of Chiefs of Police, have worked to collect officer suicide statistics and compile resources for their colleagues in hope of suggesting potential solutions and to remove the stigma of seeking help. Another such effort, after a unanimous vote in the senate in agreement from the house of Representatives, the U.S. Congress passed with former President D. Trump's signature, the Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection Act on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The goal of this newly collected data is to help agencies better understand and prevent suicides among current and former law enforcement officers at all levels (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2020).

As leaders we must remember that we can affect real change, individually and collectively. It is our responsibility to exercise service leadership on all levels. We must strive to get consistently and compassionately to know our people. With this, we can see potential signs of mental illness and it gives our subordinates the opportunity to believe in us enough to come to us with potential mental health issues, giving us the opportunity to exercise Crisis intervention leadership.

We also believe officers would benefit in learning and understanding Emotional Intelligence. As leaders we should learn it, know it, understand it, practice, and promote it to our subordinates in a way that is interesting to them. In other words, just as suicide awareness is in its infancy, so is the concept of emotional intelligence. The importance in empathy should be strongly impressed upon them. They should understand that it is the (Decision-emphasis) to voluntarily allow yourself to become vulnerable enough to walk in someone else's shoes to understand them and their issues, and in doing so help them. Also, with emotional intelligence, we should encourage self-awareness and practice it first within ourselves in hopes of recognizing not only our weaknesses but our strengths. This also should include our implicit and explicit bias.

If we as leaders hope to improve and maintain a healthy well-balanced environment for our officers, then we must honestly admit it begins with us creating a culture within the department where honesty rules supreme and understanding and empathy back it up.

### **Role of Leadership**

As we have seen so far, the necessity for leadership to stand up and combat deputy well-being is becoming increasingly common in the law enforcement profession. So, as a leader, with a plethora of methods and techniques at your disposal, what is your role?

A MAGNUS leader is a composite of several traits that compose the foundation of greatness. Within that foundation are authentic, adaptable, and credible leadership attributes that aid in combating officer wellness. Each of these styles of leaders promotes trust in the workplace, thereby building a cohesive culture that is robust in the face of any



mental or physical adversity that may develop. When you build a work environment with a cohesive culture, you produce several beneficial variables, including a trusting environment (Therwagner, 2020). Trust contributes to your credibility as a leader by making you approachable for any stressors that may emerge in the workplace.

When it comes to officer wellness, another duty of leadership is to be authentic and adaptable to the scenario at hand. When speaking with a person, it is critical to use effective communication and sincerity by listening first. Simply listening is the most fundamental and powerful approach to connect with another person (Anderson, 2020). Staying grounded and centered is essential while being an active listener and using emotional intelligence to be genuine when listening to someone who has come to you with problems. When dealing with the problem, be brave, consistent, and constantly follow up. However, if you are struggling with a lot of stress yourself, you should never neglect your wellness.

The functions of leadership in recognizing and responding to officer wellness do not end there. Never be overconfident while addressing a problem with someone and making use of the resources available to you. The problem may necessitate additional assistance from professional services or programs available via your agency.

### **Conclusion**

To address the issue of officer wellness, law enforcement leaders must establish programs and training that will enhance our officers' physical and emotional health. These programs must meet modern police enforcement trends, such as shift work, physical fitness, and general mental wellness.

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