

IMPACT OF LEAPS ON MENTAL HEALTH

The Impact of the Law Enforcement Assistance Program (LEAPS) on Mental Health in Law Enforcement Personnel

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Abstract

The Law Enforcement Alliance for Peer Support (LEAPS), a regional support program, was designed to provide law enforcement personnel with access to peer support groups to help them cope with the stress associated with their job. The program involves recruiting experienced current personnel, providing necessary training, earning support from leadership within departments, and establishing trust between members so that these peer support networks can be successful in helping active law enforcement personnel better manage stress-related issues. With sufficient resources in place and solid leadership backing, LEAPS has made a real difference in both individual lives and entire communities by fostering an environment of understanding and camaraderie among members while reducing mental health issues amongst those involved in this field of work. This paper will explore the success factors and challenges behind LEAPS and similar programs in law enforcement and examine their impact on mental health in law enforcement personnel.

The Impact of the Law Enforcement Assistance Program (LEAPS) on Mental Health in Law Enforcement Personnel

Establishing peer support programs, such as Law Enforcement Alliance for Peer Support (LEAPS), can have a positive impact not only on individual officer wellness but can positively impact organizations and communities alike (Rutledge, 2005). LEAPS and other similar peer support programs focus on emergency responders offering trained peers who are there to offer immediate and long-term support for the officers who put their lives on the line every day. LEAPS provides support before, during, and after high-stress events, helping officers feel empowered and supported. Implementing programs like this can positively impact individual officers, agencies, and communities.

The statistics surrounding mental health among law enforcement officers are alarming, with a recent meta-analysis of 35 studies finding that police officers are at significantly higher risk for PTSD than the general population. Additionally, in a survey of 553 law enforcement officers from one police department, 43% reported symptoms of depression, and 58% reported anxiety symptoms. Furthermore, 15% reported current suicidal ideation or self-harm, and 28% reported lifetime suicidal ideation or self-harm (Jetelina et al., 2020).

Peer support programs have become integral to law enforcement, providing personnel with vital resources to manage their mental health and overall well-being. Collaboration between law enforcement organizations and peer support providers is essential to ensure quality care and effective services are delivered (Levin, 2022). Beyond the numerous advantages of having an agency that supports such programs, there are also potential hurdles that will be explored in this paper that should be considered before implementing them. As with any program, there are

drawbacks, but these can be overcome. Proper measures can be taken to ensure peer support programs are beneficial and effective in aiding law enforcement personnel.

Origin of LEAPS

The Law Enforcement Alliance for Peer Support (LEAPS) program is a unique and comprehensive team of over two thousand five hundred trained peer support law enforcement officers, communications officers, and other non-sworn personnel from state, county, and local municipal police departments. LEAPS offers round-the-clock, free, and confidential peer support services to those in need. Support may be provided in various areas, such as post-critical incident support, suicide prevention, alcohol, and substance abuse prevention, relationship issues, and spiritual guidance through LEAPS chaplains (Rutledge, 2005).

The program is offered twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, to police departments across seventeen states. The LEAPS model of peer support has been found to be successful in reducing police officer stress and burnout, as well as helping to improve morale and fostering a sense of camaraderie among officers. The program has also been shown to positively impact overall mental health outcomes for those utilizing the services, including increased feelings of connectedness, improved coping skills and resilience, and a greater sense of self-efficacy (Rutledge, 2005).

LEAPS is a support network that provides emotional, psychological, and social support to law enforcement professionals. This organization understands that officers often develop close relationships rooted in shared experiences and understanding of similar events. Examples of such events can include officer-involved shootings, line-of-duty deaths, substance abuse, and financial and even relationship issues (Rutledge, 2005).

LEAPS seeks to provide officers with the resources necessary to thrive in their occupations, both emotionally and mentally. Some of the various training and resources offered are suicide prevention, mental health, anger management, stress reduction, wellness, resiliency, traumatic incident debriefing, and more. The organization's commitment to providing law enforcement professionals with the necessary tools and resources to manage their emotional well-being is paramount in creating a safe, healthy work environment for all (Rutledge, 2005).

In creating the environment, the organization provides trained peer support members who have experienced or been impacted by similar events; these members can offer guidance and emotional support while also providing referrals to appropriate professional clinicians if needed. LEAPS believes peer support can be the most beneficial form of therapy for law enforcement professionals who are often isolated or reluctant to seek help (Rutledge, 2005).

LEAPS also provides agencies with a wide range of services and support to help personnel in need. This includes not only peer support services but also funeral protocols and staffing during times of tragedy, as well as access to benefits that can aid those affected by the loss of a loved one in law enforcement. LEAPS continues to expand its range of services and is committed to providing law enforcement personnel with the best possible support when they need it most. (Rutledge, 2005)

Overall, LEAPS was founded on the belief that officers often develop close relationships rooted in shared experiences and understanding of similar events. The organization offers an array of resources, training, and trained peer support members who can provide emotional and psychological support. By providing law enforcement professionals with the necessary tools to manage their emotional well-being better, LEAPS is committed to creating a safe, healthy work environment for all.

History of LEAPS

LEAPS has its roots in the early 1990s in Mississippi. During this time, an officer attended a seminar that covered the implications of officer-involved shootings and identified the need for critical incident debriefing. This officer took the theories taught at this seminar back to his agency, the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics, and created a “shoot card” with guidelines for handling such an incident. This shoot card was meant to be kept in an officer’s wallet as a reminder of the steps they should take after a shooting. As word of this resource spread, more officers throughout the state began to seek out the officer offering this support, and an unofficial peer support program began (Rutledge, 2005).

Fifteen years later, when the Commissioner of Public Safety for the State of Mississippi, previously the director of Mississippi’s Bureau of Narcotics, witnessed the success of a peer support program created by one of his agents, he decided to implement a more formal, statewide program. Initially, this program was called CIRCLE (Critical Incident Response and Care for Law Enforcement). However, it soon became clear that the needs of law enforcement officers extend far beyond just critical incident response (Rutledge, 2005).

As a result, the program was renamed LEAPS (Law Enforcement Alliance for Peer Support) to encompass all aspects of the profession that its members may need aid with, including family support, suicide prevention, financial counseling, and many other struggles. LEAPS focuses on providing its members with the means to help each other in times of need. It has developed a comprehensive curriculum that is still used today for peer support and mental health services within law enforcement agencies across the United States.

Need for LEAPS

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a potentially emotionally debilitating mental health condition that occurs after an individual has experienced a traumatic event, either first-hand or as a witness. It can manifest as symptoms such as intense flashbacks and nightmares, emotional distress, and high anxiety levels. People with PTSD may also be unable to process the thoughts and emotions triggered by the traumatic event. The long-term effects of PTSD can be severe and disabling. They may include difficulty sleeping, difficulty with concentration or memory, irritability, depression and anxiety, poor self-esteem and guilt, relationship problems, substance abuse, and physical health issues such as chronic pain or fatigue. It can also lead to relationship problems, as PTSD can impact communication, intimacy, and trust (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have been around for centuries but were attributed to different terms based on the era. During World War I, soldiers who experienced these symptoms were identified as suffering from shell shock. Meanwhile, in World War II, soldiers showed similar signs and were labeled with terms such as battle fatigue, combat exhaustion, or war stress (Leahy, 2021).

Today, the term PTSD has become more widely used and accepted across all branches of the military. There is even an effort to call it post-traumatic stress to reduce any stigma associated with the disorder (Smith & Whooley, 2015). However, what about other individuals who can be exposed to traumatic events? Law enforcement officers, emergency personnel, and other first responders are all vulnerable to the same psychological effects of PTSD as military personnel.

Law enforcement professionals are exposed to various career experiences, which can lead to lasting physical and psychological effects. According to Alabama LEAPS (ALLEAPS, 2022),

the average life expectancy for law enforcement professionals is 59 years old, significantly lower than the average of 78.56 years for civilians. One result of this exposure is an increased risk of heart attack for nineteen-year veterans, which is three hundred percent higher than that of civilians. Additionally, officers are twice as likely to commit suicide as they are to be feloniously killed.

These exposures have also taken a toll on the personal lives of law enforcement professionals. Seventy-two percent of marriages among ten-plus-year veterans of the profession end in divorce. Domestic violence and alcoholism are also double the national average among police officers. Lastly, there is an officer-involved shooting approximately every six days in Mississippi, underscoring the dangerous nature of the job (ALLEAPS, 2022).

Ultimately, law enforcement professionals are subjected to various experiences that can affect their physical and mental health. It is essential to recognize the effects of these experiences in order to provide adequate support for law enforcement officers and their families. This includes providing access to counseling, peer-support programs, education about stress management techniques, and other resources that could help mitigate some of the dangers associated with the job.

Analyses of survey and focus group data conducted by a multidisciplinary team indicated a strong need for mental health support among law enforcement. Of the 434 officers who participated in the survey, 54 (12%) reported a mental illness diagnosis in their lifetime, and 114 (26%) had positive screening results for mental illness symptoms in the past two weeks. Qualitative findings indicated that officers viewed the survey as an essential initial step in identifying mental health issues. However, they felt that further efforts would be needed to establish trust among peers and organizational leaders before they would engage in open

dialogue about their mental health concerns. Officers also suggested the promotion of positive dialog about mental health and support for officers who seek help as potential strategies to reduce stigma (Jetelina et al., 2020).

Success Factors

The Law Enforcement Alliance for Peer Support has had many successes throughout the past decade. There was a recognized need for peer support after many tragic events that affected law enforcement officers throughout the United States were identified to have a tremendous psychological effect on officers. The opportunity to have fellow law enforcement officers arrive on the scene of a shooting, officer death, suicide attempt, or another officer-involved critical incident to offer peer support without any concerns of violating their privileged conversations protected by state law is momentous (Jetelina et al., 2020).

Peer support encourages victims or critical incident participants to express their feelings about the situation by expressing their true feelings or words. Many people hold trauma, which causes officers major physical and mental health issues. Giving people an outlet to express their feelings without concern of judgment or lack of privacy is an excellent way to reduce suicides and mental health issues. The peer support members who encourage this communication may also help someone talk about their day-to-day experiences while carrying out their law enforcement duties. Officers tend to hold traumatic thoughts and feelings, which can cause other health problems such as heart attacks, anxiety, and obesity. These bonds developed with the involved members are vital to continue the drive to help others in their time of need. Helping others can also benefit the peer support member who may be trying to work through their own previously experienced events (Cnapich et al., 2022).

Leadership Impacts on Success

Leadership cooperation from law enforcement agencies has been slow but steady. Agencies and leaders only know what they know once they are trained or advised.

The importance of teaching and training the need for peer support and the physiological effects of a traumatic event for an officer is imperative. The LEAPS concept has been taught in Mississippi, where it was developed, and is now being introduced in other states. State or federal grants typically pay for the LEAPS program. The students of the LEAPS program are chosen by their respective agencies and have usually been involved in some traumatic event themselves. This requirement helps establish skin in the game and the ability to be empathetic to other officers and their specific situations.

A cornerstone aspect to leading is by exemplifying virtues of a Magnus Officer. Three Magnus virtues rise above in facilitating leadership in these areas. Chief among these is compassion, which inspires others to take action motivated by genuine concern for the well-being of others without expecting anything in return. Additionally, resiliency and respect also play an important role; resilience allows one to endure stress and adapt quickly in times of change, while respecting all human beings regardless of their circumstances or level of disrespect they may show towards the officer. These virtues serve as a guidepost for the Magnus Officer's actions and provide them with the strength needed to lead effectively (Javidi, 2016).

In law enforcement, leaders must demonstrate a commitment to mental health and well-being. This can be done through various methods, including normalizing conversations about mental health issues and removing any associated stigmas.

Furthermore, actively encouraging discussions about mental health and creating an environment of understanding towards such topics can positively affect the law enforcement community. It will attract more applicants knowing that the department takes their mental health

concerns seriously. At the same time, current members feel empowered to give their all when carrying out duties due to being cared for by those around them. Additionally, having a support system within an agency can lead to healthier attitudes toward physical and psychological well-being among officers and improved morale and overall performance (Levin, 2022).

It is, therefore paramount for leaders in law enforcement organizations to prioritize mental health by modeling acceptance of its struggles from the top down. This can include regular meetings on removing stigmas surrounding these issues while providing opportunities for more informal conversations on personal experiences regarding mental health challenges or successes. By doing so, departments will become more effective at looking after the well-being of their personnel while enabling them to make meaningful contributions in their line of work (Levin, 2022).

The LEAPS program has empowered officers to reach out to their brothers and sisters in their time of need. The reaffirming of the brotherhood or sisterhood is a vital requirement in their chosen career in law enforcement, with the peace of mind that they are never alone and have someone in their corner that can be counted on for support. This support is an excellent opportunity for increased morale for the officers.

The peer support program has grown and improved after each incident that team members have been utilized. The peer support members have recognized the need to support others involved in critical incidents and not just limited to the actual police officers. It has been determined that dispatchers, family members, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and other officers can be affected by the critical incident. The peer support members will now reach out to the other first responders directly and indirectly involved. The members are often contacted by or on behalf of the County Sheriffs, Chiefs of Police, or Commanders of affected

jurisdictions. More law enforcement leaders and agencies are making it standard practice to request peer support for their officers in need (Faulk, 2022).

The relationship made with the peer support members is not limited to critical incidents but often for officers who are in trouble with personal issues, suicidal thoughts, or addiction problems. Often these support members can give a lending ear, a hug, and a reference to a qualified counselor who is a specialist in the specified area needed. All these conversations between peer support members and the involved officers are privileged and protected by state law in many locations.

For example, Mississippi Code was enacted to create a privilege for certified peer support members during peer support events to protect the confidentiality of communications between the peer members and emergency responders. The law defines peer support members as law enforcement officers, firefighters, or emergency medical technicians that have received training in Critical Incident Stress Management and are certified by the State Board of Health or the Department of Public Safety. A peer support event is defined as any debriefing, defusing, or counseling session conducted by a certified peer support member that involves emotional or moral support for an emergency responder who needs those services as a result of job-related stress or an incident in which the emergency responder was involved while acting in his official capacity (MS Code, 2013).

Under this legislation, a certified peer support member shall not be compelled to testify or reveal the contents of any communication made to them by an emergency responder while engaged in a peer support event without the consent of the emergency responder making the communication. This privilege only applies when the communication was made during an actual peer support event (MS Code, 2013).

However, the privilege does not apply if the certified peer support member was an initial emergency service responder, a witness, or a party to the incident that prompted the providing of peer support services; or if a communication reveals the intended commission of a crime or harmful act and such disclosure is determined to be necessary by the certified peer support member to protect any person from a specific, imminent risk of severe mental or physical harm or injury, or to forestall a serious threat to public safety; or if there is a divulgence of an already committed crime (MS Code, 2013).

Any certified peer support member who reveals the details of these privileged communications, or any person who threatens, intimidates, or in any way attempts to compel a certified peer support member to disclose the contents of privileged communication, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and shall be punished by a fine of not more than Five Hundred Dollars (\$500.00) or by imprisonment in the county jail for not more than six (6) months, or by both such fine and imprisonment (MS Code, 2013).

This legislation is intended to provide confidentiality and protection for certified peer support members and the emergency responders with whom they communicate so that the emergency responders can receive necessary emotional and moral support without fear of retribution or disclosure. It allows emergency responders the privacy to open up and be vulnerable with someone they trust to receive the help they need. This privilege can have a powerful effect in allowing emergency responders to access the help they need and stay safe in the field. With this protection, emergency responders may feel comfortable receiving the support necessary to do their jobs safely and effectively. The confidentiality that is provided by this privilege ensures that emergency responders can receive the help they need while also protecting

the confidential communications between them and certified peer support members. It is a powerful tool for ensuring safety and emotional health in emergency services.

The peer support member who responds to the high-stress event will meet with the parties involved. Upon initial contact, the parties are offered a beverage such as Gatorade. This breaks the ice and helps rehydrate the person involved during initial introductions with the member. The peer support member does not give legal advice and is there to listen, primarily with words of encouragement when appropriate. They are given a list of feelings or emotions they may experience while processing the event they have just gone through. They are reassured that their feelings are normal and that there is no right or wrong way to feel at that moment. The people involved are taken away from the initial scene to an unrelated location to reduce the stressors of being onsite of the critical incident. This is done during a defusing process that usually takes place within three hours of the initial event. During the defusing meeting, the involved member is encouraged to express their emotions. They are usually to get their facts from their administration or command. Follow-up contact will be made with the parties involved approximately two weeks later.

During this time, there is coaching, and more conversation occurs between the peer support member and the involved member. This meeting encompasses the genuine emotions involved with the reality of the event settling in and the long-term pain coming to fruition. At this time, additional information is provided for a professional therapist or other outside help that may be needed. The peer support member will remain available for any needs or communication requested by the person involved (Faulk, 2022).

Peer support members will have a debriefing for all the support members involved in each situation to counsel each other and look for feedback. This feedback opportunity has been

invaluable in improving the program and continuously updating practical techniques or procedures followed during a critical incident. These peer support programs have become a necessary and sought-after program by multiple agencies throughout the United States.

Barriers to Implementing LEAPS

Starting a peer support program can be challenging for agencies, as several significant barriers must be addressed. These include the costs associated with training and certifying peer support members, lack of available resources for instruction, and inadequate knowledge about which programs and protocols are most effective in providing support. Additionally, if multiple agencies collaborate to implement a program together, they must carefully assess their needs before investing any funds or personnel into the project. Despite these difficulties, it is possible to overcome them by taking proactive steps such as researching training options and communicating with peers to understand what protocols are best suited for those in need of peer support services.

Additionally, there is a stark discrepancy between the legal protection of confidentiality for peer support communications on a state and federal level. In particular, while some jurisdictions have implemented provisions that afford peer support communications with greater protection, others have lagged in this regard, meaning that there is as yet no unified standard to safeguard these vital conversations. Moreover, the consequences of this disparity can be far-reaching; with adequate assurance of privacy, individuals may be encouraged to engage in frank and open dialogue with peers who can provide invaluable support. Consequently, measures must be adopted to remove the patchwork of protections and ensure uniform legal coverage across all states so that all may realize the many benefits associated with peer support.

Financial Limitations

When it comes to implementing a LEAPS program, there are several potential monetary barriers. One of the most significant challenges is that it requires significant upfront costs for training and certifying peer support members. This can be expensive, depending on the size of the agency and the number of individuals who need to be trained. Furthermore, the cost of maintaining certification can be a recurring expense. Additionally, agencies may need to dedicate staff resources to coordinate and administer the program, which could result in increased personnel costs. Therefore, it is essential for agencies to carefully assess their needs before investing in a LEAPS program. When done correctly, however, peer support programs have been proven to reduce the costs of employee absenteeism and health care and improve morale and overall productivity.

Roadmap Forward

In 2021 federal legislation known as The Confidentiality Opportunities for Peer Support (COPS) Counseling Act was enacted. This legislation may encourage the adoption of law enforcement peer counseling privileged communication across the country. The Act ensures that federal law enforcement officers' information disclosed during peer support counseling sessions is confidential. The Act sets out to protect federal officers and their mental health by providing them with a safe space to talk and get help and support. Some see the COPS Counseling Act as essential to finding better solutions for first responders suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and other mental health issues. This act may catalyze other states to enact similar confidentiality protections for those seeking peer support (Grassley, 2021).

While funding for established peer support programs comes from a variety of sources, including grants from the Department of Justice, state and local governments, private foundations, and individual donations from law enforcement associations or agencies,

organizations must earmark appropriate funds to invest in a peer support program to allow it a chance to become invaluable to the users. A critical financial benefit of the LEAPS program is that it allows peer support members to offer their services at no charge. This type of service is particularly beneficial in areas where access to mental health services may be limited or cost-prohibitive for many individuals.

A potential way to reduce the costs of implementing a LEAPS program is through collaboration between different agencies. By pooling resources, costs can be shared among agencies, and overall expenses can be reduced. For example, by combining training and certification efforts across multiple organizations, it may be possible to have group discounts on fees or costs associated with certifying peer support members. Additionally, agencies can share resources and personnel across departments, allowing more efficient use of funds and reducing the need to hire additional staff. Finally, peer support programs may be eligible for grant funding or other external sources of funding that could help reduce upfront costs and assist in implementing or sustaining the program.

Another stressor that may be softened is virtual platforms to connect peer support practitioners and customers. Virtual avenues have become increasingly popular in recent years due to the convenience, accessibility, and affordability it provides. This has enabled mental health providers to reach more individuals needing help, regardless of geography or other factors.

While some initial costs may be associated with establishing a LEAPS program, these costs can be significantly reduced through careful planning and collaboration between different agencies. By properly assessing the needs of an organization before investing in a peer support

program, agencies can ensure that they can make the most of their resources and reduce expenses while still providing quality support services to emergency responders.

Law enforcement officers face numerous physical and mental challenges in their daily work, including physical conditioning, fatigue, and stress. These human factors can lead to health issues as well as decreased performance during critical events. To reduce the risk of harm to both officers and civilians, it is essential for law enforcement agencies to recognize the effects of these human factors on officer safety and well-being. They should provide training about them to their staff, implement policies that encourage resilience for officers before duty assignments, and open up a dialogue with the public regarding how they affect police-citizen interactions. By better understanding these human factors and their impact on law enforcement operations, we can ensure a safer environment for all involved (Harrington, 2017).

Conclusion

Law enforcement agencies can proactively provide their officers with the resources they need to remain mentally and emotionally healthy. This has become increasingly important as law enforcement demands have become more complex, including responding to various traumatic incidents, facing dangerous situations daily, and managing the stress that comes with upholding public trust. By proactively investing in mental health services for officers, such as peer support groups like LEAPS, law enforcement agencies can ensure that their personnel are better able to cope with these unique stresses. Furthermore, this investment benefits both departments and communities as it prevents future issues from arising due to an officer's mental or emotional instability and reduces risks associated with compromised safety. Creating programs dedicated to recognizing signs of distress in officers, providing them with necessary support before serious issues occur, and fostering an open dialogue about mental health issues within law enforcement

can go a long way toward promoting healthier work environments and protecting those who serve us every day.

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