

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER SUPPORT

## **The Importance of Peer Support**

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### Abstract

The importance of peer support for law enforcement has become a topic of interest for agencies across the United States. It's been proven that peer support teams that are trained and supported by their departments become an integral part of maintaining mental health and wellbeing for the department employees. Stress in law enforcement has always been an issue; continued exposure to high-stress incidents such as life-threatening situations or loss of life can lead to high levels of psychological stress for everyone involved in the encounter. As a result, it is important that all department employees learn how to manage stress and be aware of the resources available to them to assist with managing the stress. The purpose of this capstone is to gain the support of department administrators in the development of peer support teams. Some administrators do not see the need for peer support teams because most department employees have access to employee assistance programs, or private insurance that will cover the cost of psychological counseling. Although professional psychological counseling is an advantage over what has been done in the past, it is still insufficient based on it being available in a timely manner and it will not consistently meet the needs of the officers at the time of the event. The value for agencies to have a strong, formal peer-support team in place is invaluable. It gives the officers an essential stress management tool to reflect on a stressful or critical incident and share their experiences with others who understand the job; along with the ability to receive feedback from others who have experienced similar situations.

### **The Importance of Peer Support**

Peer support teams within police departments are becoming more prevalent in today's society; the need to discuss and monitor an officer's emotional health is vital in securing the wellness of officers both on and off the job. According to Zercoe, (2015), police officers are more likely to seek emotional assistance from one of their peers over an individual outside of the badge. Zercoe states the reason officers cannot handle repeated exposure to traumatic events is not because they are weak in character or mind, but because they simply have not been taught appropriate coping skills to deal with the constant exposure to trauma. It is also important to start changing the officer's mindset of the "tough-guy" mentality and the way cops perceive seeking help as a weakness, defect, or character flaw; and to switch that train of thought so an officer feels comfortable seeking help within the department. By getting rid of the "tough-guy" mentality officers will no longer have the fear of losing their gun and badge for them seeking emotional support from peers after a traumatic incident has been experienced (Zercoe,2015).

The amount of police suicides recorded by the *Badge of Life*, who has a mission to lessen the impacts of both stress and trauma experienced by law enforcement officers, constantly reminds agencies of the need for peer support teams. Darren Dake, a 30 year veteran of law enforcement, obtained information for the *Badge of Life* states that in 2008, 2009, and 2012, police suicide rates were 141, 143, and 126 respectively (Dake, 2015). Other information referenced that in 2016 and 2017 the rates of police suicide continued to decrease. Even though police suicides seem to be decreasing slightly as the years progress, we know one suicide is far too many; thus detailing the continued need for peer support teams to combat this tragic trend. Equally important is the understanding that peer support teams are not enacted to only reduce the amount of police suicides within a department; but these teams are also incorporated to address

numerous other negative consequences of exposure to traumatic incidents such as alcoholism, depression, divorce and anxiety, which if left unaddressed can be shattering to the overall health and wellbeing of an officer (Zercoe, 2015).

### **Literature Review**

According to Zercoe (2015), “The purpose of a peer support group is to aid an officer during times of both professional and personal crisis through the use of specially-trained volunteer officers within the department” (para. 5). Peer support teams help to address or prevent the negative effects of trauma and stress. By putting a formal team in place, it will help to address officer fatigue/burnout, assist with stress and trauma associated with critical incidents, offer peer support and address not only professional but personal issues officers may be experiencing as well as other officer wellness related issues. Distress can cause cognitive, emotional, behavioral, physical, and spiritual discomfort. Members of the same group tend to have shared history and experiences, and offer existing relationships in place to build upon. Law enforcement personnel experience, and are exposed to many incidents and individuals while performing their job duties unlike members of the public and other industries. The focus of peer support is internal within the department and focuses on the wellbeing of department members. This creates many unique challenges for those in the career field in relation to stress and exposure to critical incidents. Alcoholism, suicide and divorce rates are high in the profession (Zercoe, 2015).

Although many agencies offer access to employee assistance teams, statistics show although employees are aware of the availability, they are not accessed by a high percentage of those in need because they either choose not to access their employee assistance programs or they are not aware of how to utilize the resource (Donnelly, 2015). Peer support teams offer

members of the same group, shared history and experience, to support and assist each other in time of need. The goal of service delivery by a peer support team should be to mitigate the negative impact of critical incident stress on all affected staff members.

A critical incident can be any serious incident at work, or any situation causing distressing reactions occurring in the course of personal and professional life. Additional goals of a peer support team should be to lower emotional tension, normalize the reactions and facilitate a normal recovery process, restore individual's adaptive functions and identify who may need professional care and referrals. When the need and desire to create a peer support team is identified, multiple considerations must be addressed; clear goals, objectives and communication are essential (IACP, 2016).

### **Social Movements**

Law enforcement is a profession that exposes its personnel to a wide variety of stressors which directly impacts the wellbeing of law enforcement officers. Some of the stressors are inherently part of the job while others are created through the impact of social movements and political actions. Social movements and political protest are not a new concept. We argue that some of the major social movements that have effected and helped to shape our country include the American Revolution from 1775-1783, the Abolitionists Movement from 1830-1860, that led to the abolishment of slavery, and the Civil Rights Movement from 1955-1968 which led to equal rights for African Americans and the end of segregation. We believe the choice that the past two United States Presidents have made to weigh in on high profile police matters has helped to fuel the social movement teams, those who are pro-law enforcement as well as anti-law enforcement. On July 14, 2009, President Obama spoke to the news media regarding the incident in Cambridge, Ma. The president described that the Cambridge Massachusetts Police Officer

acted “stupidly” when they arrested Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. According to Simmons (2017), President Obama later acknowledged that his word choice was poor leading him to comment,

To the extent that my choice of words didn't illuminate, but rather contributed to more media frenzy, I think that was unfortunate.... Because of our history, because of the difficulties of the past, you know, African Americans are sensitive to these issues. And even when you've got a police officer who has a fine track record on racial sensitivity, interactions between police officers and the African American community can sometimes be fraught with misunderstanding (para. 7).

There were several police matters that President Obama commented on very early into the matter before the facts were completely fleshed out.

The transition of the presidency from Obama to Trump has seen a continued trend in the president weighing in and commenting on police matters before the facts are fleshed out. During Trump’s campaign for the presidency, he promised to return law and order to the country. After Trump was sworn in as the 45<sup>th</sup> president, one of Trump's first executive orders, signed in early February 2017, directed the attorney general to develop a strategy for prosecuting attacks on law enforcement personnel and to make certain existing laws which adequately protect police officers from targeted attacks (para. 2).

One of the most covered and easily recognized social movements is Black Lives Matter. According to the website [blackslivesmatter.com](http://blackslivesmatter.com), in 2013 a black-centered political will and movement building project called #BlackLivesMatter was created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi. “It was in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman.” Its members “organize and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on black communities by the state and vigilantes”. Black Lives Matter mobilized large numbers of protestors, in matters that involved white officers killing young black men. The

messages and chants that were part of their protests were aimed directly at law enforcement. From various news media accounts the chants often included, hands up don't shoot and no justice no peace. At times, these chants were very derogatory and inflammatory toward law enforcement. In an instance in St. Paul, MN, following the injury of an officer, who suffered a broken vertebra when a concrete block was dropped on him, the protesters cheered "One piggly-wiggly down!" There was also a chant that protestors used in New York, stating "Pigs in a blanket! Fry 'em like bacon!" (Tuttle, 2016) In response to the creation of Black Lives Matter Movement, the Blue Lives Matter Movement was created that offered counter protests to the stance taken by Black Lives Matter.

### **Emerging Technology**

When a critical incident occurs that involves a police action, the spotlight is directed on the incident from a variety of sources. Some of the emerging technology that has impacted the wellbeing of law enforcement officers is related to the saturation of media and the difficulties of being able to disconnect from a constant stream of information. The prevalence of cable "news" networks that broadcast on a continual basis and the presence of social media make it difficult for officers to avoid being exposed to the whirlwind of attention. When the elements of an officer-involved situation draw media attention, this opens the door for citizens to weigh in on the matter through Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook, among numerous other social media applications. While these technologies make it difficult for officers to disconnect, these same technologies can also be used to help get the word out about the existence and need for peer support teams. In the writer's professional experience, the "tough-guy" approach of officers dealing with critical incidents was addressed by being told to "rub some dirt on it", take another shot, suck it up and get back in the fight. Officers were very hesitant to reach out for help

because of the fear of being labeled as weak. Now when an officer is involved in a critical incident, leaders in the field are using text messaging and other technologies to promptly put a peer support team on notice.

The formation and necessity of peer support teams is crucial to the future of law enforcement and the overall wellbeing of officers (Normore, 2018). The degree of stress that officers are experiencing is very high, and in our opinion is on the rise. In the experience of the writers, officers are being asked to do more with less and at the same time the demands and the expectations of the public are that officers are being held to a higher standard and are expected to always get it right. This creates an environment where officers feel like they are being placed under a microscope and their every move is being analyzed and critiqued. This has resulted in officers experiencing additional stress.

### **Effects on Police Departments**

According to O'Hara (2018), police agencies from all over the country are implementing a wide variety of programs to reduce police related anxiety, stress, and suicide rates. The implementation of programs include suicide prevention training, peer support teams, chaplaincies, and the hiring of mental health workers, employee assistance programs and screenings of police personnel every six months to a year. The issue of implementing peer support teams within a department forces into play different functions such as department size, resource availability, community or stakeholder buy in and the need for regional or in-house peer support teams. It would be illogical and unrealistic to believe that every department across the United States, regardless of how big or small will have the resources available to implement a team by themselves. The need to rely on a regional peer support team will be essential for smaller agencies; which will require the smaller agencies command staff to have the necessary



phone numbers and resources available to get a peer support team in route. Agencies will also need to guarantee the individuals that volunteer to be a part of the peer support team have the necessary training to effectively and appropriately be the support platform officers need in a time of crisis. This training will also require agencies to have financial obligations and the willingness to send officers to continued training events to stay current in peer support methodology, and the willingness to understand the importance of screening officers every year in an effort to continuously combat the effects of stress.

### **Role of Leadership**

Leadership buy in is required for the successful creation and implementation of a peer support team with reward verses risk as a focus. Numbers and statistics can be used to support this. Moral obligation is important however, statistics reinforce support peer support team success and importance in the law enforcement community. Once a department and administration buy-in is achieved, an outline must be developed. First, policy, procedure and process must be identified. Guidelines for peer support team include team selection, specialized training, and coordinated response for incidents, defusing, debriefing and communication amongst the team. Team selection must also be addressed. A peer support team coordinator must be identified as well as team members. There must be an interest in participating, officers with critical incident experience and previous training should be considered for selection. Recommendations from supervisors can also be helpful in identifying possible candidates. Team training objectives and standards must be identified. Specialized training in critical incident stress management and group crisis intervention should be of focus. Team training is ongoing and will evolve as the team grows and expands. Other areas to consider are pre and post incident education, on scene support, one-on-one defusing following a critical incident, informal

discussions, significant other or spouse support as needed and follow-up, and referrals to mental health professionals. Once the aforementioned are completed, team implementation occurs. This includes introduction of the peer support team and policy to staff, as well as an orientation of the peer support team process and availability to staff. This can be presented in various ways, roll call training or annual in-service training as two options.

The three components of the peer support team are response, coordination and expectations (IACP, 2016). They must be clearly identified and communicated when creating a peer support team. Response consists of identifying the critical incident, defusing (post-event), debrief (post event) and peer support. Coordination requires the selection of the coordination team. This includes the team coordinator and each assigned individuals responsibility to various tasks identified within policy. Expectations need to address the mission or purpose of the team and support the department's vision and mission. This can be the need for confidentiality in performing the required duties as well as informing team members of possible after hour requirements and need for fluid and open communication for the peer support team to be effective (IACP, 2016).

Other areas where peer support teams may be utilized in a department include hospital visitations, support with career-related issues, and death notifications. Substance abuse and employee assistance program referrals, support with relationship and family issues, and employee illness situations can also be applicable to peer support team services. After implementing a peer support team the department and team can work together to expand on related services as seen needed and fit.

The creation and implementation of a peer support team serves the entirety of the department. It develops interpersonal relations and teamwork, concentrating on a healthy balance

of physical and emotional wellbeing. A peer support team is a response to a department wide problem, negative impacts of stress and trauma resulting from exposure to critical incidents as well as personal issues. Leaders must exhibit empathy when responding to those they influence, acceptance to varying feelings and thoughts resulting from encountered situations.

The importance of an authentic leader in initiating and supporting a peer support team requires the leader to have insight or vision about the goals, objectives and desired outcome of the peer support team's general responsibilities. According to Normore (2018), leadership also requires the leader to take initiative and lead by example; by leading through example, leaders will maintain a high level of mental and physical wellbeing themselves, as well as recognizing potential situations which require enhanced peer support by providing guidance to those they lead in deployment of the peer support team. Leadership through leading by example, establishes trust amongst followers. Loyalty is produced as a result of trust and reduces the hesitation for individual's to come forward who are in need of assistance. It further reduces the stigma associated with asking for help and mitigates fears of retaliation or fear from leadership for expressing issues they feel is perceived as weakness in the law enforcement field. When leaders promote a culture of openness and understanding within their department in reference to peer support teams, it shows and places value on department employee's personal and emotional wellbeing regardless of rank. Leaders must understand that unmet expectations or dissatisfaction within the work place leads to poor moral, reduced production, and ruined relationships.

### **Professional Experience**

In our experience, development and implementation of a peer support team has been well received by department members. It has assisted in promoting open communication related to critical incidents affecting the department. The peer support teams responsibilities are outlined in

policy, however since the implementation of the team in 2017, expansion has already occurred. Through clear vision and goals communicated by the team coordinator, a strong understanding of the peer support teams place and purpose within the division has been established. Credible leadership both formal and informal contributing to the success of the team has created trust, resulting in many employees reaching out for help in specific areas when perhaps previously they may not have (Long, 2018).

In addition to their responsibilities in relation to critical incidents, the peer support team has contributed to various other employee related wellness issues, and assistance to individuals within the division whom themselves are affected by outside stressors and crisis as well as those whose family members are.

The peer support team contributes to the thought; the whole is worth more than the sum. Employees are encouraged to share feelings, ask questions, and ask for help and assistance in areas they are struggling, without fear of negative stigma. The peer support team in addition to the employee assistance program made available through the county provided various resources and choices for those experiencing difficulties.

In addition to their formal duties, the team organizes activities for department members to participate in to increase camaraderie and team recreation as well as organize special events for retirements, special achievements and deploying information employees would like distributed to department members in regards to their personal lives. This can include births of a child, death notices, illnesses or any other information they would like to share with their coworkers.

### **Conclusion**

The necessity of a peer support team in law enforcement agencies continues to become prevalent in today's policing community. The day of the solution for officer's response to critical

incidents, the “tough-guy” approach of “rub some dirt on it” or take another shot has to be replaced with a structured team response of individuals who have shared law enforcement experiences.

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