

APRIL 2023

Officer Safety and Wellness Group Meeting Summary

Safer Together

Mary-Jo Robinson

EMERGING ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Wellness Teach Community
Collaboration Plannin
Engagement Trust
Culture Growth Education
Health Strength



COPS
Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice



BJA
Bureau of Justice Assistance
U.S. Department of Justice

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Recommended citation:

Robinson, Mary-Jo. 2024. *Safer Together: Emerging Issues and Recommendations*. Officer Safety and Wellness Group Meeting Summary. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

Published 2024

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Letter from the Directors of BJA and the COPS Office

Colleagues:

Since 2011, the Officer Safety and Wellness (OSW) Group has worked to improve the health and well-being of the men and women of our nation's law enforcement agencies. In recent meetings, the group focused on mental and physical health and well-being issues, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic; officer resilience; officer suicides; felonious assaults on officers; peer support networks, crisis hotlines, and other programs to help improve law enforcement health and safety; and the unique safety and wellness challenges facing small and rural law enforcement agencies.

In April 2023, the OSW Group concentrated discussions on the intersection between officer safety and community wellness. Participants recognized that the environment in which law enforcement agencies work and the needs and desires of the communities they serve are changing, so they brainstormed ideas for promoting positive law enforcement–community engagement and incorporating this concept as a foundational component of law enforcement culture.

Participants were also introduced to the Bureau of Justice Assistance's (BJA) Safer Together campaign—a training suite emphasizing the connections between officer safety and wellness, crime reduction, and community trust. Safer Together provides tools and resources to help law enforcement adapt and work with their communities to develop and support safe, healthy relationships supported by mutual trust.

BJA and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) are proud to partner in support of the OSW Group. We are grateful to the law enforcement officers, leaders, subject matter experts, and others who continue to offer their time and expertise to help guide our efforts as we develop the best resources possible for the field.

Sincerely,



Hugh T. Clements, Jr.
Director
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services



Karlhlon F. Moore
Director
Bureau of Justice Assistance

History and Evolution of the Officer Safety and Wellness Group

Founded in 2011, the National Officer Safety and Wellness (OSW) Group is a collaborative initiative of the U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ) Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) and the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). The OSW Group brings together a variety of law enforcement stakeholders from across the country, including the following:

- Law enforcement officers (LEO) of all ranks
- Local agency leadership
- Regional agency leadership
- Federal agency representatives
- Community leaders
- Representatives of major stakeholder organizations
- Members of the research community.

OSW Group meetings provide an opportunity for these diverse stakeholders to engage in open discussions about the challenges facing law enforcement and to collaboratively generate ideas for addressing those challenges. The group creates a platform for a range of law enforcement voices to be heard, opinions and ideas to be shared, and collaboration toward common goals to be achieved. This cooperation results in the generation of recommendations for the field, from the field, that are relatable and relevant to the current daily experience of LEOs across ranks.

The OSW Group was born out of a recognition that the individuals who make up the law enforcement field are the field's most important and valuable asset. Further, founders of the group recognized that effectively supporting those individuals, across all ranks, would shape the culture and forward movement of law enforcement in the United States. Based upon this foundational belief, through this working group, the COPS Office and BJA created a platform to move from sentiment to action toward improving the way the industry and our society cares for law enforcement professionals. Encouraging local, regional, tribal, and territorial law enforcement agencies to adopt a culture of safety and well-

ness, the group maintains its original goals:

- To create a space for law enforcement stakeholders to collaborate on improving officer safety and wellness
- To encourage knowledge sharing among law enforcement organizations regarding safety and wellness initiatives
- To disseminate information and best practices to the field (COPS Office 2024)

At its inception, the OSW Group aimed to address the number of officer gunfire fatalities and to improve officer safety and wellness generally. Over the course of the earliest meetings, the group identified sixteen safety and wellness priorities in four broad categories of the law enforcement field:

I. Leadership and management

1. Leadership and safety practices
2. Equipment
3. Deployment strategies and communication technologies

II. Operational and emergency responses

1. Injuries and deaths from gunfire
2. Premeditated and unprovoked ambushes
3. Rifle, long gun, and assault weapon threats
4. Task force operations (federal and local)
5. Offender history and behavior during incident
6. Court security

III. Training

1. Education and training
2. Emergency vehicle operation and safety
3. Foot pursuit safety

IV. Mental and physical health and wellness

1. Physical health
2. Psychological health
3. Maintaining good health
4. Former military in law enforcement

The OSW Group has experienced remarkable growth and evolution since 2011. The early years of the OSW Group focused primarily on physical safety, including discussions of seat belt policies,

protocols for responding to dangerous calls, and the importance of all agencies having access to proper, high quality safety equipment. As the law enforcement field moved in the direction of stronger physical safety practices and standards—with many agencies across the country improving their training, policies, and procedures—the OSW Group transitioned to focus on additional emerging topics, concerns, and challenges in the field.

Over time, the group's discussions moved away from the more traditional ideas and topics of officer safety, toward overall health and wellness more generally. While conversations around safety have remained a common thread, meeting themes have broadened and demonstrated an understanding that officer safety can be impacted, both positively and negatively, by officers' overall wellness. This realization precipitated health-focused conversations. The early discussions of health were primarily focused on its physical aspects, with limited mention of mental health. OSW Group meeting conversations centered on cardiac issues, exercise and diet habits among officers, stress management, and strategies for maintaining good health while working in law enforcement. But as society began to acknowledge the importance of mental health care and addressing the stigma around mental health, the law enforcement community also began to think more critically about mental health as an important component of overall officer safety and wellness. More specifically, the field became more open to speaking about the trauma inherent to the work of law enforcement; the impacts of this trauma on officer mental health; and the risks of unaddressed mental health challenges for the individual officer, the officer's family, the agency, and the community being served by that officer. This awareness prompted OSW Group discussions about the need for increased access to mental health supports and the necessary, broader culture shift

At the national level, the culture has also continued to shift, providing resources to support local agencies in establishing environments that support and encourage mental health care and addressing the stigma around mental health and wellness.

toward encouraging officers to engage in mental healthcare. Conversations acknowledged that this culture shift would require ongoing efforts to address the particularly strong stigma associated with mental health care in law enforcement and eliminating additional barriers to accessing mental health supports. Meeting topics also explored more specific discussions about depression, suicide, suicidal ideation, chronic stress and anxiety, and substance use among LEOs.

Since 2015, law enforcement agencies have implemented, strengthened, and expanded mental health and wellness resources, including internally embedded mental health providers, peer support and chaplaincy programs, and partnerships with external support services. At the national level, the culture has also continued to shift, providing resources to support local agencies in establishing environments that support and encourage mental health care and addressing the stigma around mental health and wellness. One example of federal efforts is the passing of the Public Safety Officer Support Act of 2022, which extends disability and death benefits to the families of

officers who have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or have died by suicide in the line of duty (Hymes and MacFarlane 2022).

As law enforcement leaders across the country continue to strengthen a culture that embraces and prioritizes mental wellness, OSW Group conversations have expanded to consider the relationship between law enforcement and the individuals and communities they serve. More specifically, the law enforcement field, and society as a whole, have ramped up critical considerations of the impact of law enforcement on the wellness of individuals and communities they serve, as well as the impact of individuals and communities on the wellness of law enforcement professionals. Further, current conversations consider the dangers of a culture that does not encourage and provide access to mental health care for law enforcement professionals and community members alike. LEOs with unaddressed mental health concerns pose a risk not only to themselves but also to their communities, which are impacted by their police officers' mental wellness. The inverse is also true: Unaddressed mental health challenges of community members pose risks to the safety and wellness of the law enforcement officers who have sworn to protect them.

OSW Group conversations have expanded to consider the relationship between law enforcement and the individuals and communities they serve.

The Current National Context

High-profile events, including the deaths of (among others) Tyre Nichols, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, have impacted the mental health and wellness of law enforcement officers and communities alike—particularly communities of color. The national responses to each of these incidents have pushed the conversation about the relationship between law enforcement and communities to the forefront of American consciousness.

Law enforcement leaders across the nation recognize that the time to identify new, innovative approaches to strengthening the relationship between communities and law enforcement—for the safety and wellness of both officers and communities—is now. Vince Davenport, Associate Deputy Director at BJA, has noted that “the public has sent a clear message over the past few years. The public has said, ‘We get a right to say how we are policed. . . . We get a say in this.’ Our authority is on loan from the people.”

Law enforcement leaders across the nation recognize that the time to identify new, innovative approaches to strengthening the relationship between communities and law enforcement—for the safety and wellness of both officers and communities—is now.

While community policing principles have always been a focus of COPS Office and BJA initiatives, this current national context has prompted deeper consideration of the ways in which the wellness of individual LEOs, law enforcement agencies, and the national law enforcement culture impacts communities and vice versa. More specifically, BJA and the COPS Office are taking a closer look at ways in which officer wellness is informed by community interactions and engagement, acknowledging that LEO health and wellness and community health and wellness are inextricably linked.

The relationship between communities and law enforcement—and more specifically the ways in which the safety and wellness of one impacts the other—was the central focus of the 2023 OSW Group Meeting. BJA had recently developed a training program and campaign (BJA VALOR Program’s Safer Together) centered around these concepts. The Safer Together theme highlights this relationship and holds that, when working together in collaboration toward shared goals, law enforcement and community members can be key partners in improving the safety and wellness of communities

for both law enforcement professionals and community members alike. Meeting participants used the philosophy behind Safer Together as a discussion platform. During the meeting, participants were asked to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and opinions regarding the Safer Together theme and the underlying concept that the safety and wellness of law enforcement officers impacts and encourages the safety and wellness of community members and vice versa. Meeting organizers and session facilitators prompted participants to consider the concept that working together is the most effective and efficient way to achieve common safety and wellness goals. Further, working collaboratively to achieve a positive community climate in which there is trust, engagement, and partnership between law enforcement and the people who live and work in their community will decrease stress and anxiety in routine interactions, reduce tension in community-police engagements, and likely improve safety outcomes for both officers and community members.

Meeting organizers and session facilitators prompted participants to consider the concept that working together is the most effective and efficient way to achieve common safety and wellness goals.

Overview of the April 2023 Meeting

For the first time since before the COVID-19 pandemic, the OSW Group gathered in person in Washington, D.C., on April 5–6, 2023. This was the first OSW Group meeting for three-quarters of the participants, creating an opportunity for new and diverse perspectives to be shared. Since the 2021 virtual meeting (Bradley 2021), the national context has amplified the already high levels of stress among front-line officers, deepened and generated new distrust between law enforcement and communities, and ultimately resulted in confusion around the role of law enforcement and the value that communities and the nation place on police and policing. Conversations about the role of law enforcement, about law enforcement mental health, and about law enforcement agencies' relationships with and impact upon the communities they serve have all been central to the national narrative and discourse in the previous decade.

This shifting national discourse around law enforcement and the changing sentiments about what communities want and expect from law enforcement have prompted national agencies and leaders in the field to reflect, rethink, and reorganize to respond to the moment in a way that prioritizes officer safety and wellness while demonstrating to community members that the field recognizes and takes seriously the expectations and sentiments of the people. Leaders in the field have begun considering ways to reframe the current climate of distrust and resentment, approaching the situation as an opportunity to consider the mutual benefits that can be generated by having important, difficult conversations between law enforcement and communities. Further, the current climate presents an opportunity to consider solutions and change that could be driven by collaboration as partners working toward a common goal: safe, healthy communities composed of safe, healthy individuals, including the LEOs who live and work in these communities. Recognizing the importance of this moment, BJA and the COPS Office brought together a diverse range of law enforcement stakeholders from across the country to engage in the 2023 OSW Group meeting around the theme of Safer Together, exploring the inextricable relationship between communities and law enforcement and the power of this relationship to achieve common goals.

APRIL 2023 OSW GROUP MEETING ATTENDEES

Moderators

William Balling

Senior Research Associate
Institute for Intergovernmental Research

Sherri Martin

National Director of Wellness Services
National Fraternal Order of Police Foundation

David Perry

Senior Research Associate
Institute for Intergovernmental Research

Experts from the field

Paco Balderrama

Chief of Police
Fresno (CA) Police Department

Shannon Baldwin

Corporal
Prince George's County (MD) Police Department

Tim Barfield

Chief of Police (ret.)
Wellington (OH) Police Department

Joseph Brooks

Chief of Police
Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Police

Dane Burris

Field Training Officer
Indianapolis (IN) Metropolitan Police Department

Jeffery Cardinal

Sergeant
Oakland County (MI) Sheriff's Office

John Chesney

Corporal
Bremerton (WA) Police Department

Valerie Cunningham

Deputy Chief of Police
Indianapolis (IN) Metropolitan Police Department

Rita Curley

Police Officer (ret.)
Amherst (MA) Police Department

Daniel Davis

Lieutenant
Belton (MO) Police Department

Vincent Deville

Sergeant
Pineville (LA) Police Department

Matthew Furse

Police Major
St. Petersburg (FL) Police Department

Omari George

Officer First Class
New Castle County (DE) Division of Police

Joe Gray

Trooper
Illinois State Police

Bradley Helm, Jr.

Police Sergeant
Baltimore City (MD) Police Department

Todd Hill

Captain
Oakland County (MI) Sheriff's Office

Melissa Hyatt

Chief of Police (ret.)
Baltimore County (MD) Police Department

Rev. Kenneth Irby

Director of Community Intervention
St. Petersburg (FL) Police Department

Matthew Kelly

Undersheriff
Miami County (KS) Sheriff's Office

Robert Martin

Chief of Police
Snowflake-Taylor (AZ) Police Department

Michael Mazzeo

Investigator
Rochester (NY) Police Department

Erick Miller

Corporal
Charleston (WV) Police Department

Kathryn Mone

Major
York County (ME) Sheriff's Office

Courtney Parker

Detective
St. Petersburg (FL) Police Department

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APRIL 2023 OSW GROUP MEETING ATTENDEES

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Reuben Ramirez

Assistant Chief of Police
Dallas (TX) Police Department

David Rice

Police Sergeant (ret.)
Greenfield (MA) Police Department

Jeff Richards

Sheriff
Franklin County (KS) Sheriff's Office

Christen Rope

Sergeant
Mesa (AZ) Police Department

Scott Rose

Sheriff
Dodge County (MN) Sheriff's Office

George Sakellakis

Sergeant
Brook Park (OH) Police Department

Becki Sammons

Police Officer
Iowa City (IA) Police Department

Scott Sitts

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Rapid City (SD) Police Department

John Treadwell, Sr.

Police Major
New Castle County (DE) Division of Police

Subject matter experts

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Executive Director
Ohio Patrolmen's Benevolent Association

Jeremy Barnum

Deputy Director
Police Executive Research Forum

Nicholas Breul

Senior Project Manager
National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund

Laura Cooper

Executive Director
Major Cities Chiefs Association

Dwayne Crawford

Executive Director
National Organization of Black Law
Enforcement Executives

Harvey Hedden

Executive Director
International Law Enforcement
Educators and Trainers Association

Rev. Markel Hutchins

Chairman, Board of Directors
and Chief Executive Officer
MovementForward, Inc.

William Johnson

Executive Director
National Association of Police Organizations

Yesim Karaman

Director of Government Affairs
National Sheriffs' Association

Cathy Knape

Training Manager
Peace Officers Research Association of California

Darrell Kriplean

President
Phoenix Law Enforcement Association

Maureen McGough

Chief of Strategic Initiatives
The Policing Project at NYU Law

Michael McHale

President
National Association of Police Organizations

Megan Noland

Executive Director
Major County Sheriffs of America

Tim Richardson

Senior Legislative Liaison
National Fraternal Order of Police

Lynda Schwartz

Executive Director
Virginia Center for Policing Innovation

Jared Seide

Executive Director
Beyond Us & Them

Jeff Spivey

Chair
International Association of Chiefs of Police

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APRIL 2023 OSW GROUP MEETING ATTENDEES

(Continued from page 9)

Officer Safety and Wellness Section

Daniel Stump

Senior Manager
Institute for Intergovernmental Research

Jonathan Thompson

Executive Director
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National Sheriffs' Association

Jennifer Zeunik

Senior Director
National Policing Institute

Observers

Jillian Barnas

AAAS STP Fellow
National Institute of Justice

Joel Hunt

Senior Computer Scientist
National Institute of Justice

John Liebengood

Guest of BJA and the COPS Office

Dr. Serena Liebengood

Guest of BJA and the COPS Office

Dr. Oliver Stone

Supervisory Clinical Psychologist
U.S. Marshals Service

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Hugh T. Clements, Jr.

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Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

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Sara Dziejma

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Social Science Analyst
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

The April 2023 OSW Group meeting provided an opportunity to gather feedback from diverse voices in the law enforcement field about creating a culture that not only accepts the inextricable link between officer and community wellness but also centers that relationship and establishes opportunities to engage with communities on a regular basis in ways that support a positive community climate. The two-day meeting consisted primarily of break-out discussions, providing an opportunity for participants to engage in robust discussions about these topics, followed by whole-group debriefs to share the ideas generated in the break-out sessions. Meeting organizers strategically designed the break-out sessions to incorporate initial sessions made up of similarly ranked professionals, followed by groups of mixed rank, ranging from chiefs to line officers. This strategy created a safe and comfortable space for all participants to openly share their experiences, perspectives, and ideas and then allowed professionals across ranks and titles to hear from one another. Overall, the meeting enabled participants to engage in difficult conversations about hard topics and generated potential ideas and recommendations that will be relevant to and informed by officers working daily in the field. As one 18-year police veteran said, “If we take care of our own people and teach them how to take care of the people that they police, everyone will be better off.”

“If we take care of our own people and teach them how to take care of the people that they police, everyone will be better off.”

– 18-year police veteran

Creating Buy-In for the Intersection of Officer Wellness and Positive Community Engagement

A primary focus of the April 2023 OSW Group Meeting was the importance of establishing in agencies a foundational belief in the relationship between officer safety and wellness and community safety and wellness. That is, prioritizing this relationship and establishing strong relationships with communities must be a central principle of agencies across the country. Participants first reckoned with their own opinions about this relationship and then produced strategies for creating internal buy-in to this principle across all ranks of an agency as well as external buy-in among community members. A number of common themes emerged, with consensus across ranks from law enforcement executives to line officers. Five components were identified as essential for establishing an agency culture that centers community relationships:

1. **Training** officers of all ranks on community engagement and the principle that law enforcement and community safety and wellness are inextricably linked
2. Developing **strategic approaches to establishing buy-in** from the top down
3. **Building officer trust and engagement** internally so that they believe in and champion agency principles
4. **Engaging communities in building positive relationships** and community-based strategies for improving safety and wellness
5. **Embracing opportunities for growth in the culture of law enforcement** to foster community partnerships

TRAINING

Training is a foundational opportunity to foster a culture that centers community partnership in a manner that is sustainable over the long term. Incorporating required trainings on the importance of building strong relationships with communities and the impact of positive community climates on officer safety and wellness will be critical for establishing the culture shift that the current context requires. Law enforcement professionals across ranks agreed that training on these topics should begin in law enforcement academies and become required new hire, in-service, and yearly review curriculum. Many meeting participants suggested incorporating training that centers the role and importance of positive law enforcement–community relationships into accreditation requirements. Further, officers across all ranks, from the top down, should be required to receive training on these principles.

Training is a foundational opportunity to foster a culture that centers community partnership in a manner that is sustainable over the long term.

According to group participants, buy-in strategies must strategically engage law enforcement instructors and field training officers (FTO). Instructors and FTOs who believe deeply in these principles and the importance of fostering a positive community climate will hold a high standard for the training and will aim for more than just

completion as a necessary “check of a box,” as one participant stated. In addition, instructors and FTOs who are champions of the principles will find creative ways to incentivize officers to truly engage with the curriculum and materials. Field training on these concepts can ensure that the topic stays front-of-mind and becomes an important part of each officer’s—and the agency’s—day-to-day operations.

STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO ESTABLISHING BUY-IN

Strategic, well-planned approaches to establishing buy-in are central to successfully getting officers across ranks on board with adopting a new (or strengthening an existing) agency principle and corresponding practices. Efforts should target agency leadership, frontline supervisors, FTOs, and rank-and-file officers alike with approaches specifically tailored to each group.

The importance of achieving buy-in among middle managers was echoed across discussions at the OSW Group meeting. While support from senior leadership is essential, the buy-in of middle managers is equally important given that they have more direct, regular contact with the rank and file and often have more influence than senior leadership on front-line officers.

Achieving the buy-in of the rank and file requires involving them in the front-end planning and implementation of new principles, practices, and approaches. Creating spaces for rank-and-file officers to share their opinions, perspectives, experiences, and ideas as they relate to strengthening relationships with communities will create a sense of ownership, leading to increased engagement

in the related practices and principles as well as sustained engagement over time. Further, engaging rank-and-file representatives on the front end creates an opportunity for those officers to have conversations with others and to model behaviors that support positive community engagements and relationship building on the job, generating more acceptance and increasing the reach of the principles early on.

Identifying and leveraging champions within agencies will be a key to achieving broad buy-in across ranks. Champions should be individuals who not only believe in the importance of building a culture that centers community collaboration and building positive community relationships but also are broadly engaged within their departments, respected by their peers, and well connected to officers throughout their agency. Operationalizing champions has the power to legitimize the purpose and importance of these principles. Once identified, agency leadership should support these champions with the resources necessary to spread the message and engage with others about the importance of a positive community relationship with shared ideals and goals.

Identifying and leveraging champions within agencies will be a key to achieving broad buy-in across ranks.

Recognizing generational differences and incorporating buy-in strategies that will reach different generations of LEOs will strengthen the likelihood of successful and sustainable implementation of these principles. Generational differences in openness to discussing officer wellness, and mental health in particular, may require different strategies for approaching these conversations to encourage receptiveness across different generations. For example, an app to identify needs in the community may not be as accessible for older generations of officers who are not as comfortable using mobile technology, thereby creating a barrier to opportunities for community engagement. Leaders must understand the diversity of their force and tailor strategic buy-in strategies to reflect that same diversity and increase engagement and accessibility to the principles and practices.

BUILDING OFFICER TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT

In light of the national context in which officers are operating, OSW Group meeting participants indicated that officer trust—both in their agencies (internally) and in their communities (externally)—is at an all-time low. Participants repeatedly stated that officers' trust in the communities and individuals they serve has steadily declined as the national media have highlighted and amplified police reform rhetoric and protests. The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated this issue, as officers, along with the rest of the country, spent substantially less time engaging with their communities. With more time spent absorbing the polarized public narrative and less time interacting with community members on a day-to-day basis, officer mistrust in the American public only grew. This observation is supported by recent data. The National Director of Wellness Services at the FOP

shared that in a recent FOP survey, more than 50 percent of LEOs who responded indicated that they are fearful of being sued, fired, or even arrested as a result of actions taken while on the job. Officers feel undervalued and at risk while doing their jobs. This dissatisfaction has been one factor in the current unprecedented recruitment and retention challenges, including soaring numbers of resignations (Westervelt 2021). Law enforcement leaders, both nationally and in agencies across the country, must validate the feelings of low morale and lack of public trust and create safe spaces for officers to share openly about their experiences. Leaders should engage in routine conversations with the rank and file. These conversations should include language that encourages officers to believe that more engagement with communities is the antidote to mistrust and fear for both officers and community members alike.

Law enforcement leaders must validate the feelings of low morale and lack of public trust and create safe spaces for officers to share openly about their experiences.

tions with the rank and file. These conversations should include language that encourages officers to believe that more engagement with communities is the antidote to mistrust and fear for both officers and community members alike.

Leaders in law enforcement must also build officer trust internally. Officers are seeking confirmation that they are supported by leadership, particularly around community

engagement. The culture of policing has historically reinforced a “warrior” mentality, which has often resulted in a disconnect between officers and communities. Further, officers in the meeting reported that the field has prioritized efficiency and quantity, encouraging officers to move quickly from one call to the next. This drive for efficiency is likely due in part to the increased volume of work that agencies face with fewer staff. However, officers want to know that their jobs will be secure and that they will be supported as efforts shift toward more nonenforcement community interactions as well as toward taking longer on calls to allow for a more human-centered approach.

In addition, officers are wary of yet another shift in practices and policies. Participants reflected that new practices and initiatives seem to get “recycled,” using the same approaches to implementation that have proven unsuccessful for past efforts. One officer said, “We make something new and exciting, but it’s essentially the same underlying principle. If we want something different, we have got to do some things differently.” Another officer said, “When you plan to implement a new initiative, you need to first think about who you want to engage and create a safe space for them to engage before rolling out the program.” National and local leadership must consider ways to effectively build officer trust that leadership will be supportive, that officers will be engaged in planning and their feedback will be incorporated in implementation, and that communities will be receptive and supportive.

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

As a meeting participant said, “Public safety is not just [law enforcement’s] job. It is the responsibility of the entire community. Law enforcement needs to understand that we are a part of the solution, but we are not the entirety of the solution.” Engaging communities from the very start

as collaborators on building a culture that centers community relationships is essential to successfully strengthening community climates. This includes bringing community members into conversations about the strategies and practices for relationship building and collaboration. Community members have skills, knowledge, and expertise that will be valuable to building a culture of mutual responsibility and partnership. Leveraging these resources will not only foster community buy-in but also provide law enforcement agencies with insights into the community context that may otherwise not be available to the agency.

Officers reflected that empathy is a key element to building trust between law enforcement and communities and that strengthening empathy requires connection and engagement. Research shows that feeling a sense of social connection is an important part of triggering prosocial behaviors (Abramson 2021), meaning that the more time officers spend interacting with the communities they serve, the more empathy both the officers and community members will develop for one another. Having empathy increases the likelihood of helping others and is an important component of successful relationships, as it allows people to understand others' perspectives, needs, and intentions (Greater Good Science Center 2024).

Officers reflected that empathy is a key element to building trust between law enforcement and communities and that strengthening empathy requires connection and engagement.

Preliminary research on empathy and policing suggests that law enforcement interactions that demonstrate empathy can build trust and allow officers to diffuse situations with less use of force, ultimately improving the safety and well-being of officers and community members alike. A study with the Seattle Police Department reviewed the impact of a program called LEED—Listening and Explaining with Equity and Dignity—on policing outcomes. This study found that officers trained on LEED principles, including active listening, use of calm and respectful language, and perspective taking, had significantly different behavioral patterns than those who were not trained. Outcomes included more than 25 percent fewer arrests made by LEED-trained officers and a more than 50 percent reduction in the likelihood of use of force in an encounter by officers trained on those principles (Suttie 2016).

Laying the groundwork for increased touchpoints with communities must be a central focus of agencies across the country. For those officers who police in communities where they do not live, a helpful approach to increased connection and shared empathy with community members may be a redefining of community. More specifically, the definition of an officer's personal community must be broadened to encompass the community where they work. This simple shift can increase a sense of belonging, connection, and responsibility for the communities where officers are policing.

EMBRACING OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH IN THE CULTURE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

During the two-day meeting, participants reflected on areas of opportunity for the law enforcement field to foster a culture that promotes officer and community safety and wellness. These ideas may support the growth and sustainability of a law enforcement culture that centers positive community engagements and views communities as important partners with shared goals around safety and wellness. Areas of opportunity identified by meeting participants include the following:

- Consider the culture of police academies. Shift toward practices that model not only the principles of health and wellness that are essential for officers but also the behaviors and approaches that are desirable in officer engagements with community members and communities as a whole. As one veteran officer said, “We used this aggressive approach in police academies, like yelling and throwing bags, because we told ourselves we were raising tough cops. But we get back what we push out, and this behavior is what we’ve been pushing out.”
- Establish a culture that reinforces and rewards community engagement and interaction:
 - Recognize and encourage officers for positive nonenforcement interactions.
 - Make policy and procedure adaptations that enable officers to prioritize community engagement opportunities. For example, meeting participants recommended that agencies make engagement in community events or service opportunities a standard practice required at the agency and individual officer level.
 - Review staffing models and practices to ensure that officers have the capacity to realistically engage with their communities.
 - Reevaluate how success is defined and incentivized. Embed nonenforcement community interaction as an indicator of success.
- Assess the definition and concept of policing, shifting away from a mentality of police as warriors toward one of police as engaged community partners.
- Engage members of the community in conversations and planning on a regular basis for opportunities to share ideas, build trust, collaboratively problem solve, and build relationships. Create opportunities that not only allow community members to learn about law enforcement but also allow law enforcement to learn from community members.
- Center wellness in the culture of policing across the country, focusing on resource identification and accessibility for officers.
- Establish mandatory attendance at psychological debriefings after exposure to a critical incident.
- Encourage officers to hold one another accountable for their wellness and for their interactions with the community.

Institutionalizing and Sustaining a Culture of Community Partnership

Institutionalizing and sustaining a culture that centers positive community partnership depends on the strategic, thoughtful implementation of reflective policies and practices both nationally and locally. According to OSW Group meeting participants, the forward momentum for sustaining such a culture requires the same principles necessary for implementing it, including the following:

- Ongoing, routine training on the importance of positive community interactions and relationships
- Sustained, intentional engagement of both the rank and file and communities
- Continued efforts to build trust both internally and externally
- Supporting champions and middle management in their efforts to institutionalize these principles

Institutionalization of the philosophy and principles that reflect the inextricable link between officer and community safety and wellness requires, in part, a commitment to growing the overall culture of officer wellness in the field of law enforcement. Practices and policies that reflect the importance of community-police relations will, if adopted and practiced effectively, strengthen wellness by increasing positive community engagements, decreasing stress, and creating more opportunities for shared wellness. However, to ensure that these principles are effectively institutionalized, officers must be in a state of wellness to engage in practices that are reflective of the principles. As was echoed throughout the two-day meeting, officers who are not well cannot serve communities well. BJA Director Karhlton Moore said, “We need to work toward making sure our officers are safe and well and that our communities are safe and well. . . . It all starts with wellness.” Efforts to strategically implement and establish buy-in around principles to strengthen community-police relationships will fall short if officers across the nation are unable to seek and maintain wellness. Therefore, it is imperative that

agencies encourage and enable officers to proactively access strategies for establishing and sustaining holistic wellness. This encouragement includes ensuring low-barrier access to necessary wellness services, particularly those related to mental health. The network of mental health supports available to LEOs must be culturally appropriate and sensitive, comprising providers who have experience working with law enforcement. OSW Group meeting participants repeatedly indicated that lack of cultural awareness and experience working with law enforcement among mental health providers has often caused more harm than good, further deterring officers from seeking support. One meeting participant shared that survey data on his agency's county-provided employee assistance program (EAP) indicated that more than 80 percent of LEOs who used mental health services reported that they would not return to those services because of ill-equipped providers. To assist agencies and individual officers in identifying culturally appropriate services, the FOP has established an Approved Provider Bulletin: An online, nationwide directory of providers that have been vetted by the FOP. This directory is a living resource with new providers being vetted and included on a regular basis. Services include individual clinicians, inpatient treatment programs, and trainings and wellness products for law enforcement professionals (FOP 2024). For agencies and officers not able to access an FOP-vetted provider, the FOP and the COPS Office provide a guide to assist individuals and organizations with evaluating providers (FOP Division of Wellness Services 2022).

Open, accessible feedback loops for both the LEOs and community members will be important for long-term institutionalization of principles that reflect the importance and impact of a positive community climate. However, the presence of feedback loops itself is not enough. Processes must include routine review of the feedback received and implementation of feedback when and where appropriate. LEOs and community members want to see evidence that they are heard and that their feedback is taken into consideration. Further, meeting participants suggested that leaders and researchers in the field should focus more resources on routine evaluation of the new initiatives, policies, and practices that they implement. This focus would provide data to demonstrate impact, support ongoing efforts, and generate insights on areas for improvement.

Establishing a culture that understands the inextricable link between officer and community safety and wellness and acts according to these principles by centering positive and nonenforcement community engagement must consider hiring practices as a component of building and sustaining such a culture. Agencies should establish hiring standards that incorporate these principles, prioritizing academy graduates who demonstrate a passion for both officer and community safety and wellness and recognize the importance of building positive community relationships. More specifically, interview questions that reference community relationship building and engagement with communities in nonenforcement settings may inform agency leadership if a candidate will carry forth these practices in their daily role. For those officers who are already on the force and struggling to adopt these practices in their daily duties, meeting participants suggested that agencies should consider requiring remedial, nonpunitive trainings. This culture shift will require an ongoing commitment to accountability and prioritization of these principles from the top down.

Fostering an Environment that Can Withstand Crisis

Fostering an environment that can withstand the many different types of crises an agency, an officer, and a community may face will be a key component of sustaining a culture within law enforcement both locally and nationally that centers the importance of community-police relationships. This effort requires preparing and laying the groundwork for successful navigation of a crisis long before an incident occurs. Discussions during the two-day OSW Group meeting highlighted several factors that are critical for successful preparation for a crisis, including the following:

- **Plan early and often.** Don't wait to start gathering the necessary information, including details about the local context related to community-police relations, challenges that community members face, and strengths possessed by the community that may present opportunities for partnership and collaboration. Engage local stakeholders as partners in crisis planning, and assemble the resources necessary for crisis response—such as establishing an assigned team of personnel and financial resources. Planning must include preparation of materials that will be necessary for leaders, allowing leaders to stay the course, center agency values, and provide clear communication both internally and externally. Agencies should have a response plan and resources available at all times.
- **Engage local community members.** Community members have unique local knowledge that will assist in understanding the community climate, history, and experiences. It is essential to leverage this local knowledge and expertise on a routine basis. When a crisis occurs, these community members can navigate the nuances and sensitivities of their community (Katsos, Miklian, and McClelland 2021). Establishing solid, trusted relationships with community leaders prior to a crisis will ensure that these relationships can be activated in the midst of a crisis situation.
- **Set the tone before a crisis occurs.** Agencies should establish a strong foundation of their values, including the importance of strong community relationships, so that these values are embedded in officer response to a crisis across ranks. These values must be communicated internally and externally. These values should include routine community engagement and support by law enforcement. Some OSW Group meeting participants referred to these intentional community engagements as “credibility deposits” that build trust and relationships with the community,

which can in turn be drawn upon in times of crisis. Supporting food pantries, engaging with schools, and showing up to support community events are examples of ways that law enforcement agencies are currently supporting their communities. Establishing this culture early sets the tone internally, providing the example of community engagements for others in the department to follow, even (or especially) in times of crisis. Leadership, including the chief, sheriff, or other executive leaders, should be actively engaged and visible in the community, so that when a crisis does occur, community members recognize agency leaders and trust that those leaders have the best interest of the entire community at heart.

- **Establish a culture of collaboration.** Engaging all levels of law enforcement in the planning and preparation for a crisis generates unique ideas and establishes ownership among the rank and file to work together to find solutions. Establishing this culture before a crisis occurs will encourage unification and collaboration in crisis response.
- **Strengthen the culture of wellness.** OSW Group meeting participants suggested that strengthening the culture of wellness within agencies is important for ensuring that officers can receive necessary supports in the midst of a crisis and over the longer term after a crisis has ended. This effort includes building and maintaining a strong network of resources that are easily accessible for officers, including peer support programs, culturally competent mental health providers, and family supports. In addition, agencies must be responsive to officers' unique and diverse needs and promote a culture of wellness that provides appropriate, tailored supports for officers of color, women, and other historically marginalized groups. In particular, OSW Group meeting participants reported that Black officers often experience a particular isolation during and after crises that have a racial element. Participants reported that the Black community often has adversarial views toward Black officers following incidents, while many people in law enforcement—including leadership, almost 90 percent of whom are White according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) (Goodison 2022)—simply don't understand the experience of being a person of color in the field. A culture of wellness must be responsive to the unique needs of the diversity of officers within an agency.
- **Reflect and assess.** OSW Group meeting participants suggested that reflection and assessment following a crisis must become standard practice for learning, growth, and a strengthened crisis response approach. This stage of reflection and assessment should engage not only agency leadership but also rank-and-file officers and community members. Engaging diverse perspectives and experience is important for making meaningful improvements. Documenting lessons learned and strategies for improvement will foster an ongoing culture of growth and forward movement. Reflection and assessment are vital to avoiding similar crises in the future and strengthening crisis response if a similar incident does occur.

Many of the factors that meeting participants suggested are crucial for withstanding crises are reflective of the same principles that are essential for building an overall law enforcement culture that supports both law enforcement and community safety and wellness. Strategic, intentional planning, transparency and communication, collaboration, community engagement, and reflection and assessment are important elements of fostering a culture that can withstand crisis.

BJA's Safer Together Campaign

Consideration of these same themes that were discussed throughout the April 2023 OSW Group meeting has led BJA to create the Safer Together (<https://www.valorforblue.org/Training/ExploreSaferTogether>) campaign. The concept of Safer Together centers around the inextricable relationship of law enforcement and communities, recognizing that the safety and wellness of one impacts and affects the safety and wellness of the other. The concept maintains that working together is the most effective and efficient way to achieve common safety and wellness goals. Further, working collaboratively to achieve a positive community climate will decrease stress and anxiety in routine interactions, reduce tension in community-police engagements, and likely improve outcomes for both officers and community members.

Safer Together sets forth a set of principles to encourage strong, healthy community-police relationships. Combining both a philosophy and a program that includes skill building, training, and other resources, Safer Together addresses the changing policing environment, the needs of the policing field, and the needs and desires of communities being served by the police. The campaign provides practical solutions that can benefit both LEOs and communities. At its core, Safer Together is about officer safety and wellness. The Safer Together campaign recognizes that real change and improvement in community-police relations happens at the local level. While national policies and programs can support healthy community relationships, the individual one-on-one interactions that officers have with their communities on a daily basis are the key to establishing a positive community climate. Interactions that are laden with stress, distrust, and anxiety will generate a negative community climate, having a cyclical impact for both the officers serving that community and the individuals residing there.

The Safer Together campaign provides a framework for communities and law enforcement to work together to achieve safety, wellness, and trust. The campaign provides no-cost practical tools, such as a training curriculum for law enforcement professionals across ranks, community discussion guides, and social media toolkits to support agencies in establishing a culture founded upon the Safer Together principles.

Working collaboratively to achieve a positive community climate will decrease stress and anxiety in routine interactions.

The training curriculum teaches officers that they have a tremendous amount of influence in every interaction. The course provides officers with strategies for positive engagement with community members during service calls and more broadly while engaging in the community. Further, the training curriculum teaches officers that making an effort to have positive interactions will generate trust. In turn, this can help to decrease officer and community stress, and improve the community climate. Ultimately, many officers in a department engaging in small acts of positive interaction can result in major improvements in the overall relationship with the community, contributing to a reduction in the level of stress that officers face from their daily contacts.

The Safer Together campaign recognizes that a positive community climate, generated in large part through positive police-community interactions, is one of the most important factors for reducing harmful stress and dangerous community interactions for LEOs. A healthy, positive community climate can improve officer safety and wellness, generate mutual trust and cooperation, improve community safety and wellness, and reduce crime in the community.

The training curriculum teaches officers that they have a tremendous amount of influence in every interaction.

Conclusion

While the national climate and rhetoric around law enforcement pose many challenges to officers and to the field, the current context presents an opportunity to pursue change and strengthen the relationship between law enforcement and communities at both the local and national level. The topic of law enforcement and its relationship with communities can be challenging. However, both law enforcement professionals and community members are currently engaged in the conversations. Leveraging this passion and engagement by creating positive, safe, equitable platforms for conversation and collaborative problem solving can be the catalyst for improving community-police relations. BJA's Safer Together initiative provides an adaptable framework to support these efforts while keeping officer safety and wellness at the core and recognizing the inextricable link between community and officer wellness.

Successful implementation and sustainable institutionalization of the principles that undergird Safer Together requires early engagement of those principles, beginning in law enforcement academies and new-hire trainings. LEOs across all ranks, and especially front-line officers, must be engaged in the process from the very start, including local campaign design and roll-out strategies. Officers want their voices to be heard and their feedback to be used to improve the likelihood of making lasting, positive change for law enforcement and communities through the adoption of the Safer Together principles. Community engagement must also be centered throughout all phases of the process. This engagement will increase mutual trust, provide insights into the community context, and create the foundation for a collaborative partnership between law enforcement and communities.

A culture of officer safety and wellness must remain at the forefront, with national and local leaders encouraging officers to prioritize their wellness, provide access to low-barrier wellness supports, and adapt policies and procedures that currently limit officers' ability to prioritize their wellness. This includes prioritizing nonenforcement engagement with communities. Institutionalizing the Safer Together principles requires the entire law enforcement field to pursue wellness to engage with communities and individual community members from a place of health and well-being. Officers must individually pursue positive interactions with community members, supported by leadership that prioritizes these interactions, to build shared trust and empathy. One positive interaction at a time will improve community climate and generate a collaborative partnership between communities and LEOs, working toward shared goals of safety and wellness. As BJA Director Moore said, "We are all safer together. We all have the same destinies, and we need to decide whether or not we are going to accept the fact that our destinies are intertwined. And then we need to work toward making sure our officers are safe and well, and that our communities are safe and well."

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About BJA

The **Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)** is a component of the Office of Justice Programs (<https://ojp.gov/>), U.S. Department of Justice (<https://www.justice.gov/>), which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics (<https://www.bjs.gov/>); National Institute of Justice (<https://nij.ojp.gov/>); Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (<https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/>); Office for Victims of Crime (<https://www.ovc.gov/>); and Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (<https://www.smart.gov/>).

BJA provides leadership and services in grant administration and criminal justice policy development to support local, state, and tribal law enforcement in achieving safer communities. BJA supports programs and initiatives in the areas of law enforcement, justice information sharing, countering terrorism, managing offenders, combating drug crime and abuse, adjudication, advancing tribal justice, crime prevention, protecting vulnerable populations, and capacity building. Driving BJA's work in the field are the following principles:

- Emphasize local control.
- Build relationships in the field.
- Provide training and technical assistance in support of efforts to prevent crime, drug abuse, and violence at the national, state, and local levels.
- Develop collaborations and partnerships.
- Promote capacity building through planning.
- Streamline the administration of grants.
- Increase training and technical assistance.
- Create accountability of projects.
- Encourage innovation.
- Communicate the value of justice efforts to decision makers at every level.

To learn more about BJA, visit <https://bja.ojp.gov>, or follow us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/DOJBJA) and Twitter (@DOJBJA). BJA is part of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs.

About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When law enforcement and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has been appropriated more than \$20 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 138,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- More than 800,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations and the COPS Training Portal.
- More than 1,000 agencies have received customized advice and peer-led technical assistance through the COPS Office Collaborative Reform Initiative Technical Assistance Center.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than nine million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.

The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, roundtables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement. COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, <https://cops.usdoj.gov>.

In April 2023, the OSW Group convened to discuss the changing public safety needs of communities across the nation and their law enforcement agencies. BJA's Safer Together campaign emphasizes and strengthens the link between officer safety and wellness, community trust, and crime reduction; it is a suite of interactive training courses, available for both front-line officers and deputies and command-level leadership, that teaches practical strategies to minimize the stress of most law enforcement-community encounters and connect with the people they serve.



COPS

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