

Effective Leadership Response to the Challenges of Law Enforcement Suicide

James D. Sewell




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

SPC St. Petersburg College
Center for Public Safety Innovation

Effective Leadership Response to the Challenges of Law Enforcement Suicide

James D. Sewell





This project was supported, in whole or in part, by Cooperative Agreement Number 2012-CK-WX-K019 awarded to St. Petersburg College by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions contained herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. References to specific agencies, companies, products, or services should not be considered an endorsement by the author(s) or the U.S. Department of Justice. Rather, the references are illustrations to supplement discussion of the issues.

The internet references cited in this publication were valid as of the date of publication. Given that URLs and websites are in constant flux, neither the author(s), the contributor(s), nor the COPS Office can vouch for their current validity.

This resource was developed under a federal award and may be subject to copyright. The U.S. Department of Justice reserves a royalty-free, nonexclusive, and irrevocable license to reproduce, publish, or otherwise use and to authorize others to use this resource for Federal Government purposes. This resource may be freely distributed and used for noncommercial and educational purposes only.

Recommended citation:

Sewell, James D. 2021. *Effective Leadership Response to the Challenges of Law Enforcement Suicide*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

Published 2021

Contents

Introduction	1
Leadership Presence	3
Communication	5
Changing the Organizational Culture . . . and Confronting the Stigma	7
Developing a Comprehensive Stress Management Program	9
An organized program of crisis intervention.	10
Critical incident stress management	10
Employee assistance program (EAP).	11
Family support	12
Ongoing training in stress management	13
Organized program of physical fitness.	17
Peer support unit	18
Police chaplain program	19
Professional mental health services.	20
Support for healthy diet and nutrition	21
Dealing with Police Suicide	23
Taking Risks With Innovative Practices	25
Conclusion	27
References	29
About the Author	33
About the COPS Office	35





Introduction

Since the 1990s, law enforcement professionals have come to understand the impact of job stress on their personal and professional lives. Sadly, much of this awareness has come as a result of the negative manifestations that have become too observable: cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure; substance abuse and post-traumatic stress; abnormally high divorce rates and domestic violence; and, too frequently, suicide of law enforcement personnel. With police personnel suffering physical, psychological, medical, and behavioral issues as a result of such stress, the question becomes: How do we make sure our cops *live* . . . and live better, healthier, and more productive lives on and off the job?

The answer—and the focus of this paper—begins with and requires effective and progressive law enforcement leadership. Contemporary law enforcement leadership cannot ignore the existence of the problems caused by stress, deny that job stress is an issue in any agency, or avoid taking action to ensure the health and well-being of their employees. It is clear that effective leaders cannot distance themselves from their personnel during times of stress or crisis, nor can they afford to send the unintentional message that they just do not care about those under their command. The personnel of an agency are its most valuable asset, and the actions of those at the highest level of an agency must recognize, respect, and reinforce that value.

During the course of this work, the author will focus on several specific elements of effective leadership needed when dealing with the stress of law enforcement personnel:

- Leadership presence
- Communication
- Changing the organizational culture . . . and confronting the stigma
- Developing a comprehensive stress management program
- Dealing with police suicide
- Taking risks with innovative practices



Leadership Presence

Historically, many command courses for law enforcement managers rising through the ranks have discussed the concept of “command presence,” the combination of authoritative bearing, voice, and body movements, and a displayed attitude of self-confidence that underscores one’s rank. In their book on leadership, McChesney and Gavin (2011) point out that leaders “know how to speak, where to speak, and, more important, when to speak” (90). Such communication is a vital part of a leader’s presence. An effective leader knows when to appear during a crisis, when and how strongly to declare support for agency personnel during critical times, and when to wear a uniform or revert to soft clothes. It is the actions of the leader in caring for the individuals under their command that speak far louder than mere words or a charismatic personality.

An example of leadership presence is a chief who supports agency fitness standards by working out with officers in the department workout room or a local gym. The chief demonstrates unity with the officers and implicit support of the standards. In addition, the casual setting allows a more relaxed atmosphere for conversation; the chief can conduct “check-ins” with officers on their overall wellness.





Communication

It is the accepted axiom in the real estate world that sale of property depends upon “location, location, location.” A similar axiom in law enforcement leadership would be that the ultimate success of a leader depends upon “communication, communication, communication.” Many problems for law enforcement executives have occurred when communication within the organization or with the community failed; many of those same issues are resolved only when effective communication is re-established.

Nowhere within the profession is that more important than in dealing with the job stress that impacts sworn and civilian personnel throughout an agency. It is imperative, then, that the agency leader and their key staff promote meaningful communication at and among all levels of the agency. That means adopting a practice of regular and ongoing contact between those at the highest level and their rank and file, again using the tried-and-true philosophy of management by walking around (MBWA), even when the leader has other demands on their time. The use of formal and informal groups—including representatives of any employee collective bargaining organizations—to provide employee input into key issues, problems, and practices also encourages interaction, communication, and an easing of the barriers that often exist between bosses and the troops.

The major purpose of communication as we address law enforcement stress is to ensure that employees feel they will be given assistance and support when they bring forward a problem. Openness of communication between leadership and line employees in particular should be designed to support, both formally and informally, the recognition of officers' problems and exhibit a willingness by both leadership and the individual agency member to effectively deal with those problems. The message throughout such efforts at ensuring open and honest communication is that leadership understands that it is desirable to temper the need for firm management with an appropriate level of compassion and commitment to agency personnel. The end result of a leader's efforts at enhancing and ensuring communication within an agency is best captured by a famous quotation: “I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”



Changing the Organizational Culture ...and Confronting the Stigma

A critical element of the leader's role in communication about the issue of law enforcement stress is dispelling the stigma associated with effectively dealing with that stress, action that is aimed at challenging and changing what may be deep-held beliefs of the organizational culture. It is a traditional feeling within the law enforcement community that an officer who seeks help is a weakling who cannot handle the difficulties of the job. After all, a cop gives help, they don't need help . . . or so some members of many agencies seem to think. Sworn personnel are frequently unwilling to admit to having emotional problems, and they often fear that their career will be ruined if it is discovered that they have sought any type of psychological assistance. Consequently, officers are afraid that the slightest leak of information—any breach of their privacy and exposure of the confidential nature of their personal issues—will cost them within their agency and subject them to alienation among their peers. In too many agencies, the mantra “if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen” is a pervasive attitude among senior “macho” personnel and potentially contagious among those younger officers who try to emulate them in order to be accepted in the subculture of the agency.

It takes strong leadership to overcome such attitudes and replace them with a recognition that law enforcement officers have personal problems that are similar to their peers', as well as any community member's, and that only through professional understanding can we help each other survive the negative impacts of the job. It is indeed hard work to change the current beliefs of police personnel, even if held by only a few, and integrate the same type of professional approach to addressing the problems of law enforcement that we would use in dealing with the problems of the community.





Developing a Comprehensive Stress Management Program

A significant part of the leader's responsibility is ensuring that resources are available to support his or her law enforcement personnel in dealing with the stress that comes with the job. Elements of a comprehensive agency stress management program, each of which will be discussed in detail, include the following:

- An organized program of crisis intervention
- Critical incident stress management (CISM)
- Employee assistance program (EAP)
- Family support
- Ongoing training in stress management, beginning with the inoculation of recruits during academy, throughout an officer's career
- Organized program of physical fitness
- Peer support unit
- Police chaplain program
- Professional mental health services
- Support for healthy diet/nutrition

An organized program of crisis intervention

While much of this paper's discussion is on preventing the negative manifestations of stress and ensuring the health and well-being of police personnel, it is a reality that incidents may occur. A relationship between an officer and their spouse may end in an emotional explosion, with the spouse becoming the victim of violent abuse or homicide; in the alternative, the officer may choose suicide as their only option. An officer's contact with reality may be completely lost, and they may have to be institutionalized for treatment. It is important that discussions about such issues and their potential occur at the highest level of the organization before an event and that the agency ensures that it has policies and procedures in place to effectively handle the resulting crisis for the department. Personnel should know how to expeditiously activate a crisis intervention protocol on short notice and with maximum safety both for the involved officer and for agency personnel.

Critical incident stress management

In its Model Policy on Critical Incident Stress Management (2011), the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) suggests that the language of a proper policy statement emphasize the following:

It is the responsibility of this department to manage critical incident stress by providing personnel with a critical incident stress management (CISM) program. The CISM program shall be utilized to provide personnel with information on reactions to the trauma associated with critical incidents and assist in the deterrence of negative responses. It is the policy of this department to take immediate action after such incidents to safeguard the continued mental well-being of all involved personnel. (IACP 2011)

Critical incident stress management (CISM) is then defined as "A formal process used to assist an individual who has been involved in a traumatic event to return to or maintain an effective level of functioning" (IACP 2011). Generally, CISM teams are trained members of law enforcement and fire-rescue organizations, complemented by professional clinicians, who respond to deal with first responders in the aftermath of a critical incident. Such incidents are generally defined as "an incident that is unusual, violent, and involves a perceived threat to, or actual loss of, human life that may overwhelm an individual's normal coping mechanisms and cause extreme psychological distress" (IACP 2011). Examples of such incidents include the 2001 World Trade Center attack (on a large scale), the violent death

of an officer in line of duty, or a particularly violent scene such as the 2015 church murders in Charleston, South Carolina. Members of a CISM team are used to providing emotional triage and first aid at the scene or shortly thereafter. Most are commonly trained in what is called the Mitchell Model, named after Jeffrey Mitchell, one of the early proponents of such intervention techniques. These personnel provide debriefings and other inventive techniques to help first responders deal with the stress of what they have experienced.

Employee assistance program (EAP)

According to the Employee Assistance Society of North America (EASNA), the trade association for providers of such employee assistance programs, EAPs are

employer-sponsored programs designed to alleviate and assist in eliminating a variety of workplace problems. EAPs typically provide screening, assessments, brief interventions, referrals to other services and case management with longitudinal follow-up for mental health concerns and substance abuse problems. The source of these employee problems can be either personal or work-related. Those who work for EAPs come from many different professions including social workers, psychologists, counselors, substance abuse specialists, occupational nurses, and others. (EASNA 2009, 12)

EASNA estimates that in 2002 more than 100 million Americans had access to an EAP. The society attributes the following benefits to such programs (EASNA 2009, 14):

- Better job climate and organizational morale
- Better preparedness and immediate response for on-the-job crises and other critical events
- Greater ability to attract new employees
- Less absence among employees
- Less inter-group conflicts and team problems
- Less turnover of employees and avoidance of costs of replacement
- More engaged employees and supervisors

- More productive employees
- Reduced disability claims costs
- Reduced overall health care claims costs

Employee assistance programs, then, can provide valuable and organized support to agency personnel, both on issues related to job stress and critical incidents as well as with issues outside the normal range of agency support, including finances, family issues, health concerns, and even child and elder care.

In implementing an employee assistance program for a law enforcement agency, several issues should be kept in mind. First, the EAP provider, if external to the agency, must understand the uniqueness of dealing with police personnel and their families and the cultural issues that accompany law enforcement. Second, the EAP must be able to address the issues of law enforcement personnel with a sense of urgency and ensure the timeliness of any response. Third, the agency staff member responsible for coordinating with the EAP must periodically verify the effectiveness of the program with the personnel served, that it continues to meet the needs of the agency and its members, and that bureaucratic requirements on the part of either the EAP or the law enforcement agency do not discourage participation by personnel in need of support.

Family support

This paper has referenced the importance of family support several times, but its importance cannot be overstated. As a profession, law enforcement is often criticized for its divorce rate, for incidents of domestic violence, and for relationship issues not just between officers and their spouses or significant others but also with their children. Stress at home further complicates stress on the job, and it is in the best interests of the agency and its leaders to continue to address family issues through education and training, through the provision of support services, including spouse-to-spouse peer support, and through an agency-wide attitude that stresses the importance of family.

Periodic get-togethers for spouses and children, such as dinners, cookouts, group sporting events, or other social events, become another way to solidify the role of the family in the success of the police agency. Such reinforcement becomes particularly critical following a crisis affecting an agency or its individual members. After the 2014 civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, for instance, the Saint Louis County Police Department held a department-sponsored family event at a local museum aimed at recognizing the police families for their support during the days of violence; more than 600 family members attended.

Ongoing training in stress management

Implementing an active and ongoing training program of stress awareness, management, and mitigation for sworn and nonsworn personnel is crucial to the health and wellness of the personnel of any law enforcement agency. Such training should include formal classes as well as in-service and roll-call training.

Three key questions arise as we discuss training in the larger area of law enforcement stress. First, who needs to be trained or educated about issues relating to stress on the job? The easy answer is: EVERYONE! In particular, training and critical information should be provided to the following:

All sworn and civilian personnel

- Governing and legislative bodies
- Managers and bosses
- Media
- Spouses and families of sworn and civilian personnel
- Supervisors, especially first-line

Second, when should such training occur? Simply put, such training should follow a law enforcement officer—and civilian personnel as well—from the day they enter the police academy until after their retirement. At the recruit level, new officers need to be inoculated to the issue of stress and its impact on their professional and personal lives; however, their inexperience and lack of knowledge about the realities of police work would suggest that too much training on handling of job stressors would not be highly effective at this stage and would fall on naïve and deaf ears. Similarly, the effective orientation of nonsworn personnel—especially dispatchers and other civilian personnel who may be exposed to disturbing situations—to stress and its impact is vital to their future emotional survival. However, after gaining experience on the job and exposure to real job stressors within the first two years, these new personnel would be more likely to understand and accept efforts to educate them about stress and specific methods to mitigate its impact.

Throughout their career, as demands of the job and their personal lives change, as personnel develop and mature in each, additional training should reinforce their ability to withstand the impact of stress in general. Unique job assignments, such as homicide or child

abuse investigations, special operations, or undercover operations, bring unique stressors; training and preparation of personnel must be tailored to effectively deal with the demands of these positions. Promotion to supervisory or management ranks causes further changes, and those personnel promoted to leadership positions must learn new skills for them to effectively understand and handle not only their own stress, but also the stress of those under their command.

Too frequently, programs of stress management fail to recognize the stress that builds during a career in law enforcement. While our focus is often on specific critical incidents (e.g., violent death of an officer, taking a life in the line of duty, or a particularly heinous violent crime) and the resulting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), we also must acknowledge the impact of stress accumulated over a career of 20 years or more: cumulative career traumatic stress (CCTS). Comprehensive stress training, then, must include preparation of personnel both preceding and following retirement. In addition to discussing the impact of CCTS, preretirement training should focus on the emotional differences between active and retired status and should prepare retiring officers for the financial changes they will undergo; post-retirement retreats allow for continued social interaction with officers and a forum for exchange of information and retirement experiences with other retirees.

It is equally crucial that any effective training program dealing with police stress and its negative implications engage and include spouses, significant others, and other family members. Many spouses initially become involved with a civilian who then joins the force. Often left out of the police subculture, the spouse must then understand what the spouse's new cop personality entails. With misunderstanding and a frequent lack of communication in the relationship, the stress an officer must deal with now includes two fronts: the job and the home. It is necessary that an agency work to reduce the stress on both fronts: on the job, to give the officer the tools they need to be successful; and in the home, to give the spouse, significant other, and family the tools they need to make an officer successful; to identify warning signs of stress in their officer; and to know where and how to obtain help.

Such preparation of spouses and families becomes paramount when an officer faces the aftermath of a critical incident. It is at home that many symptoms will manifest themselves, and—depending on the circumstances—it is the home environment that must endure intense scrutiny, comments, criticisms, and even attacks from the outside world, including the media and community members who lack specific knowledge of an incident but are willing to add their opinions.

Third, in what areas should we train agency personnel? For those who deal with law enforcement officers during times of crisis and stress, the answers lay in four questions:

1. Are there specific topics that should be included in a comprehensive stress management curriculum?
2. Are there warning signs of stress I should recognize?
3. Are there times that are particularly stressful and could lead to dangerous behaviors such as suicide?
4. What should I do if one of my friends, colleagues, or family members is in crisis?

The curriculum adopted within an agency can be as broad as the issues with which an agency and its sworn and civilian employees must deal. Among the most common topics include the following:

- Access to and use of psychological services
- Access to and use of the agency employee assistance program
- CCTS
- Departmental intervention protocols
- Diet and nutrition
- Effective interpersonal relationships
- Identification of at-risk personnel
- Impact of the job on an officer's family
- Officer wellness
- Other mechanisms of self-care
- Physical and psychological manifestations of stress
- Physical fitness and health
- PTSD
- Recognition of early warning signs of suicide

- Recognition of warning signs of trauma-related and chronic stress
- Relaxation techniques
- Suicide prevention and intervention

Whether acting in a leadership position or simply trying to help a friend or colleague in trouble, people need to be aware that stress can telegraph its presence through a number of signs. These warning signs include the following:

- Depression
- Excessive fatigue
- Expressed feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness
- Increased complaints by citizens community members or, more particularly, other officers
- Increased use of sick or compensatory leave
- Increased worker compensation claims
- Intense anger and emotional outbursts
- Nightmares
- Over-aggressive behavior with community members
- Pronounced changes in behavior, whether sudden or over a period of time
- Sleep disturbances
- Withdrawal from one's peers

There are indeed times of particular crisis for law enforcement personnel, i.e., times when stress is at its highest and during which an officer can become a significant danger to themselves or others. Among these are the following:

- A recent unwanted organizational or geographic move
- Anticipated loss of financial security
- Approaching retirement
- Being terminated
- Death of a close loved one, cherished friend, or counselor, especially by suicide

- Fear of punishment or loss of freedom
- Loss of any major relationship (a particular red flag)
- Severe injury or serious or terminal illness, especially when coupled with a fear of becoming a burden to others
- Under Internal Affairs or criminal investigation

The final question from both the agency's leadership and its rank and file becomes: What should I do if one of my friends, colleagues, or family members is in crisis? If the leadership of the agency and those charged with implementing the program of stress management training are successful, the response will be relatively straightforward: Use the resources that have been provided to you. Identify warning signs through the behaviors and verbal communication of the individual; if you have questions, refer to the policies and protocols adopted by the agency, which you have been provided. Then communicate in a timely fashion with the appropriate resources about whom you have been educated: your supervisor, a peer support officer or civilian, a chaplain, the employee assistance program, or the agency's mental health professionals.

Organized program of physical fitness

In discussing the need for physical fitness in the police profession, Quigley (2008) has noted:

It should not be surprising that physical fitness and exercise improve long-term health. Studies have shown that sedentary people have twice the risk of coronary artery disease than active people as well as a higher risk of stroke, colon cancer, and back injuries. Only 22 percent of U.S. adults get at least 30 minutes of light to moderate exercise five or more times a week, and less than 10 percent exercise vigorously at least three times a week. More than 50 percent of deaths in the United States are attributable to these and other lifestyle choices. (Quigley 2008, 62)

While most law enforcement officers enter the profession with generally high physical standards, especially after the rigors of many police academies the lifestyle of policing, including poor dietary habits, and the normal aging process may take their toll. The responsibility for leaders, then, is to implement programs of fitness that maintain the physical condition of their officers and enhance their ability to physically handle the stressors they encounter on the job.

Many, if not most, law enforcement agencies provide their own fitness facilities; others, in order to avoid the expense of the equipment and its upkeep, contract with local fitness centers and gymnasiums as a perquisite for their personnel. To further encourage their personnel to make use of such facilities, a number of agencies allow such fitness activities to be compensable or conducted on duty time.

Agencies frequently have tied their programs of fitness and conditioning to a reward system that provides incentives in the form of extra pay, days off, or public recognition. Peer pressure often plays an important role in officers maintaining a level of fitness. Other departments have dealt with fitness standards as many agencies do with firearms. In such cases, inability to comply with the agency's standards results in a specified time period to reach a defined fitness level; failure to comply at that time results in discipline up to termination. Regardless of the approach, agency leadership should ensure their personal compliance with the expected physical standards.

Peer support unit

The idea of peer support dates back to the early 1970s with efforts by larger agencies, such as the police departments of Boston, New York, and Chicago, to deal with alcoholism in their police ranks. Citing the successes of groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Boston Police Officer Ed Donovan—who had been attending AA meetings to deal with his own abuse issues—and his colleagues approached the Boston Police Commissioner about implementing what would now be called a peer support program for police officers and their families. In an exercise of the type of leadership that this paper encourages, Boston Police Commissioner Robert diGrazia authorized the creation of the Boston Police Stress Program, generally viewed as the first of its kind in the nation.

The peer support concept holds that police employees, both sworn and civilian, are more likely to discuss psychological and emotional issues with someone who understands their job and the types of stress they may undergo rather than with a psychological professional who brings expertise but no such understanding to their conversation. This approach at ensuring the emotional health of law enforcement personnel assumes that a basic level of training is necessary, and empathy is particularly critical, in allowing an officer—functioning in this situation as a paraprofessional—to provide necessary support for another officer. With such preparation, the peer support officer should then be able to listen, assess, and (as necessary and appropriate) refer a troubled colleague to proper and professional assistance. As Kameana and his co-authors (2011) have noted,

The mission of a peer support program is to provide emotional, social, and practical support to police personnel during times of personal or professional crisis. It may also offer peer-to-peer assistance in anticipating and addressing other potential challenges or difficulties. (Kamena et al. 2011, 80)

Within these parameters, peer support units or teams have been implemented in a variety of ways. In some states, such as Mississippi and Utah, statewide teams and individuals provide such support. As the Utah Bureau of Emergency Medical Services notes on its website,

The Utah Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) Program has been established to assist emergency service workers throughout the State. The CISM team comprises mental health professionals and peer support personnel who are trained to assist emergency responders in dealing with the stress of their profession. (Utah CISM Team 2020)

In many mid-sized and larger agencies, resources are available within a single agency. Some smaller agencies, on the other hand, find it appropriate to combine resources in countywide or regional teams. The approach adopted by an agency will largely depend on the size and complexity of the agency, available internal and external resources, budgetary support, and access to training of peer support personnel. Regardless of the specific approach, the decision to implement an effective peer support program ultimately depends on the leadership provided by the agency head and the commitment and support of those at the highest level of the organization.

Police chaplain program

The faith-based community also can offer care and support to officers during times of stress and crisis, and as a result many agencies have established formal chaplaincy programs within their organization. The website of the International Conference of Police Chaplains (www.icpc4cops.org), established in the United States in 1973 and now involving more than 2,000 chaplains worldwide, articulates the role and responsibilities of a law enforcement chaplain. Among those activities most applicable to dealing with stress management of agency personnel, chaplains can be expected to do the following:

- Assist at suicide incidents
- Assist the department in making death notifications
- Counsel members of the local law enforcement community, sworn and nonsworn

- Counsel officers in areas such as stress management, post shooting, and burn-out
- Counsel with the families of law enforcement officers, other members of a department, and their families
- Provide guidance should a line-of-duty death occur within the department or community
- Serve as part of a department's Crisis Response Team
- Visit sick or injured officers and departmental personnel in homes and hospitals

Especially for officers and civilian personnel of faith, the ability to reach out for a chaplain offers significant benefit in reinforcing their spiritual resilience to stress and the crisis that results from critical incidents. Thomas McDearis, chaplain of the Blacksburg (Virginia) Police Department and senior pastor of the Blacksburg Baptist Church, highlighted this role of the chaplain in reflecting on the agency's response to the 2007 tragedy on the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, which left 32 students killed and another seventeen wounded by a gunman. As he noted,

In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech tragedy, officers from five area agencies began making contact. Most did not want the others to know that they were talking to the 'cops' parsons,' so they would call at night or find some reason to drop by our churches. Some called to ask if I wanted to join them for lunch. Some just needed to let off steam. Some did nothing more than tell the latest joke. Some sent emails or text messages. But, in the months following the tragedy, seldom a week went by without calls from officers, their spouses, or their significant others . . . when a word from God was appropriate, helpful, and desired, we have tried to offer it. But we have always extended support, friendship, humor, and a presence—a spiritual presence—for wounded spirits. (McDearis 2007, 18–19)

Professional mental health services

For all the effective response given by personnel assigned to a CISM team by peers or by chaplains, the work of CISM is best supplemented by mental health professionals, individuals who are licensed as mental health or behavioral clinicians, psychologists, psychotherapists, or psychiatrists. The professionals who are most successful are those who take time to understand the unique culture of law enforcement and the needs of both sworn and civilian members of the agency and their families. Selection of such professionals, whether

as employees of the agency or as contract personnel, requires full pre-employment screening as well as interviews and discussion to ensure their suitability for the policing environment, including their willingness and capabilities in responding to scenes of violence involving officers of the agency.

Although the number of psychological resources available to an agency may be limited, there is one particularly fine line to walk. Because of the trust needed between an officer seeking help and their treating psychologist or clinician, the same individual would not be a good fit as the professional who performs fitness for duty evaluations.

Support for healthy diet and nutrition

In an article prepared for *The Police Chief*, Mellor and Chimento captured the essence of the need to address this issue:

For those working in law enforcement, there are sometimes challenges to eating healthy meals while on the job; long hours of shift work, sitting in a car for an extended period of time, and working overnight are all potential barriers to healthy eating. As such, those in the profession need to take a proactive approach to their diets and develop plans for eating that minimize the effects of these barriers on their daily nutrition. (Mellor and Chimento 2014, 12)

Support from the agency's leadership can come in a variety of ways. Educating personnel about healthy diets, nutrition, eating habits, and the value and use of vitamin supplements is an important first step. Such training must be practical enough to recognize the unique nature of a law enforcement officer's lifestyle and offer viable alternatives for maintaining a healthy diet on a cop's schedule. Such training must also be offered to an officer's family; again, dealing with stress often begins at home. Agency leadership can further support healthy nutrition by offering appropriate foodstuffs in the agency's canteen or breakroom or by contracting with or other otherwise involving local restaurants in meeting the nutritional needs of police personnel.



Dealing with Police Suicide

The suicide of a law enforcement officer or other member of an agency is the most serious and, sadly, frequent manifestation of the impact of job-related stress inherent to our profession. At the same time, suicide is the most emotionally charged and divisive issue in virtually any law enforcement agency.

It is not uncommon for there to be a major split within a police agency when a suicide occurs. For every officer who dies by suicide, a significant number of surviving law enforcement personnel will grieve their actions and call for the officer to be remembered for who they were and for their service to the community. At the same time, another significant number will bring their personal moral or religious standards to bear and call that dead officer a coward and accuse them of weakness and taking the “easy way out.”

For those reasons, it is critical that the leadership of an agency have extensive discussions with the agency’s personnel *before* an event occurs. Such discussions should begin after training is provided for agency personnel on police suicide and its issues, including implementation of the proper steps to take to identify and prevent suicide by law enforcement officers and support personnel.

One focus of these discussions should be the protocols to be used following such a death. An agency, for instance, may decide that it is appropriate to provide a liaison to the family, to allow personnel to attend the funeral in uniform and on duty, and to designate a benefits coordinator, while at the same time electing not to provide a formal vehicular procession and only limited graveside honors. Again, the timing of such discussions and decisions is vital to the success of such a policy and for the well-being of the agency.

To afford police honors to an officer who commits suicide is a controversial suggestion that demands discussion. For many officers, the physiological and psychological impact of depression, the leading cause of suicide, is overwhelming, and suicide appears to them to be the only viable option. Rendering of law enforcement honors to officers with an otherwise unblemished record is simply recognition of the way they lived, not the way they chose to die. Many officers can make a mental and emotional distinction between such colleagues and those officers who die by suicide as a way to avoid accountability for criminal or moral misconduct. Others find that distinction to be artificial and still condemn both the act and the actor.

Again, the agency leader's role is of crucial importance in ensuring adequate and complete discussion of such issues before a suicide occurs. Upon such an incident, the leader's role shifts to ensuring post-suicide support of survivors of law enforcement officer suicide, i.e., both the family of the officer and his or her police family, the officers and support personnel left behind. The trauma, grief, and guilt following such an event take a tremendous toll on the agency and its members and must be directly and expeditiously addressed by departmental leadership in every situation.



Taking Risks with Innovative Practices

Effective law enforcement leaders are, of course, willing to take risks to improve the way they and their personnel do business, to enhance the services they provide their communities, and to ensure that the profession continues to progress. Such leadership requires a willingness to try new and innovative practices, some of which may be untested in the field of criminal justice, and in doing so to lead from the front.

An example of such forward thinking leadership can be seen in a program instituted in Tampa, Florida. Beginning in 2014, officers attend Operation Restore, a post-trauma training for first responders that is conducted during an intensive four-and-one-half day course held in a retreat format at Tampa's Franciscan Center. Each session has been limited to no more than seven attendees of mixed genders. Specially selected trauma psychologists, mental health counselors, and certified police chaplains use a combination of educational sessions, group processes, and one-on-one confidential counseling sessions to help participants process their traumatic experiences in a more meaningful way. Trained practitioners in eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) guide attendees through this nationally recognized and evidence-based method for enhanced dealing with critical events. To better deal with future issues, participants receive additional training in I-Rest yoga, insight meditation, forgiveness, and other stress management tools.

The comments of a participating Tampa police officer, captured on the program's "Testimonials" page, are particularly telling and reflect the initial attitude of many officers attending such training:

"I could possibly be one of the world's biggest skeptics. I entered with an 'I can sit through anything' mentality. An hour in, I had an 'Oh s*** this is me' moment and suddenly I couldn't stop a rush of emotions I have harbored for years. The gift of forgiving myself was an enormous weight lifted off my chest. I won't be dramatic and say you saved my life, but I'm confident you improved the quality and length of it!"—Tampa Police Officer. (First Responders 911 2020)

The leadership of the Tampa Police Department has played a significant role in the success of this program. Then Police Chief Jane Castor attended the training herself, then required members of her command staff and later mid-management personnel to participate to bet-

ter understand their role in assessing and referring their personnel for assistance. She also identified individual personnel who showed signs of PTSD and personally encouraged their attendance. Since the program's implementation in 2013, other agency heads have taken an active role in fostering the attendance of their first responders, and attendees now have included personnel from local agencies in Tampa Bay and other areas of Florida as well as a number of out-of-state officers.

Other practices can be taken to improve the mental and emotional health of law enforcement personnel, but some carry risks to the leaders brave enough to attempt them. Requiring the administration of psychological instruments normally used for initial screening of police officers, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) or the California Psychological Inventory (CPI), on a regular basis throughout an officer's career or upon specific assignment may allow for better recognition of the changes in personality that come with the job and improved prediction of mental health issues. Offering or even requiring regular mental health check-ups can also remove some of the stigma of the use of professional or paraprofessional counseling. Creative methods to ensure the mental health of law enforcement personnel, such as these, can be controversial, especially with seasoned line personnel.

As noted earlier, many officers avoid seeking psychological assistance because they feel a psychologist or other professional mental health clinician cannot understand what they face in the profession. A novel approach is for law enforcement leaders or agencies to encourage officers to seek their own professional credentials in the mental health field by offering stipends or scholarships to return to graduate school with the understanding that they will provide counseling assistance to law enforcement personnel for a specified time period. The reader may remember that such an approach worked in the late 1960s and 1970s when the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration created its Law Enforcement Education Program, which funded the college degrees of thousands of working police officers. (OJP 1996)

Conclusion

In defining leadership and effective leadership practices, McChesney and Gavin (2011) have cautioned, “regardless of the motivation for seeking a leadership role, one must recognize and appreciate that such a position is not a right, but a unique privilege. This privilege of leadership creates unlimited opportunities to help employees succeed” (10). The opportunities associated with this leadership role become especially important when dealing with the issues of occupational stress in our profession. Leaders who understand the complexity of the issue; who care for their personnel; and who act decisively, creatively, and with courage can have a profound effect on the health and well-being of not only those personnel but also of their families and ultimately the community they serve. It is through actions and consistent practices demonstrating our concern that we as law enforcement leaders can take advantage of the opportunities our positions afford us and answer the question posed at the beginning of this paper: How do we make sure our cops *live* . . . and live better, healthier, and more productive lives on and off the job?



References

- EASNA (Employee Assistance Society of North America). 2009. *Selecting and Strengthening Employee Assistance Programs: A Purchaser's Guide*. Arlington, VA: EASNA.
- Ellison, Katherine W. 2004. *Stress and the Police Officer*. Second Edition. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Everly, George S., Jr., and James T. Reese. 2007. *Psychological Body Armor—Seven Strategic Lessons about Life, Resiliency, and Coping with Stress for Police, Firefighter, EMS, and Public Health Personnel*. Ellicott City, MD: Chevron.
- Finn, Peter, and Julie Esselman Tomz. 1996. *Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families*. Washington, DC: U.S. National Institute of Justice.
<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/163175.pdf>.
- First Responders 911. 2020. "Testimonials." Accessed October 7, 2020.
<https://firstresponders911.wixsite.com/operationrestore/testimonials>.
- Gilmartin, Kevin M. 2002. *Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement: A Guide for Officers and Their Families*. Tucson, AZ: E-S Press.
- IACP (International Association of Chiefs of Police). 1994.
Model Policy: Employee Mental Health Services. Alexandria, VA: IACP.
<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/employee-mental-health>.
- IACP. 2011. *Model Policy: Critical Incident Stress Management*. Alexandria, VA: IACP.
<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/critical-incident-stress-management>.
- IACP. 2012. *Model Policy: Post-shooting Personnel Support*. Alexandria, VA: IACP.
<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/post-shooting-personnel-support>.
- IACP. 2016. *Peer Support Guidelines*. Alexandria, VA: International Association of Chiefs of Police.
<https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/Psych-PeerSupportGuidelines.pdf>.

- Kamena, Mark D., Douglas Gentz, Virginia Hays, Nancy Bohl-Penrod, and Lorraine W. Greene. 2011. "Peer Support Teams Fill an Emotional Void in Law Enforcement Agencies." *The Police Chief* 78(8): 80–84. <https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/peer-support-teams-fill-an-emotional-void-in-law-enforcement-agencies/>.
- Kates, Allen R. 2008. *CopShock: Surviving Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*. Second Edition. Tucson, AZ: Holbrook Street Press.
- Kirschman, Ellen. 2006. *I Love a Cop: What Police Families Need to Know*. New York: Guilford.
- MacMillan, Scott. 2009. "Mental Health and Stress Management Programs in Policing." *TELEMASP Bulletin* 16(5): 1–6.
- McChesney, Kathleen, and William Gavin. 2011. *Pick Up Your Own Brass: Leadership the FBI Way*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books.
- McDearis, Thomas R. 2009. "Wounded Warriors and the Virginia Tech Tragedy." *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 78(1): 13–19. <https://leb.fbi.gov/file-repository/archives/january09leb.pdf/view>.
- Mellor, Steven, and Kevin Chimento. 2014. "Officer Safety Corner: Healthy Eating Improves Officer Nutrition and Well-being." *The Police Chief* 81(11): 12–13. <https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/officer-safety-corner-healthy-eating-improves-officer-nutrition-and-well-being/>.
- Miller, Laurence. 2008. *Mental Toughness Training for Law Enforcement (METTLE)*. Flushing, NY: Looseleaf Law Publications.
- OJP (Office of Justice Programs). 1996. *LEAA/OJP Retrospective: 30 Years of Federal Support to State and Local Criminal Justice*. Washington, DC: Office of Justice Programs. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/164509.pdf>.
- Quigley, Adrienne. 2008. "Fit for Duty? The Need for Physical Fitness Programs for Law Enforcement Officers." *The Police Chief* 75(6): 62–64. <https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/fit-for-duty/>.

- Sanberg, Elizabeth Lang, Corina Solé Brito, Andrea Morrozoff Luna, and Shannon M. McFadden. 2010. *A Guide to Occupational Health and Safety for Law Enforcement Executives*. Washington, DC: Police Executive Research Forum. https://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Free_Online_Documents/Public_Health/a%20guide%20to%20occupational%20health%20and%20safety%20for%20law%20enforcement%20executives%202010.pdf.
- Smith, Bobby E., and Linda Sivertsen. 2007. *The Will to Survive*. Marksville, LA: VOC Publishing.
- Territo, Leonard, and James D. Sewell. 2013. *Stress Management in Law Enforcement, 3rd Edition*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Utah CISM Team. 2020. "Critical Incident Stress Management Team." Accessed March 26, 2020. <https://www.utcism.org/>.
- Van Haute, Mary, and John M. Violanti. 2015. *Public Safety Suicide: The Human Dimension*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.



About the Author

James D. Sewell was appointed Assistant Commissioner of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FLDE) on May 23, 2003, and retired from that agency on January 27, 2005. During his tenure with the FDLE, he held a variety of leadership positions including Deputy Commissioner, Regional Director of its Tampa Bay Regional Operations Center, Director of the Division of Criminal Justice Information Systems, and Director of the Florida Criminal Justice Executive Institute. He also served as Chief of Police for the City of Gulfport, Florida, for nearly five years. In addition, he held positions with the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles and the Florida State University Department of Public Safety, where he began his law enforcement career in 1973.

Dr. Sewell holds a BS, MS and PhD in Criminology from the Florida State University. He has published two textbooks and more than 40 articles—principally on law enforcement management and law enforcement stress issues—in academic and professional journals and is a graduate of the Florida Criminal Justice Executive Institute Chief Executive Seminar (eighth class) and Federal Bureau of Investigation National Academy (114th session).





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 police 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 invested more than \$14 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 130,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations and the COPS Training Portal.
- Almost 500 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 eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.
- The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, round tables, 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>.



This comprehensive project focused on strengthening programs that help families support officers in mental or emotional crises or considering suicide. The suite of six publications includes four reports documenting innovative interventions currently being used around the country, one protocol for agencies on how to address an officer suicide, and a resources abstract. This publication, *Effective Leadership Response to the Challenges of Law Enforcement Suicide*, focuses on the importance of progressive law enforcement leadership. Contemporary law enforcement leadership should not ignore the existence of the problems caused by stress or avoid taking action to ensure the health and well-being of their employees. The author focuses on several specific elements of effective leadership needed when dealing with the stress of law enforcement personnel.



COPS

Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services
145 N Street NE
Washington, DC 20530

To obtain details about COPS Office programs,
call the COPS Office Response Center at 800-421-6770.

Visit the COPS Office online at cops.usdoj.gov.

SPC St. Petersburg College
Center for Public Safety Innovation

St. Petersburg College
P.O. Box 13489
St. Petersburg, FL 33733-3489

<https://cpsi.spcollege.edu/>

e111920931
Published 2021