

Implementing Peer Support Services in Small and Rural Law Enforcement Agencies



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 **IACP**
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Executive Summary

Peer support services are a valuable tool in promoting mental wellness in high-stress workplaces using the strengths and relationships of specially trained peers in a non-clinical setting. In times of personal struggle or crisis, an employee may feel more comfortable initially seeking support from a peer who understands the context and has experienced the same stressors, rather than a mental health practitioner.¹ Peer support, therefore, can be an important first step in an officer wellness strategy.

This resource outlines the considerations and recommended action steps for small and rural law enforcement agencies seeking to establish and maintain peer support services. While each of these considerations will be explained in further detail throughout this guide, the following list can be taken as a roadmap based on lessons learned from established and developing peer support programs in small and rural law enforcement agencies. These steps may be adjusted to suit each agency's unique goals and starting points.

Program design

- Seek buy-in for the program from internal and external stakeholders. Building trust is essential.
- Define criteria of a good peer supporter and be deliberate in applying those criteria when selecting members and coordinators of your peer support team.
- Research and connect with other agencies to exchange ideas and share resources and sample policies.
- Conduct a brief survey or focus group to assess your agency's peer support needs.
- Decide on short- and long-term goals for the scope of peer support services, considering available financial and personnel resources.
- Create a budget based on anticipated expenses and existing low- and no-cost resources that can support the work.
- Consider working with neighboring jurisdictions for a regional or mutual aid model.
- Explore confidential call lines, virtual options, and mobile apps that can help meet access challenges caused by geography and staffing limitations.
- Establish program goals and policies to define parameters and address common concerns such as confidentiality. Decide on the metrics by which these goals will be tracked.

1. Randy Kratz, "Peer Support: Building Up from the Inside Out," *Social Work Today* 2018, accessed August 2, 2022, https://www.socialworktoday.com/news/pp_070918.shtml.

- Identify a network of resources for referrals.
- Provide initial and ongoing training for the peer support team.

Program launch

- Develop a marketing plan to ensure personnel have clear and frequent reminders of the available resources.
- Engage supportive command staff as champions to set a positive tone and normalize participation.

Maintenance and evaluation

- Continue to publicize the availability of peer support in roll call, trainings, and other departmental communications.
- Develop a long-term sustainability plan to ensure the program maintains the required levels of resources and support.
- Track success by keeping data on the number of engagements with the program and seeking feedback from personnel who have used it.
- Periodically re-evaluate the program and modify as necessary.
- Support the peer supporters. Being a peer supporter can be rewarding, but it also comes with its own stressors; ensure the peer support team members and coordinator also feel comfortable seeking support.

These steps are merely the framework for establishing peer support services in small and rural law enforcement agencies. The next sections of this guide will delve further into each of them and provide examples and explanations.

Introduction

More than two-thirds (71 percent) of law enforcement agencies in the United States serve rural areas (fewer than 10,000 residents), and 75 percent employ fewer than 25 sworn officers.² While there is a popular misconception that serious crime only occurs in urban areas,³ officers in small and rural agencies face the same daily challenges as their colleagues in urban departments, from community conflicts to traumatic events such as fatal vehicle incidents and homicides—and the same challenges to their mental health. Good mental health is just as vital as good physical health for officers to best serve and protect their communities from crime and violence.⁴

Despite the wellness needs of rural police officers, many rural areas are healthcare deserts where the population-to-provider ratio for mental health care can be as great as 30,000 to one.⁵ Compared to their urban counterparts, rural residents engage with mental health services at a far lower rate.⁶ Rural police departments often have limited personnel and resources, inadequate emergency and community services, and limited technological access and equipment. Socioeconomic, geographic, and workforce factors are significant barriers to rural communities' health care access.⁷

Regardless of a law enforcement agency's location or size, adopting safety and wellness programs is vital to ensuring the health of the officers who put themselves in danger to protect their communities. Peer support programs can be a vital mental health resource for small and rural agencies; however, the same geographic and demographic factors that reduce access to other types of mental health support can also complicate implementing peer support. In particular, small and rural agencies face four common challenges:

1. Small and rural agencies typically have **fewer staff members** than larger or more urban agencies and are spread too thin.
2. Scheduling, class size, and shift coverage are barriers to **accessing training**.

2. Shelley S. Hyland and Elizabeth Davis, *Local Police Departments*, 2016: Personnel, bulletin (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019), <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/lpd16p.pdf>.

3. J.F. Donnermeyer, P. Jobes, and E. Barclay, "Rural Crime, Poverty, and Community," in *Advancing Critical Criminology: Theory and Application*, eds. W.S. DeKeseredy and B. Perry (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 199–218.

4. Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act (LEMHWA) of 2017, Pub. L. No. 115-113 (2018), <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ113/PLAW-115publ113.pdf>.

5. Elizabeth Simpson, *Addressing Four OSW Pillars in Smaller and Rural Communities*, Officer Safety and Wellness Group meeting summary (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2020).

6. Simpson, *Addressing Four OSW Pillars* (see note 5).

7. R. Nelson, "Telemedicine and Telehealth: The Potential to Improve Rural Access to Care," *The American Journal of Nursing* 117, no. 6 (2017): 17–18; Reschovsky, J. D., and A.B. Staiti, "Access and Quality: Does Rural America Lag Behind?," *Health Affairs* 24, no. 4 (2005), 1128–1139.

3. Officers in small and rural agencies may not be comfortable speaking to their peers in the department because of **confidentiality concerns**, sometimes called the “fishbowl effect.”⁸
4. Rural areas have **fewer in-person mental health services** than urban areas and often **lack the infrastructure for telehealth access**.

Despite these barriers, small and rural law enforcement agencies also have some advantages for implementing peer support programs:⁹

1. Small agencies are flexible and able to **implement new approaches quickly**.
2. Officers in agencies with smaller staff numbers in general can, more easily or often than their counterparts in larger agencies, take on **higher-level duties** that they would not usually be responsible for, including operational responsibilities that directly impact their entire agency.
3. Working in a smaller agency allows for **more engagement between leadership and staff at all levels** to give everyone a voice.
4. Employees of smaller agencies can more easily **cultivate personal relationships** with their community leaders and the public than employees of larger agencies.

This guide outlines findings and recommendations for implementing successful peer support services to promote officers’ mental health and wellness in small and rural agencies. The information presented in this guide comes from published research, conversations with members of small and rural law enforcement agencies, and peer support training provided by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and Cop2Cop, Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care’s law enforcement peer support hotline.

Defining Peer Support

“A peer support person (PSP), sworn or civilian, is a specifically trained colleague, not a counselor or therapist. A peer support program can augment outreach programs such as employee assistance programs (EAP), in-house treatment programs, and out-of-agency psychological services and resources, but not replace them. A peer support person is trained to provide both day-to-day emotional support for department employees as well as to participate in a department’s comprehensive response to critical incidents. PSPs are trained to recognize and refer cases that require professional intervention or are beyond their scope of training to a licensed mental health professional.”

Source: International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP): Police Psychological Services Section, “Peer Support Guidelines,” (San Diego, CA: IACP Police Psychological Services Section, 2016), <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/peer-support-guidelines>.

8. Willard M. Oliver and Cecil Meier, “Stress in Small Town and Rural Law Enforcement: Testing the Assumptions,” *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 29, no. 1 (2004): 37–56.
9. International Association of Chiefs of Police, *Policing in Small, Rural, and Tribal Communities*, Practices in Modern Policing (Alexandria, VA: International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2018), <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/practices-in-modern-policing-policing-in-small-rural-and-tribal-communities>.

Peer Support Services in Small and Rural Agencies

Because of physical, emotional, and mental occupational stressors, police officers suffer from higher than average rates of heart disease, divorce, sick leave usage, alcohol abuse, and significant mental health issues such as acute stress disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety disorders.¹⁰

Peer support services can be an essential, effective, and financially viable wellness strategy to mitigate these challenges and build resiliency. These programs encourage officers to share occupational stressors with their law enforcement peers in a structured setting and can connect officers with other community mental health resources. Positive impacts on those who receive peer support include increased hopefulness, better social functioning, and improved quality of life.¹¹

Ten Steps to Building a Wellness Program

The IACP's Officer Health and Wellness Agency Assessment Tool and Action Planning Roadmap is a guide for law enforcement executives who are designing and implementing any officer wellness program. The roadmap suggests the following 10 steps for building a comprehensive officer health and wellness program such as a peer support program:

1. Obtain necessary buy-in
2. Develop program and team leader
3. Review research and connect with agencies that have similar programs
4. Identify priority areas
5. Define program mission and goals and develop a plan
6. Build a referral network
7. Provide training for program team
8. Launch program and conduct regular outreach
9. Maintain program
10. Evaluate impact of program

Source: International Association of Chiefs of Police, *Agency Assessment Tool and Action Planning Roadmap* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2019), <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/officer-health-and-wellness-agency-assessment-tool-and-action-planning-roadmap>.

10. Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act (LEMHWA) of 2017 (see note 4).

11. Matthew Chinman, Kevin Henze, and Patricia Sweeney, 2013, *Peer Specialist Toolkit: Implementing Peer Support Services in VHA*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs) <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/vsn4/docs/peer-specialist-toolkit-final.pdf>.

Program Design

Stakeholders

One initial and ongoing step to implementing successful peer support services is engaging with stakeholders and getting buy-in. Stakeholders can be internal or external and may include everyone from the agency head and command staff to the patrol officers, community leaders, mental health service providers, and officers' families. One way to build support is to identify the toughest critics, address their concerns, and discuss the benefits of a peer support program with them. Another strategy is to meet with the agency's strongest advocates of peer support and ask them to be ambassadors for the program with their peers. It is also useful for command-level personnel to champion the program, as leadership sets the tone for the rest of the agency.

A common hurdle to successfully implementing a peer support program is resistance or lack of interest from stakeholders who do not believe the program is needed. There can be a perception that peer support is only needed when an adverse incident or crisis occurs. Educating staff on the benefits of peer support as one of many tools in a comprehensive officer wellness program can help destigmatize asking for help. Craft messaging to dispel negative perceptions by emphasizing the proactive aspect of building resilience before you need it, like brushing teeth to avoid cavities or exercising to prevent a heart attack. Some agencies have found it helpful to draw on the department's culture of being a family and equate peer support to having each other's back.

Departments may also encounter distrust from personnel who believe leadership is just checking a box rather than making a sincere effort to support officers. Direct and clear communication from the agency head is essential to signal that leadership fully supports the initiative.

Leadership should also proactively address privacy concerns around a proposed peer support program by emphasizing that peer supporters will follow strict confidentiality standards.

Choosing the team

One of the keys to a successful program is carefully identifying and selecting the team coordinator and peer support members. All peer support team members should be compassionate, ethical, and well-respected in the department. They should demonstrate respect for confidentiality, a cornerstone of any successful peer support program. In addition to sworn and civilian personnel, the team may include a chaplain and a licensed mental health clinician. The clinician may be contracted as needed to provide debriefings and clinical support.

Individuals may be invited to join the peer support team by the coordinator or be nominated by their supervisors or current peer support team members. These carefully selected individuals should help maintain the qualities of compassion, trustworthiness, and discretion in the team. Agencies may also ask for volunteers initially but interview or vet them before accepting them onto the team. One agency took the unique approach of setting a ballot box in the break room and asking staff to anonymously submit names of people they thought would make good peer supporters. If a name appeared multiple times, it was a good indication that the person had the trust of their peers. This collaborative approach to selecting team members allowed everyone to have a voice in the process while providing a means of screening for desirable characteristics in a team member.

When selecting a team coordinator, consider that most small agencies do not have the resources for a dedicated wellness officer, meaning that the team coordinator will perform that role in addition to regular duties. If feasible, redistributing some portion of their other responsibilities will allow the team coordinator to devote time to the program and help prevent burnout.

Research and connect

Connecting with neighboring law enforcement agencies is also important for smaller and rural departments adopting peer support programs. Agencies can exchange ideas on what has been successful, examine how they overcame implementation challenges, discuss best policies and practices, and share resources. In addition, agencies can recommend external mental health professionals who have earned officers' trust and successfully assisted them.

Conducting a needs assessment

While an agency considering a peer support program likely has initial ideas, seeking input from agency personnel can still be helpful. A brief survey or focus group can gather information about employees' needs, perceptions about peer support, and likelihood of using a peer support program. This information can help shape the program to meet officers' most pressing needs and proactively address common concerns about confidentiality or potential career repercussions.

Sample Questions for Survey or Focus Group

The following questions can be asked in your survey or focus group to help gather information about employee needs:

- Are you familiar with the concept of a peer support program? What does peer support mean to you?
- What area(s) of peer support do you think would be most helpful for the department (for example, one-on-one support, critical incident debriefing, educational sessions, general wellness, or resiliency training)?
- Do you think you would take advantage of the following types of peer support?
 - One-on-one support with a trained peer member in my department or from another agency
 - Educational session on wellness topics
 - Call lines
 - Virtual peer support
 - A mobile app
- What concerns do you have with engaging in peer support through your department?
- Do you have specific concerns with privacy and confidentiality?
- Would you like to be part of the planning process?

Training the peer support team

The peer support program's scope and focus will inform the team's training needs and will vary from agency to agency. Introductory and ongoing training may cover communication skills, resilience building and stress management, crisis intervention, substance abuse, suicide risk assessment and intervention, local resources, wellness and self-care, and understanding when to make referrals to a qualified mental health professional (QMHP).

Peer support roles can be broadly grouped into three areas: (1) prevention, (2) intervention, and (3) postvention. Postvention, as defined by the mental health profession, is the organized response to the aftermath of a suicide;¹² here we use the term to also include an organized response after a line of duty death (LODD) or other trauma. Agencies may choose to start with a specific type of peer support and build up to other functions and trainings as the program evolves. Peer support team members may be responsible for serving multiple roles depending on the needs and circumstances of the agency.

12. "After a Suicide in Blue: A Guide for Law Enforcement Agencies," International Association of Chiefs of Police, accessed October 4, 2022, https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/244736_IACP_NOSI_AfterSuicide_p5.pdf.

Prevention

Peer prevention liaisons provide a proactive approach to resilience and suicide prevention through training, education, and resources. Their training content may include the following:

- Resilient peer liaison training
- Suicide prevention and awareness
- Self-care
- Psychoeducation

Intervention

Peer intervention counselors provide basic peer counseling, connect officers with QMHPs, and host groups for officers on various topics. Their training content may include the following:

- Reciprocal Peer Support for Wellness (RPS) training
- Staffing telephone support lines
- Risk assessment
- Case management and referrals
- Support groups

Postvention

Peer postvention crisis responders bridge a gap in resources following a critical or traumatic event. Their training content may include the following:

- International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) or Psychological First Aid (PFA) peer crisis response skills
- Critical incident debriefing and traumatic incident teams
- Line of duty deaths
- Suicide survivors
- Family resilience

In-house peer support

Agencies can choose from various models when implementing one-on-one peer support. One example is RPS, a nationally recognized evidence-based model developed by Cop2Cop to train agencies on prevention, intervention, and postvention strategies. A key feature of the training is creating a network where an officer in distress can speak with another officer who has completed peer support training. There are four components of the RPS model:¹³

- 1. Connection.** A peer supporter forms a connection with the person seeking support by eliminating distractions and focusing on the individual and situation at hand.
- 2. Information gathering and risk assessment.** The peer supporter collects information about the officer's situation and concerns and conducts a risk assessment to identify any urgent need for follow-up support. Information about the present concern and the history of the person in need are considered together.
- 3. Wellness planning and goal setting.** As the peer supporter and the individual seeking assistance establish rapport, the peer supporter helps the individual explore strengths and set goals. The peer supporter checks in regularly to ensure any outside referrals are meeting the individual's needs.
- 4. Resilience and affirmation.** The peer supporter praises and affirms the individual seeking support, emphasizing the importance of self-care and self-advocacy to foster resilience.

Regional peer support

Regional peer support programs can create a network of peer supporters across neighboring agencies. For many smaller and rural agencies, a regional peer support program provides anonymity for those who are uncomfortable confiding in their immediate coworkers, a common concern when an agency has a small number of sworn officers. Interagency peer support can also be helpful in critical incidents, such as LODDs, for which the home agency's peer support team may themselves be in need of support. Some agencies find that partnering in peer support efforts with local fire and emergency medical services agencies helps to augment resources. Larger and mid-sized agencies that participate in regional networks may be able to offer the services of their in-house mental health professionals to other agencies in the network; while this can relieve smaller agencies of the burden of finding a local mental health care provider, it does require that the larger agency have the funds to maintain an in-house provider and the capacity to take on work from additional agencies.

13. C. Castellano, "Reciprocal Peer Support (RPS): A Decade of Not So Random Acts of Kindness," *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health* 14, no. 2 (2012): 105–10. PMID: 23350226.

Call lines, virtual options, and mobile apps

Employing an in-house or regionally accessible mental health professional may not be feasible for many small and rural agencies with tight budgets. Call lines, telehealth, and mobile apps can improve confidential health care access. However, rural areas still face barriers to implementing these solutions, including inadequate broadband access, physician licensing systems that restrict where providers can practice, and limits to the reimbursement offered for these solutions by state-specific programs like Medicaid.¹⁴ However, agencies do not need to rely on formal telehealth and wellness platforms. Some agencies use commercially available mobile mental health and text support apps that are low-cost or free, while others use private online message forums or messaging apps for officers in the local region to connect virtually through posts in a protected space.

When employing a call line, telehealth, or mobile app, agencies need to determine who will be providing the peer support, and whether they are culturally competent in issues related to law enforcement. A 2018 Fraternal Order of Police survey found 52 percent of officers would not seek mental health services due to concerns that practitioners may not understand the context of their work as law enforcement officers.¹⁵ Officers may engage more willingly with counselors and crisis line workers who have also worked in law enforcement and understand the unique issues they face.

Finance

Many agencies establish and run peer support programs with minimal expenditures beyond staff time. However, some types of peer support may lead to other financial obligations such as callouts and overtime, training for team members, educational activities and speakers, or wellness app subscription fees. Some agencies earmark funds for peer support as part of their general training budget or under the umbrella of officer wellness activities. Grants may also be available to assist with these programmatic expenses; for example, the COPS Office's Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act (LEMHWA) program funds can be used to improve the delivery of and access to mental health and wellness services for law enforcement through the implementation of peer support, training, family resources, suicide prevention, and other promising practices for wellness programs.¹⁶

14. "Telehealth Use in Rural Healthcare," Rural Health Information Hub (RHIhub), July 1, 2021, <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/telehealth>.

15. "Report on FOP/NBC Survey of Police Officer Mental and Behavioral Health", Fraternal Order of Police, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://files.fop.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/OfficerWellnessSurvey.pdf>.

16. "Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act (LEMHWA) Program," Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, accessed October 3, 2022, <https://cops.usdoj.gov/lemhwa>.

Policies and standard operating procedures

Written policies and procedures governing the peer support program are highly recommended; these policies should be accessible to all personnel. Agencies may be able to obtain sample policies from neighboring agencies to use as templates; the Supplemental Resources section at the end of this guide contains additional information on where to find model policies and procedures. State and local jurisdictional statutes may address peer support programs and confidentiality standards; the agency's legal advisor should review the policy before implementation. Potential callouts and overtime may need to be negotiated with a collective bargaining unit.

Peer Support Policy Checklist

Agencies writing peer support policies and procedures should consider including the following sections:

- Definition and purpose of the peer support program
- Criteria for selection and deselection of peer support team members
- Training of peer support team members
- Expectations of peer support team members
- Overtime for peer support provided outside of scheduled work hours
- Privacy and confidentiality:
 - Exceptions to confidentiality
 - Peer supporter confidentiality agreement
- Limitations of peer support and when external referrals should be made

Mental health and wellness resources

While talking to a peer supporter can be invaluable, sometimes an officer needs a QMHP or another community resource. Agencies should have a network of local resources ready to which the peer supporters can connect individuals for additional assistance. While options may be limited, it is still important to find trusted mental health providers in the community who have the cultural competency to address the concerns of law enforcement officers. Finding providers is another way that regional collaboration is useful, as peer support teams can share trusted resources.

Program launch

Agencies can advertise the launch of the peer support team with frequent and visible promotional flyers in the station, announcements at roll call, and notices in intraoffice communications. Thoughtful, positive messaging outlining services available and confidentiality policies can help promote peer support as both a facet of an overall officer wellness strategy and an employee benefit. Supportive command staff can champion the effort by setting a positive tone and normalizing participation. If feasible, allowing peer support team members to lead or assist with routine departmental training can help establish them as knowledgeable and trusted resources. After the initial rollout, agencies should continue to promote peer support services at roll call, trainings, and in communications. Ongoing promotion of the availability of peer support helps integrate it as part of the agency's culture.

Maintenance and evaluation

Develop a plan for sustainability

A written peer support policy is the first step toward sustainability, establishing the program as an ongoing component of the agency's officer safety and wellness plan. It is also necessary, however, to develop plans for selecting peer supporters and team leaders after the initial recruitments. The effort to develop peer support services is often spearheaded by one or two people who see a need for such a program and become the driving force to create and maintain it. Continuity planning helps sustain the peer support program through transfers, retirements, and leadership changes, even after the program's initial champions are gone.

Evaluate and adjust

Hold consistent, recurring meetings with the peer support team to discuss successes and challenges. Make sure internal resources are maintained and updated regularly. Review policies to ensure the program follows statutory regulations governing privacy, shift lengths, turnarounds, rest periods, and number of hours worked.

Measure success by tracking data such as the number of engagements, time spent on each engagement, and referrals given. As well, seek anonymous feedback from personnel who have used the service. To maintain confidentiality, avoid including personally identifying details in data collection. Be transparent

about what data is or is not being collected, who has access to it, and for what purposes it can be used; this transparency will help build and maintain trust. Periodically re-evaluate the program and modify as necessary; if the program is not having the desired impact, take that opportunity to expand the scope of services or shift course.

Support the peer supporter

Being a peer supporter can be very fulfilling; however, peer supporters must also practice self-care to maintain their own mental health and set a good example for others on the peer support team and those receiving support. This practice is especially important for the person who functions as the peer support team coordinator, as they must assist team members in managing responsibilities and expectations and setting clear boundaries.

Law enforcement officers face difficult situations and stressors in both their professional and personal lives. Peer supporters have their own stressors, such as listening to others' concerns, responding to traumatic events, and the pressure of the increased responsibility of their role; all of these factors can cause cumulative stress and vicarious trauma. Ways to aid peer supporters should be built into the program's structure; these practices may include regular consultations with a mental health provider, debriefing during difficult situations to process events and share coping skills, allowing time off when needed, and using available officer safety and wellness resources.

Promising Practices in Implementing Peer Support Services

The following case studies highlight promising practices and lessons learned from three peer support trainings for law enforcement agencies serving smaller and rural law enforcement agencies communities.

Sunriver (Oregon) Police Department

Sunriver, Oregon, is a resort community of 10,000–15,000 year-round residents, growing to 20,000–25,000 during the peak summer season. The Sunriver Police Department (SPD) consists of 12 sworn officers, one nonsworn administrative assistant, eight seasonal nonsworn bicycle patrol officers, and 25 community volunteers who assist with special events. The department collaborates with neighboring agencies for training and mutual peer support. The SPD takes a holistic approach, integrating peer support as part of an overall officer wellness strategy and offering a variety of services.

The department's peer support team has three primary functions: (1) to provide critical incident debriefing, (2) to offer one-on-one support for departmental members, and (3) to assist families in LODDs. Defining what type of program the agency wanted was an essential first step; this initial decision informed its training needs. Setting expectations from day one was crucial to get staff buy-in. The chief communicated directly with personnel to articulate his full support and make clear his expectation of confidentiality; these direct and clear communications from the top were fundamental for building trust in the peer support program.

The peer support officers at the SPD were chosen based on the leadership team's belief that they would provide exemplary assistance to those in need. Peer supporters attend quarterly training; this ongoing training has allowed them to establish strong interpersonal relationships and feel comfortable knowing that if and when a major event occurs, there is a well-prepared team waiting to help and provide the resources needed.

The SPD collaborates with surrounding agencies to access additional aid and resources; the department reaches out to neighboring jurisdictions for additional peer support following critical incidents or officer deaths and participates in a countywide chaplaincy program for spiritual support.

Radford (Virginia) Police Department

The Radford Police Department (RPD), in rural southwestern Virginia, serves a town of 18,000 with 39 sworn and 16 civilian personnel. The RPD peer support program evolved out of positive relationships that already existed in the department whereby officers would turn to trusted peers for support. Having observed this, the officer who would become the peer support coordinator led an effort to create a formal peer support team at RPD.

With the chief's approval, the coordinator assembled a team of personnel—including officers, a dispatcher, a chaplain, and a licensed professional counselor—that he knew to have the character traits and personalities of effective peer supporters. In turn, those team members reported being willing to join because of their trust and relationships with the coordinator.

The RPD already offered regular mindfulness sessions and guided group therapy to promote officer wellness. However, the coordinator saw a need for increased communication and wanted to build camaraderie across shifts. To that end, he placed a whiteboard in the common area for staff to express gratitude, vent frustrations, or share a joke; the goal was to encourage and normalize communication and sharing while connecting shifts that had limited routine interactions. To the coordinator, the level of participation on the whiteboard, with many people expressing feelings of gratitude and providing jokes for comic relief, signaled widespread support for being able to voice feelings. After he described this at a regional training session, a neighboring agency set up its own whiteboard with similar success.

The RPD peer support program began by focusing largely on prevention but has enhanced its services by adding additional elements of intervention and postvention. The department networked with other area agencies to share information and jointly compile a comprehensive list of vetted resources offering a variety of options for different personalities and needs.

The team received state certification, which the peer support coordinator believes helps legitimize the peer team in the eyes of agency personnel and gives confidence to employees that information will not be shared with their employer. The team operates in compliance with Virginia Code, which protects privileged communications by subjects of peer support services and states peer support activity shall not be disclosed, nor subjects be compelled to testify.¹⁷ The RPD peer support team is currently applying for a Certificate of Specialized Training through the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF), which will provide additional credibility to the program and allow it to provide mutual aid nationwide as a certified peer support team.

17. Va. Code § 19.2-271.4.

South Dakota Highway Patrol

The South Dakota Highway Patrol (SDHP), a statewide agency, serves a primarily rural jurisdiction, with troopers often living and working far from their colleagues. As a result, it confronts some of the same challenges as small and rural law enforcement agencies. The SDHP's peer support initiative grew out of its Crash Assistance Program, a resource for individuals and their families following a fatal or life-threatening crash. The SDHP employs a full-time officer wellness coordinator who oversees its peer support services.

The SDHP developed a written policy to define processes, set expectations, and address common concerns such as confidentiality. To devise this policy, the officer wellness coordinator obtained sample policies from other agencies to review and customize.

Under the SDHP's selection process, peer supporters must be nominated by someone currently serving on the peer support team and must be successfully fulfilling their primary occupational responsibilities. A prospective peer supporter's supervisor may provide input as well. The SDHP looks for character traits of integrity, discretion, kindness, and openness in peer supporters. Team members receive training on topics such as critical incident debriefing, diffusing tension, and communication skills. Feedback from front-line personnel helps inform training needs.

The SDHP's officer wellness coordinator places a premium on being visible and building relationships, trying to be the kind of person he would turn to in a challenging situation. When traveling around the state for training, he takes advantage of informal social gatherings so troopers can get to know him personally.

Supplemental Resources

Model Policies

- IACP Police Psychological Services Section's Peer Support Guidelines:
<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/peer-support-guidelines>
- Employee Mental Health and Wellness:
<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/employee-mental-health-and-wellness>
- Personal Relationships in the Workplace:
<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/personal-relationships>

Officer Health and Wellness

- IACP Officer Health and Wellness Resources:
<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/officer-health-and-wellness>
- COPS Office Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Resources:
<https://cops.usdoj.gov/lemhwareources>
- Cop2Cop: <https://njcop2cop.com>

Small and Rural Agencies

- IACP Smaller Department Section and Online Community:
<https://www.theiacp.org/working-group/section/smaller-department-section>

About the IACP

The **International Association of Chiefs of Police** (IACP) is the world's largest and most influential professional association for police leaders. With more than 30,000 members in more than 165 countries, the IACP is a recognized leader in global policing. Since 1893, the association has been speaking out on behalf of law enforcement and advancing leadership and professionalism in policing worldwide.

The IACP is known for its commitment to shaping the future of the police profession. Through timely research, programming, and unparalleled training opportunities, the IACP is preparing current and emerging police leaders—and the agencies and communities they serve—to succeed in addressing the most pressing issues, threats, and challenges of the day.

The IACP is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia. The IACP is the publisher of *The Police Chief* magazine, the leading periodical for law enforcement executives, and the host of the IACP Annual Conference, the largest police educational and technology exposition in the world. IACP membership is open to law enforcement professionals of all ranks, as well as non-sworn leaders across the criminal justice system. Learn more about the IACP at www.theIACP.org.

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 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 130,000 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.
- 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, 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>.

Peer support can be an important part of an officer wellness strategy. Employees may feel more comfortable initially seeking support from a peer who understands the context and has experienced the same stressors.

This guide, *Planning and Implementing Peer Support Services in Small and Rural Law Enforcement Agencies*, provides a roadmap for small and rural law enforcement agencies implementing or enhancing peer support services. It highlights promising practices and provides brief case studies of peer support programs in three small or rural agencies. Topics include establishing trust and buy-in; identifying, training, and supporting team members and leaders; confidentiality; local and regional partnerships; and evaluation metrics.



COPS

Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice

U.S. Department of Justice
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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.



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