



# How Police Leadership Can Respond To Officer Mental Health Crises.

Officers need to be able to trust that the leaders of their organizations recognize the stigmas attached to accessing mental health treatment.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF STAYING AHEAD OF THE CURVE

First responders and the leaders around them devote their professional lives to keeping citizens and their communities safe. But if the officers who are the very fabric of the public safety paradigm are at risk, the people they've sworn to protect will face more danger as well.

It's the responsibility of law enforcement leaders to recognize this and do everything in their power to prevent it from happening. That means creating a culture that supports the concept of vulnerability. If every officer knows that sometimes it's OK to not be OK, that eliminates the stigma from within. That doesn't mean eliminating resiliency; it means promoting empathy and understanding.

There are seven important ways to make the mental health of your officers a top priority.

### 1. **Throw preconceived notions out the window.**

A big part of being a good leader is identifying your blind spots. As public awareness of the importance of positive mental health continues to grow – and, given the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be on an upward trajectory for a while – the spotlight on how law enforcement agencies handle the well-being of their officers will shine brighter. If you don't know what best practices are, ask. Educate yourself. Seek out different perspectives that can help you implement effective strategies.



## **2. Establish peer support groups.**

While outside help is better than no help at all, nothing breaks down barriers more than officers seeing a window into their colleagues' psyches. And these groups should not just be in place to address critical incident stress. In the FOP survey referenced earlier, only one-third of respondents had ever reported utilizing a peer support service – but three out of four of those who did found it helpful.

## **3. Set up an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).**

EAPs aren't uncommon, but they're often underutilized. Many organizations haven't taken the time to truly understand what resources EAPs can offer and haven't fully developed relationships with their EAP providers. The Chicago Police Department's EAP, for instance, extends these free services to families of active officers and retired department members.

## **4. Utilize free resources.**

Acadia Healthcare's Treatment Placement Specialists team offers complimentary treatment guidance and referrals for first responders and their families who need behavioral healthcare services. It's an easy way for organizations large and small to have vetting of potential treatment options done for them, and having partnered with the FBI National Academy Associates (FBINAA) and Officer Safety and Wellness Committee (OSW), TPS contains a bevy of experience from law enforcement officers who have been on the front lines.

## **5. Ensure regular check-ins beyond what's already in place.**

Several years ago, the psychological services committee of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) recommended regular, routine psychological wellness checks for all public safety employees. This is a good way to make sure nothing slips through the cracks, and by normalizing these reviews, peers may be more willing to discuss mental health concerns with one another



## **6. Focus on education.**

Learn from the past, and look toward the future. Study how law enforcement leaders handled the aftermath of prominent events, and be proactive in establishing guidelines for major incidents. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) wrote a guidebook for police chiefs on how to protect officer mental health in the early days after a mass casualty event following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. While no one wants to experience similar large-scale trauma, the lessons learned can be vital even to smaller agencies. NAMI and the IACP are great resources to stay current on evidence-based law enforcement practices that focus on mental health.

## **7. Keep asking questions.**

Are your supervisors trained to recognize signs of chronic stress? Do your officers understand the extent of their insurance benefits when it comes to counseling or treatment for mental health or substance use disorders? Do you provide resilience education? Do you have a culture that promotes self-care? Do you have a mechanism in place for family and/or spousal support? Are you consistently disseminating information in a way that reinforces your support for officers who are seeking help?

## **ARE YOU PART OF THE PROBLEM OR THE SOLUTION?**

Perhaps the most important question to ask is this: Are you part of the problem or part of the solution?

Honor Wellness Center, a Connecticut-based nonprofit, is the latter. Founded in 2017, this outpatient center provides first responders, veterans and their families with evidence-based treatment that addresses chronic and progressive addiction, mental health and traumatic experiences.

The goal is to break down barriers to mental health services and give first responders a chance to talk to those who have had similar experiences, as opposed to a general practitioner or therapist.

"It's a very unique, unusual culture in public safety, whether it is fire service or law enforcement," Christopher McKee, a retired captain with the Suffield (Connecticut) Police Department and board member at Honor Wellness Center, told the Hartford Courant. "We need a certain level of trust in those that we work with, those we confide in."



At the end of the day, police officers and other first responders need to be able to trust the leaders of their organizations to recognize the inherent obstacles and stigmas attached to mental health treatment in the law enforcement world. They need to be able to see a consistent growth mindset toward departmentwide access to psychological services. They need to be able to walk into work and feel comfortable and confident that if they are involved in traumatic situations – singular or cumulative – help is available with no strings attached.

We're making strides to get there. But there is work left to do.

### **How Mindbase Can Help**

Each encounter with trauma wears down a person's psychological reserve. Considering the degree to which officers are exposed to critical incidents, is important to understand the prevalence of depression, alcohol abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among officers.

Mindbase is the first and only Integrated Officer Wellness Platform designed to identify situational challenges affecting personnel by gathering data on calls-for-service. Our powerful proactive app and dashboard gives peer support and leadership the insight they need to identify at-risk personnel and provide meaningful support when they need it most.

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