

Officer

Mental Wellness

at a Glance

Did You Know?

- The suicide rate for police officers is four times higher than the rate for firefighters.
- The number of police suicides is 2.3 times that of homicides.
- Almost one in four police officers has had thoughts of suicide at some point in their life.
- In the smallest departments, the suicide rate of officers is almost four times the national average.
- Between 7-19% of police officers have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Steps law enforcement leaders can take to enhance resiliency in your agency today:

1

Form a workgroup on officer wellness. Work with your command staff, supervisors, union leadership and mental health providers to decide what sorts of wellness supports officers need, such as education and training or an annual wellness check. Many agencies find an officer peer support program especially helpful.

2

Find the right mental health service providers to support your officers. Work with your employee assistance provider or community mental health providers to find professionals who understand law enforcement culture and are familiar with trauma. To build trust and credibility, integrate these professionals into your agency's day-to-day operations.

3

Assign a mental health manager. Assign a mental health professional or a member of your command staff to the role of mental health manager. This person will help implement mental wellness programs, evaluate policies related to psychological services and serve as your mental health incident commander in a critical incident.

4

Revise your policy and procedure around providing psychological services to officers after a critical incident. Current research shows that rigidly-structured CISM debriefings may be harmful to some officers. Work with mental health professionals to identify more helpful interventions, such as Psychological First Aid or a more flexible debriefing protocol that provides support and education, but doesn't require officers to re-live the incident. Consider also requiring a mandatory one-time wellness check with a mental health professional after a critical incident. This will provide 'cover' for any officer who is struggling but doesn't want to call attention to himself.

5

Promote a cohesive and supportive culture within your agency. Show your officers that you value their health and well-being by checking in with officers in-person after a critical incident, keeping an open door policy, and instructing your command staff and supervisors to look after officers' wellbeing. Provide opportunities for the whole agency, and officers' families, to socialize and support each other.

6

Plan for rare, but catastrophic, incidents. Build close ties with other community leaders, first responder agencies, faith groups, local media, schools and major employers. Should you face a mass casualty incident or natural disaster, working together effectively will be the key to resilience for your entire community.

How to Assist a Fellow Officer after a Critical Incident

After a critical incident, every officer involved should ideally have an opportunity to talk with a trained peer support counselor or a mental health professional right away. But supervisors and fellow officers can also provide support after the event. Genuine concern and support go a long way. Here are some ways to help immediately after an incident:

- 1 Ensure Safety:** Make sure that the officer is safe and uninjured. If the immediate threat has passed, this may be obvious, but it doesn't hurt to ask if he or she needs medical care.
- 2 Provide Practical Assistance:** Ask if there's any way you can help—a cup of coffee, a ride home or a call to a family member.
- 3 Offer to talk:** Let him or her know you are available to listen. Say, "That was an intense situation. Do you want to talk?"
- 4 Listen Attentively:** Some people will want to talk through what they experienced and others will not. Follow their lead. Don't worry about fixing the problem, and don't feel like you need to ask detailed follow-up questions.
- 5 Reassure:** If the officer seems upset, reassure him or her that whatever reaction they are having is normal. If they feel fine, that's also okay. Say, "There's nothing wrong with you. You are having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation." A hug can help, too.
- 6 Leave a Number to Call:** Before you leave, give the officer your phone number or the number of a 24 hour helpline—somewhere they can call day or night.

DO

- ✓ Listen carefully. Be patient and sit with him or her for a few minutes.
- ✓ Encourage him or her to go home, get some sleep, eat or call a friend.
- ✓ Leave if asked to, but make sure to leave behind a phone number in case they want to talk later.

DON'T

- ✓ Tell him or her to suck it up or get back to work.
- ✓ Ask for details of the incident to satisfy your curiosity.
- ✓ Get side-tracked telling a story about your own experience.

To learn more about officer mental wellness, visit www.nami.org/cit and look out for our upcoming guide: *The Chief's Role in Safeguarding Officer Mental Health After Mass Casualty Events*.

All citations are available online at www.nami.org/cit.