

**IMPLEMENTATION OF CRITICAL INCIDENT DEBRIEFING, FOR
EMOTIONAL/MENTAL WELLNESS OF OFFICERS IN THE
HARRISONBURG POLICE DEPARTMENT**



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IMPLEMENTATION OF CRITICAL INCIDENT DEBRIEFING, FOR EMOTIONAL/MENTAL WELLNESS OF OFFICERS IN THE HARRISONBURG POLICE DEPARTMENT

Problem

Currently, the Harrisonburg Police Department (HPD) has 112.5 authorized sworn police officers positions (annex A). There are formalized and biannual training in use of force, firearms and driving that are mandatory for all sworn personnel. However, the agency has no program in place other than the EAP referral (employee assistance program) for the officer's emotional/mental wellness (annex G). Officer's mental wellness; was recently addressed as a focus for police agencies, in The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (Services C. O., The Presidents Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015).

The Harrisonburg Police Department would benefit by addressing the emotional/mental wellness of officers from the hiring process to retirement. The Harrisonburg Police Department should address the issue of emotional/mental wellness, to alleviate stress and gain compliance through a cultural change of the agency.

Assumptions

- HPD will continue to hire officers, that represent a variety of backgrounds
- HPD will continue to see an increased number of calls, that create stress on the officers mental/emotional state
- HPD officers are not immune from stressors that effect police agencies nationally.
- HPD will continue to lose officers at a yearly average of 14 certified officers (Dodd, 2018)

Facts/Data

- HPD has three Divisions that encompass 112.5 officers(annex A)
- HPD requires a physiological exam as part of the hiring process at a cost of 575.00 dollars per person (Annex J) (City of Harrisonburg, 2017)
- HPD has no policy or procedure in place to address the emotional/mental wellness of officers
- HPD has seen a the increase in calls for service that have effects on the officers' emotional/mental wellness(annex C)
- The City of Harrisonburg has a policy outlining how to access the EAP(employee assistance program) (annex G)
- HPD has a Chaplin program, consisting of two chaplains that have on call schedules (annex A)

Discussion

To begin the discussion one must first understand and define what a critical incident is. For police officers it could consist of a wide variety of calls or definitions. The definition chosen here comes from the Roanoke Police Department in Virginia, which states:, "Critical Incident: Any event that has emotional power to overwhelm an individual's usual ability to cope and which may interfere with the functioning of a person's coping skills immediately or in the future"(annex D). Therefore, agency leaders need to make identifying services, preparing for

their use, and creating a culture in which self-care is a valued part of their everyday work (Services C. O., Improving Law Enforcement Resilience, 2017).

House Judiciary Committee Chair Bob Goodlatte (R-VA) stated, “Our nation’s law enforcement officers have one of the toughest jobs in the nation. Every day, they risk their lives to keep the peace and protect our neighborhoods from criminals. Due to the stressful nature of their occupations, law enforcement officers need better access to mental health services to improve their health and help alleviate the anxiety that is a byproduct of their jobs” (GOP, 2017).

President Barack Obama stated, “When any part of the American family does not feel like it is being treated fairly, that’s a problem for all of us.” It means that we are not as strong as a country as we can be. And when applied to the criminal justice system, it means we’re not as effective in fighting crime as we could be” (Services C. O., The Presidents Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). This is a powerful statement, in regards to the issue of mental wellness; a police officer needs to be at the top level of his performance.

The Officer Safety and Wells Group (OSW) recommended that counseling, both peer and professional, is critical to helping officers respond resiliently to crisis and trauma (Services C. O., Improving Law Enforcement Resilience, 2017). Police officers who protect the community should have protection from the mental and emotional health problems related to the job. An officer whose capabilities, judgment, and behavior are adversely affected by poor physical or psychological health not only may be of little use to the community he or she serves but also may be a danger to the community and to other officers (Services C. O., The Presidents Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015).

Police officers never patrol the street with an inoperable vehicle, gun or radio; however, supervisors fail to look at the most important quality of the officer; the mind. Far too many times supervisors pay little attention to the maintenance of what is all officers’ most valuable resource: their brains (Services C. O., The Presidents Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). The Harrisonburg Police Department must have an atmosphere that allows officers to speak freely and in confidence about the mental/emotional wellness. The agency must fulfill its duties and obligations to the officers so the community as a whole will benefit from an officer that is mentally and emotionally well and has the correct equipment to perform the job.

The communities that we serve deserve the very best product of policing available and without a program to address all aspects of police work, the citizenry will feel the impacts. A robust but non-punitive; peer review error management program—in which law enforcement officers could openly and frankly discuss their own or others’ mistakes or near misses without fear of legal repercussions— would go a long way toward reducing injuries and fatalities by improving tactics, policies, and procedures. Protecting peer review error management findings from being used in legal discovery would enable the widespread adoption of this program by law enforcement (Services C. O., The Presidents Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). The Fairfax County Police Department (annex F), the Virginia State Police (annex E) and the Roanoke City Police Department (annex D) have peer-debriefing teams to address the mental/emotional wellness of the officers. Currently none of the local police agencies in the

Harrisonburg, Virginia area has a policy that outlines peer-debriefing teams. The Commonwealth of Virginia currently has a code that protects the communication of peer debriefings:

§ 19.2-271.4. Privileged communications by certain public safety personnel;

A. A person who is a member of a critical incident stress management or peer support team, established pursuant to subdivision A 13 of § [32.1-111.3](#), shall not disclose nor be compelled to testify regarding any information communicated to him by emergency medical services or public safety personnel who are the subjects of peer support services regarding a critical incident. Such information shall also be exempt from the Virginia Freedom of Information Act (§ [2.2-3700](#) et seq.) (Virginia General Assembly, 2017)

To show the importance of peer debriefing, a colleague was interviewed who worked in a command level position at Blacksburg Police Department, on April 16, 2017. This is a significant day in history because 32 Virginia Tech students and teachers lost their lives, which remains one of the deadliest school shootings in America. Cummings stated, “When we went through the VT shootings, my chief called in reinforcements from SC and NC, effectively introducing us to SCLEAP. Blacksburg PD was very aggressive in offering peer support, and as a result suffered remarkably low personnel losses. A neighboring agency that took a different approach suffered significant losses to their personnel. In the wake of that event, we put together VALEAP (Virginia Law Enforcement Assistance Program) (annex I), initially as a small group from Blacksburg PD, Fairfax County PD and the VSP; it has grown considerably since then” (Cummings, 2018).

Resilient officers and agencies are vital to effective public safety in this country. The men and women who dedicate their lives to protecting others must be healthy and must feel they have the support of their agencies and communities. As one attendee noted, “You can’t have a well department with well officers without a well community.” A law enforcement agency’s most critical resource is its personnel. They deserve the best protection agencies and the community can give (Services C. O., Improving Law Enforcement Resilience, 2017). It was evident that the critical incident review implemented by one agency created resilience and a cultural change that allowed officers to feel protected to receive the help they desperately needed.

National Occupational Mortality Surveillance found that police died from suicide 2.4 times as often as from homicides. However, depression resulting from traumatic experiences is often the cause, routine work and life stressors—serving hostile communities, working long shifts, lack of family or departmental support—are frequent motivators too (Services C. O., The Presidents Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). People experience emotional health crises in response to a wide range of situations, but for law enforcement officers, their job experience involving frequent exposure to trauma can heighten these crises. Efforts to study suicide in law enforcement have been limited, as have efforts to raise awareness of the signs and risks. OSW Group attendees noted that each year more officers are believed to take their own lives than are killed in the line of duty (Services C. O., Improving Law Enforcement Resilience, 2017).

Unfortunately, with the limited number of studies or the culture prevailing in agencies, numbers may not be accurately reported; recent studies showed this could be as high as seventeen percent of suicides are being hidden (The Badge of Life, 2018). When looking at the years from 2008 until 2017 comparing suicides to line of duty deaths, they are close each year in the number of deaths (annex B). Yet police culture highlights the efforts of those that die in the line of duty, but remain quiet about those that die because of suicide. It is evident that suicide is a major problem in police work, but most remain quiet. The Harrisonburg Police Department has never had a suicide in the police ranks; however, we have had suicides in agencies like probation and parole that we work with closely.

John Violanti maintains that an average life span for police officers is 66 years or 10.6 years after retirement; adjusted for age and gender. This is lower than the average for males in the United States (76 years of age). Caring for oneself physically and emotionally are ways one can increase the likelihood of a longer life (The Badge of Life, 2018). John Violanti explained during an interview, that police officers at the age of fifty-five have a 56% chance of dying, compared to a 2% chance for the general population (Violanti, 2018). Chiefs do acknowledge that police work is a highly stressful, traumatic job. They admit the job work can cause severe emotional trauma and PTSD (some departments still try to “outlaw” PTSD claims). When a suicide occurs at a department, however, too many forget all this. Even in the most obvious case of horrific trauma on the job, few want to admit the possibility that the death had anything to do with the job. Instead, it was a “weakness” on the part of the officer. The officer had personal problems. It was the spouse’s fault, or charges were pending. It certainly had nothing to do with PTSD from the job (The Badge of Life, 2018).

When focusing on the mortality and suicide rate of police officers, it shows that police culturally will try to deny the reasons were associated with the Job. However, comparatively it shows in studies, this problem is real and unavoidable, neither officers nor agencies can ignore the problem. As a whole, police agencies try to avoid the acknowledgement of suicide as if it is some plague and when kept out of sight or mind it does not exist. They see it as a sign of weakness, but until we recognize the issue and the effects, the job itself has on officers’ emotional/mental wellness the elephant will remain. The Harrisonburg Police Department is neither different nor immune to the stress of the job, or the problems related to denying the emotional/mental wellness of officers. The Harrisonburg Police Department cannot wait for something to happen to recognize there is a problem. The agency must be proactive and ensure that officer’s mental/emotional wellness is treated with dignity and respect.

Partnerships are another crucial element. An agency cannot successfully tackle these issues without partners such as industrial hygienists, chaplains, unions, and mental health providers. Nevertheless, no program can succeed without buy-in from agency leadership as well as the rank and file (Services C. O., The Presidents Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). Former IACP (International Association of Chiefs of Police) President Craig Steckler wrote, “But our collective silence only compounds the problem. By ignoring the issue, we implicitly promote the unqualified expectation that police must, without question, be brave, steadfast, and resilient. Our refusal to speak openly about the issue perpetuates the stigma many officers hold about mental

health issues—the stigma that depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide are signs of weakness and failure, not cries for help.” (Huey, 2016)

In an interview with the City of Harrisonburg Human Resources department, weaknesses were revealed in our system that tracks EAP usage and sick leave. Human resources advised they could obtain the amount of times employees of the City of Harrisonburg have accessed the EAP, but would not be able to separate it by entities, like the Police Department. So the numbers would be skewed and not accurately reflect the amount of time that police have accessed the EAP for their emotional/mental wellness. Additionally, it was advised that due to our current sick leave usage type and individuals being on separate plans based on hire date, sick leave cannot be accurately calculated (Martin, 2018).

A recent survey distributed to a random selection of the Harrisonburg Police Department gave feedback on the agency’s ability to meet the emotional/mental wellness. The survey focused on the culture and issues that exist within the Harrisonburg Police Department and possible solutions that could address the concerns of the officers. There was over a ninety percent agreement that officers would benefit from a peer debriefing. In the same survey over eighty-five percent agreed, they were comfortable with speaking about their emotional/mental stress. The results were overwhelming that officer’s have been in situations that have affected their emotional/mental wellness, where it would have been beneficial to have a peer to speak with in regards to the incident. Officers also provided information in a survey that an agency centered team would be the best answer to address the emotional/mental wellness of officers (Annex L). Unfortunately, only seventy-seven percent of the surveys were returned which was higher than research suggest, which is most of the time between thirty and forty percent (Fryrear, 2015).

When choosing a solution, the Harrisonburg Police Department must look at multiple solutions based on size of agency, current culture of the agency, officer’s feelings and trust. When looking at the Harrisonburg Police Department three possible solutions are feasible for implementation to address the mental/emotional wellness

1. Expand the current Employee Assistance Program (EAP) program offered by the City of Harrisonburg, by adding a full time psychologist to the payroll.
2. Create an HPD policy that addresses the concern of emotional/mental wellness of police officers by developing and implementation a peer debriefing team.
3. Create a multijurisdictional team, bound together by MOU’s (memorandum of understanding) to address the emotional/mental wellness of all officers in the jurisdiction.

Each of the above solutions are viable options and will be discussed in detail below to show advantages, disadvantages and the cost associated with each.

Solutions

1. Expand the Current EAP program offered by the City of Harrisonburg by hiring a full time staff psychologist.

Advantages:

- Supervisors and officers are already familiar with the current EAP program

- Requires limited training on the expanded services
- Full time psychologist added to the pay roll for the City of Harrisonburg.
- Can reduce the out of pocket expenses for the psychological evaluation as part of the hiring process, current cost per exam is 575.00 (annex J)

Disadvantages:

- Officers do not feel confident in the EAP program (Annex L)
- When using the system you are transferred to a twenty four hour hotline, sometimes to someone in another country and then called by someone later (Palaskey, 2018)
- Officers, including those working in corrections and policing, who want access to good mental health care but struggle to trust their in-agency EAP as a truly anonymous resource (Services C. O., Improving Law Enforcement Resilience, 2017)
- Unable to track usage of EAP program

Cost:

- Average cost for a psychologist in Charlottesville, Virginia which is a thirty minute drive from the Harrisonburg Police Department is, \$70,510.00 (Indeed, 2018)
- EAP only covers three sessions of physiological exams (annex G)
- Associated cost of the psychological exams of \$575.00 per person(annex J)

2. Create an HPD policy that addresses the concern of emotional/mental wellness of police officers by developing and implementation a peer debriefing team.

Advantages:

- The policy will specifically address the needs of the Harrisonburg Police Department.
- Provides for education for officers, on emotional/mental wellness.
- Allows HPD to direct the future culture of the agency
- Having member of HPD on the team, and a supervisor as the team leader
- HPD already have a Chaplin program in place.
- Allows for a mental health provider from CSB on the team to address an more in depth emotional/mental wellness of the officer (Janocka, 2018)
- Have a protocol in place from the Virginia Office of Emergency Medical Services for development of a CISM (Crisis Intervention Stress Management) team (annex H).
- Have established polices from other agencies that we can model (annex D, E, F).
- Currently working with Lexipol to establish new policies for accreditation
- Monthly training with officers, and planned training with outside agencies that have established procedures

Disadvantages:

- Changing the current culture to realize the importance of emotional/mental wellness may be challenging
- Member of the debriefing team if needed will have to seek emotional/mental wellness from another source

Cost:

- Ginger Neff, LPC(Licensed Professional Counselor) has agreed to be part of team, on a volunteer basis at no cost (Neff, 2018)
- Denise Janocka LPC, CSB (Community Services Board) Emergency Services Supervisor, has agreed to be part of the team on a volunteer basis at no cost (Janocka, 2018).
- Associated cost of the psychological exams of \$575.00 per person(annex J)
- Personnel on the team from the Harrisonburg Police Department will be compensated by their hourly overtime rate(cost) or time could be flexed (No cost)

3. Create a multijurisdictional team, organized by MOU's (memorandum of understanding) to address the emotional/mental wellness of all officers in the jurisdiction.

Advantages:

- Have other agencies (Rockingham County Sheriff's Office, James Madison University Police Department, CSB just to name a few) that will be able to respond, and have outside individuals that may not be involved with the critical incident.
- Allows for a mental health provider from CSB on the team to address an more in depth emotional/mental wellness of the officer (Janocka, 2018)
- Have a point of contact as a Director of the Program (law enforcement) from one agency.
- Have a protocol in place from the Virginia Office of Emergency Medical Services for development of a CISM (Crisis Intervention Stress Management) team (annex H)

Disadvantages:

- With multiple agencies involved, which agency would hold the policy?
- Differing agency agendas
- How compensation for officers from agencies fairly across the board determined.
- MOU's would have to be agreed to by all agencies
- Changes of Department heads would require a new MOU
- Monthly Training coordinated between the different agencies

Cost:

- Added cost of contacting a Mental Health Clinician, \$70,510.00 (Indeed, 2018)
- Off duty employment compensation of the Harrisonburg Police Department, of 35 dollars an hour (established based on average overtime rate) (Westfall, 2018).
- Associated cost of the psychological exams of \$575.00 per person(annex J)

Conclusion

It is vital that HPD develop a program to addresses the emotional/mental wellness of its officers, from the date of hiring to retirement. The Harrisonburg Police Department cannot continue to deny or ignore the research presented across the country. Law Enforcement officers in our agency are not immune to stress that is prevalent in the job. This study has addressed three possible solutions, each with its own specific advantages, disadvantages and associated cost.

Option number one is very attractive, as the EAP is already in place and supervisors and officers are familiar with the policy. This solution would require an additional cost to the City of Harrisonburg, averaging \$70,510.00 yearly compensation for a psychologist. This option requires the least amount of work from HPD as everything would be set in place by the human resources office that currently oversees the EAP.

Option number two will use the local Community Service Board members that are part of our CIT Team (annex M) and a private LPC to reduce additional cost. Our agency currently has a Chaplin program with two Chaplin's that are available on call and have normal officer hours. By establishing an internal policy, it would allow a change in culture in regards to mental/emotional wellness (annex K). Harrisonburg Police Department will formulate policy(through Lexipol) using national standards, but have the ability to use other agency policies(annex D,E,F) from the Commonwealth of Virginia, to assure it meets the CISM criteria (annex H) and the Virginia Law Enforcement Professional Standards Commission (Services V. D., 2018). This would keep HPD from trying to address different accreditation standards for each agency. Also, the survey conducted with officers from the Harrisonburg Police Department felt option two would be the best way to address the emotional/mental wellness of officers (annex L).

Option number three has just as many benefits as option number two. However, it would require multiple law enforcement agencies, to agree on policy and sign an MOU. This could create conflicts as each agency already has established policy and agencies accreditation are under different standards. Internal conflicts could arise in regards to the administrative director, how long is the term, and the rotation schedule, for each agency. In addition, each agency may not agree to serve as the director of the program without additional compensation. This could affect the cost for the debriefing teams at each individual agency.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Harrisonburg Police Department, create and implement a policy for officers emotional/mental wellness consisting of its own debriefing team. The benefits of implementation of option number two above far out way our system of having no policy or procedure in place. The creation and implementation of an emotional/mental wellness policy would provide for education, support officers' in times of need, and create the cultural change necessary for officer wellness to be taken seriously throughout the agency. The attached implementation plan will serve as a guideline to make option number two become an integral part of the Harrisonburg Police Department (annex N), which John Violanti described as an agencies best practice (Violanti, 2018).

Submitted for approval: _____

Captain Dan Claytor

Date

☐ Approved

☐ Not approved, Reason: _____

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Annex List attached separately.

- Annex (A) – Harrisonburg Police Department organizational Chart
- Annex (B) – Police Suicide/Line of Duty Deaths
- Annex (C) – Harrisonburg Police Department Calls for Service
- Annex (D) – Roanoke City Police Department Policy
- Annex (E) – Virginia State Police Policy
- Annex (F) – Fairfax County Police Department Policy
- Annex (G) – Harrisonburg City EAP policy
- Annex (H) – CISM accreditation; Virginia officer of emergency medical services
- Annex (I) – VALEAP overview
- Annex (J) – HPD physiological pre-screening cost
- Annex (K) – Force Field Analysis
- Annex (L) – Survey of Officers
- Annex (M) – CIT policy
- Annex (N) - Implementation Plan

Executive Summary

IMPLEMENTATION OF CRITICAL INCIDENT REVIEW, FOR EMOTIONAL/MENTAL WELLNESS OF OFFICERS IN THE HARRISONBURG POLICE DEPARTMENT

Problem:

The only program currently in place to address the emotional/mental wellness of HPD officers' is the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) (annex G). Officer's mental wellness; was recently addressed as a focus for police agencies, in The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (Services C. O., The Presidents Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). Presently the Harrisonburg Police Department has not taken steps to address the issue presented in the Task Force guidelines. The Harrisonburg Police Department should address the issue of emotional/mental wellness, to alleviate stress and gain compliance through a cultural change of the agency, towards emotional/mental wellness.

Possible Solutions:

1. Expand the current Employee Assistance Program (EAP) program offered by the City of Harrisonburg, by hiring a full time psychologist.
2. Create an HPD policy that addresses the concern of emotional/mental wellness of police officers by developing and implementation a peer debriefing team.
3. Create a multijurisdictional team, bound together by MOU's (memorandum of understanding) to address the emotional/mental wellness of all officers in the jurisdiction.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Harrisonburg Police Department, create and implement a policy for officers emotional/mental wellness consisting of its own debriefing team. The benefits of implementation of option number two above far out way our system of having no police or procedure in place. The creation and implementation of an emotional/mental wellness policy would provide for education, support officers' in times of need, and create the cultural change necessary for officer wellness to be taken seriously throughout the agency. The attached implementation plan will serve as a guideline to make option number two become an integral part of the Harrisonburg Police Department (annex N), which John Violanti described as an agencies best practice (Violanti, 2018).

Submitted for approval _____
Chief Steve Sellers, Harrisonburg Police Department _____ Date

☐ Approved

☐ Not Approved, Reason _____