

# **Byrne/Justice Assistance Grant**

**2018 Local Solicitation  
CFDS #16.738**

## **PROJECT TITLE: Harrisonburg Police Officer Emotional/Mental Wellness Program**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Description of Agency and Community:**

The Harrisonburg Police Department employs 112.5 sworn officers and has a civilian staff of 18. It also has an Auxiliary Police Unit that has 10 sworn officers and 4 non-sworn members.

Harrisonburg is in the central Shenandoah Valley and is intersected by Interstate 81. It has a population of 52,538 and covers 17.41 square miles. It is the county seat of Rockingham County. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis combines the City of Harrisonburg with Rockingham County for statistical purposes into the Harrisonburg, Virginia Metropolitan Statistical Area, which in 2011 estimated the combined population at 126,562. The median age of the Harrisonburg population is 22.7; the median age of the population in Virginia is 43.3. Harrisonburg is home to two universities: James Madison University, which has 22,667 students and Eastern Mennonite University, which has 1,880 students.

Harrisonburg continues to develop from a small agricultural based municipality to a large urban area. From 2002 to 2012 the City of Harrisonburg has grown 4.2 percent. Within that population 31.8% is below the poverty level (statistic from US census). It is reported to be one of the top ten fastest growing cities in Virginia for the past 3 years. Harrisonburg also has been named as a statewide-managed shelter site for natural and man-made disasters for the Washington DC metropolitan area.

The Harrisonburg Police Department's sworn staffing has increased from 90 officers in 2013 to 112.5 officers in 2018. While overall crime rates have remained consistent, with 3531 Group A IBR Offenses reported in 2013 and 3313 Group A IBR Offenses reported in 2017, violent crime has increased 49% from 61 offenses reported in 2013 to 119 offenses reported in 2017. The homicide rate has tripled, from one murder in 2013 to three in 2017.

### **PROBLEM/NEED STATEMENT**

To begin the discussion, one must first understand and define what a critical incident is. 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 is considered a critical incident. Agency leaders need to prioritize identifying critical incident response 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 regard to the issue of mental wellness; a police officer needs to be at the top level of his performance.

The Officer Safety and Wellness 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).

Currently, the Harrisonburg Police Department (HPD) has 112.5 authorized sworn police officer positions. Formalized and biannual training in use of force, firearms and driving are mandatory for all sworn personnel. There exists a physical fitness program and policy providing officers the time and funding to participate in physical fitness regiments twice a week. However, the agency has no program in place other than the EAP referral (employee assistance program) for the officers' emotional/mental wellness.

The Harrisonburg Police Department would benefit by addressing the emotional/mental wellness of officers from the hiring process through 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 affect police agencies nationally.
- HPD will continue to lose officers at a yearly average of 14 certified officers

### **Facts/Data**

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

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

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 needs of employees. 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. Over 90% of respondents agreed that officers would benefit from a peer debriefing. In the same survey over 85% agreed that they were comfortable with speaking about their emotional/mental stress. The results were overwhelming that officers have been in situations affecting their emotional/mental wellness where it would have been beneficial to have a peer to speak with about the

incident. Officers also provided opinions that an agency-centered team would be the best answer to address the emotional/mental wellness of officers.

The goal of the Officer Emotional/Mental Wellness Program is to improve officers' mental and emotional wellbeing through training, peer support, and a program designed to change culture and reduce stigma that depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide are signs of weakness and failure.

Several components of this project have already been put into place, such as conducting surveys, developing a strategic plan, obtaining support from City Leadership and Department Command Staff, and drafting a program policy. This proposal for funds is to provide the training and certifications needed in development of the Incident Support Team. Several objectives have been identified to ensure these funds further the overall project goal.

#### *Implementation of Program Policy for Mental Wellness*

A policy has already been drafted and approved by the Chief of Police. The policy will be released to staff, and the Peer Support Team will provide training and facilitate discussions with staff to ensure understanding of the need for and scope of the policy. These discussions will also serve to help reduce the stigma that providing self-care and reducing emotional strain are signs of weakness or failure.

#### *Developing an Incident Support Team*

Team members have already been identified, with a Peer Support Team Director and Team Leader, and have had discussions with existing Critical Incident Support Teams and trainers in other agencies.

The Peer Support Team will provide services to police staff:

- Immediate support as needed when responding to the scene of a critical incident, to include contacting family members, arranging transportation, providing food, etc.
- Critical incident education.
- Act as a liaison with the Employee Assistance Program, police chaplain, police psychologist.
- Participate in debriefing and diffusing sessions with affected employees. Assist the police psychologist with follow-up as directed after an incident.
- Coordinate long term assistance at the direction of the peer support director.
- Coordinate the completion of any needed Worker's Compensation Injury paperwork and submission of claims to the Virginia Municipal League.

#### *Provide training and development for Peer Support Team Members*

Team members would need to attend training in areas pertinent to critical incidents, and will be required to attend several training sessions each year.

Training opportunities provided by the Virginia State Police (Richmond) have been identified, though training dates have not yet been announced. When announced, the Harrisonburg Police Department will register the team members for training. Registration and travel costs have been identified in the Program Budget.

Meanwhile, plans have been made to allow team members to shadow other existing peer support teams in local agencies. These agency partners have agreed to provide opportunities for HPD peer support officers to attend quarterly meetings, response to critical incidents, and incident debriefings.

After our team members have attended training and shadowed other teams, they will review the knowledge gained and apply to the existing policy.

*Reduce stigma of weakness and failure associated with seeking help*

After the initial training period, team members will attend quarterly meetings and advanced training. They will begin peer discussions about the existing culture pertaining to mental stability and stress management. Peer counselors will be made available to all staff, and will respond to critical incident needs.

During this period, team members will review the Agency's response to past critical incidents and identify actions to take for a better response to future incidents.

Team members will review the existing program and policy for effectiveness on a quarterly basis, making recommendations for change as determined.

On an Agency level, the program is intended to help improve officer retention:

*Improve Officer retention by reducing turnover by 50%*

In the past 5 years, employee turnover has increased from a loss of seven employees per year, to an average loss of 14 employees per year. Reduction in stress caused by emotional response to critical incidents, and increased support of employee wellness would help employees feel valued by the Department. While increases in salary or family needs are often cited as reasons for transferring to other police departments or civilian jobs, many employees have cited high levels of mental stress accompanied by lack of personal support and consideration for mental wellbeing from the Agency.

On a community level, the program is intended to improve officer interaction with the public:

*Improve Officer interaction with the community by reducing the number of formal complaints specific to officer behavior/attitude by 20%*

Current and prior surveys and complaints about how officers treat the public, negative interactions, or lack of community engagement will be reviewed and used to identify areas of focus specific to stress management and emotional response and control.

## **PROJECT EVALUATION**

To determine whether project objectives are being met, the Peer Support Team Director will formally evaluate the project.

*Process Evaluation*

It is necessary to determine the extent to which the officers have been participating in the program and utilizing the peer support services. If the evaluator determines that the services are not being utilized (the team not being called for incident response, officers not confiding in team members), he will work with agency personnel to correct the problem.

#### *Outcome Evaluation*

Baseline surveys utilized in developing the program strategic plan will be re-issued toward the end of the program, and responses compared to determine if the support and training provided did influence officers' mental and emotional wellness, employee retention and community relations.

### **SUMMARY**

Currently, the Harrisonburg Police Department (HPD) has 112.5 authorized sworn police officers for a City of 52,538 people covering 17.41 square miles. Formalized training in use of force, firearms and driving is mandatory for all sworn personnel, and there exists a physical fitness policy and program. The Agency has no program in place other than the EAP referral (employee assistance program) for the officers' emotional/mental wellness. Officers' 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 President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015).

The Harrisonburg Police Department will create and implement a policy for officers' emotional/mental wellness that would provide for education, resources to support officers in times of need, and create the cultural change necessary for officer wellness to be taken seriously throughout the Agency.