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**Walking Away a Winner:
A Holistic Approach to Law Enforcement Vitality**

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ABSTRACT

Vitality in law enforcement is a growing concern for agency executives. The career journey of a police officer is one that is in constant transformation. Agencies have not traditionally focused on this metamorphosis and as a result, the officer's overall wellness is neglected. The law enforcement professional becomes an eyewitness to human suffering over the duration of his/her career. This collateral damage takes its toll on the individual officer, his relationships, and his behavior. Specifically, the officer's physical, financial and spiritual wellness is taxed and the downward decline begins (Mattos, 2010). The antiquated para-military subculture prevents agencies from properly addressing these issues and both the department and the officer suffer.

Law enforcement agencies should take a holistic approach in providing their officers training and resources to encourage and promote vocational longevity. This path towards wellness and vitality needs to begin with the identification and acknowledgement of reoccurring occupational weakness that have largely gone unaddressed. Law enforcement executives need to forge partnerships with their employees. This commitment entails putting measures and training in place that focuses on the officer and his ever changing career journey. This holistic approach will lead towards a well-rounded officer committed to the agency that supports him.

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INTRODUCTION

Vitality in the law enforcement profession is a growing concern to agency executives as officers are quitting their jobs at alarming rates (Mattos, 2010). This growing trend is further complicated on the national level as it becomes more problematic in finding suitable candidates to fill police vacancies. Administrators are searching for ways to retain veteran police officers and are beginning to see the importance and benefits of vocational vitality and all that this encompasses. They are striving to hire their officers with the intent of eventually retiring them after a long successful career. This approach will require them to be innovative and focus on the quality of life of the officer throughout his career within the agency. This will force them to acknowledge the constant exposure of societal toxins experienced by their officers and the resulting unseen and often unspoken collateral damage. Agency leaders are seeking new avenues that offer support, understanding, resources, and training that focuses on the whole officer as he approaches, encounters and overcomes pitfalls unique to his chosen profession.

The career journey of a law enforcement officer is one that is in constant transformation. Officers enter their careers and are indoctrinated through their training to “win” and to maintain this mindset throughout their day to day interactions with the public. This has led to a unique subculture within the vocation that emphasizes independence, strength and “us against them” thought process. Cadets are told to run towards trouble while everybody else runs away towards safety. The training focus is primarily on survival from a physical attack. Some agencies place “Everybody Goes Home” signs in their buildings to reinforce this mentality. This overemphasis, although

extremely important, has led to neglecting the individual officer's overall wellness as he/she witnesses the worst of mankind throughout their career. This internal trauma takes its toll on the individual officer and their personal relationships and often forces them to leave the police profession early.

It is important to explore those strategies that can help bridge the gap in training and equip officers to recognize, avoid, and overcome obstacles that can be detrimental to them, their families, and the organization. The path towards wellness and vocational vitality needs to begin with the identification of those reoccurring occupational weaknesses. The eroding physical, financial, and spiritual health aspects are specific areas that need to be addressed. Wellness can occur only when purposeful actions are taken to cultivate the officer as a whole person (Feemster, 2009). Law enforcement agencies should take a holistic approach in providing their officers training and resources to encourage and promote vocational longevity.

POSITION

Physical health is a vital component in this approach. Gilmartin (2002) explored the transformation of an officer going from being physically fit to becoming unhealthy as a result of occupational hazards. The path towards eroding physical health is a career journey that includes shift work, poor diet, and living a mostly sedentary life of driving a patrol vehicle or sitting behind a desk.

Gilmartin (2002) identified an occupational phenomenon as the hyper vigilance biological rollercoaster as another hazard detrimental to physical health. This concept suggests that officers are always in a state of readiness while on duty, anticipating the worst as they constantly scan their environment looking for danger. This reinforces the

“us against them” mentality taught early in the officer’s career that every contact with the public is a perceived threat. It also prepares the officer to respond from a biological aspect by heightening those functions within the body to react when needed. The officer in a hyper-vigilance state can have heightened hearing and improved vision. The officer can experience an elevated heart rate, blood pressure, and an increase in their blood sugar. Adrenaline is increased and affords the officer a sense of heightened energy and strength to overcome a physical attack. Officers routinely respond to desperate calls of help by driving quickly to the scene utilizing their patrol vehicle’s emergency lighting equipment and siren. The officer is in a heightened state of hyper-vigilance as he/she assesses the roadway for hazards and mentally prepares themselves for when he/she arrives on scene to seek out and overcome the threat. All too often, the once desperate call for assistance turns out to be not a threat at all. The officer has to make the transformation back to a level of normal level of alertness. This can often occur several times within the officer’s shift. At the end of the officer’s shift, he/she returns to his family and can become disengaged as he/she attempts to recover from this phenomenon. Hypervigilance is a necessary evil that forces officers to practice good safety skills, but it comes at a high cost to the officer’s health, family, and his agency.

Gilmartin (2002) offered that since hyper vigilance is physiological in nature, physical fitness is required to minimize and overcome this cycle. Gilmartin (2002) prescribed “cardio-therapy,” which is aerobic exercise for 30 minutes at a time and several times a week. Blum (2000) cited that physical conditioning can show predictable improvement on individual officer’s emotional condition and energy levels.

Officers are consistently in a state of biological transformation as they rotate shifts on a regular basis. As a result of shift changes, the officer's sleep and eating patterns are disrupted and this takes a cumulative physical toll on the officer. The diet of most officers is usually dependent on what restaurants are open during their tour of duty. This can be problematic for those officers assigned to the nightshift as "fast food" options may be the only fare available. The sedentary nature of police work increases their chances of contracting coronary heart disease (Quigley, 2008).

Agencies know the benefits of physical fitness, and some make it a requirement as a condition of employment and graduation from the police academy. The individual officer, for the most part, is then charged with continuing his/her own physical fitness regimen, which can decline or altogether cease over the course of his/her career. This can occur even though some progressive departments have provided equipment and opportunities to encourage this endeavor. Officers have various reasons for non-exercise, including a lack of energy or time. The inability of an officer to meet the basic physical demands can lead to increased risks of injury, disease, and leaving the agency prior to being eligible for retirement benefits. Smith (2005) suggested that police officers' longevity is two to five years post retirement, and further suggested it is related to the lack of a personal or agency fitness and wellness programs.

Law enforcement executives can forge a partnership with their officers by working together to develop an agency fitness plan that serves as a win-win solution for both parties. This commitment and participation can benefit the department with potentially lowering on job injuries and associated insurance costs and use of force

complaints. The officer can reap the benefits of being healthier and having a better quality of life.

Another key component in seeking law enforcement vitality is addressing financial wellness of the individual officer. Gilmartin (2002) explained that officers have a tendency to make repeated large purchases as a coping mechanism to deal with occupational stress. These purchases can include automobiles, boats and other expensive items that tend to be outside the officer's budget.

This stress-related consumerism initiates a cycle in which the officer works extra jobs just to pay the bills. This can entail the officer working 16 hours or more in a single day. The officer can repeatedly make large out of budget purchases over the course of his/her career to diminish feelings of stress and temporarily feel content. This ultimately leads to financial difficulties that can take years to recover. Officers are increasingly finding themselves working many years past their retirement eligibility year to compensate for poor financial decisions made during their career.

Retirement planners recommend that potential retirees accumulate 70% to 80% of their current working income in order to maintain their standard of living during retirement (Rehm, 1996). Officers often find that they cannot transition into retirement because they did not adequately prepare for the future. This financial uncertainty can be debilitating and adds yet another dimension that keeps an officer from thriving in his/her career.

Officers are more capable of making the transformation into retirement if they would have planned for the event and had received support from their agency (Caudill, 2009). Law enforcement executives can assist their officers with this dilemma by

offering training and financial counseling. This will assist the officer in dealing with financial issues as they occur and give him/her a sense of financial empowerment and security. The agency can educate the officer of the financial pitfalls directly related to police work and encourage them to set financial goals that ultimately lead to a financially secure retirement. Mattos (2010) recommended that agencies should seek the guidance and direction of professionals in this endeavor. Richard Gable is a financial advisor for the Houston Police Officer's Pension System and he routinely discusses financial issues with officers. He will match an officer's pension income and Social Security benefits with current and future expenses and give them an overall perspective of their financial health (Veres, 2012).

The officer's career journey also gets sidetracked from deteriorating emotional changes in the officer brought on by repeated negative interactions and witnessing traumatic events. The officer's spirituality or overall outlook on life begins to transform from a positive to a negative viewpoint after repeated exposure to human suffering. Officers can begin to question their own sense of self and purpose and become indifferent.

Spirituality can be described as a "big picture" understanding which allows for the person to know their purpose and the role that they play in the world. It promotes understanding of the sometimes unexplainable aspects of police work. It puts things in perspective and allows a sense of being connected to fellow man, nature and God. Feemster (2009) suggested that police work is spiritual in nature as it seeks to serve others and maintain order and peace.

Spirituality also can take on the form of organized religion and agencies can partner with the clergy community to offer additional assistance to their officers upon request. It can contribute to positive feelings including compassion, hope, and meaningfulness. It is an important key to contributing to the overall wellness of an officer throughout his/her career. It has the potential to remind the weathered veteran officer that the work he/she undertakes does make a difference and is meaningful to those he/she serves.

Law enforcement executives can provide opportunities within their agencies to address the collateral traumatization experienced by their officers. They can set up educational programs that seek to inform officers and help them cope through spirituality based initiatives. Spirituality affects the performance and vitality of officers by enabling them to recharge themselves (Feemster, 2010).

COUNTER POSITION

The biggest opposition to the implementation of a holistic approach to officer wellness is the organizational hierarchy and their reluctant to change policy. This is largely based on the engrained police subculture ideologies and the perceived stigmatization associated with this unorthodox method. There is reluctance by agency leaders to acknowledge topics that are widely known but rarely spoken of within the rank and file of the organization. The perception of weakness based on antiquated paramilitary viewpoints supersedes sound recommendations. Malmin (2012) explained the police subculture is so firmly engrained that it dismisses the need for assistance and labels those officer who outwardly express emotional issues as weak. He believes that this single component has the potential to cripple the police profession by stating “the

subculture poses one of the most significant risks to the health and wellness of its personnel” (Malmin, 2012, p.15). Feemster (2009) cited that the law enforcement community is keenly aware of the holistic approach to wellness and its potential to remedy many of the maladaptive behaviors and symptoms exhibited by officers, yet are reluctant to fully embrace the concept.

Feemster (2010) suggested that this type of training can no longer be ignored by agency leaders as it reflects directly on them and their inability and reluctance to train the whole person in a comprehensive and effective manner and promote vocational vitality. Agency leaders must transform their own mindset before a cultural shift will occur. This will entail that they be open-minded and set policies in place that take care of the individual officer. Upon adopting this approach, it forces the agency to acknowledge those eroding dimensions of physical, financial and spiritual health of the officer and address them in a holistic way.

The next obstacle to overcome is the actual implementation of a holistic approach training model. It is multi-dimensional in nature and can be complex for those agencies transitioning to this methodology. This is problematic as a standardized curriculum does not exist. The Federal Bureau of Investigations’ (FBI) Behavioral Science Unit has taken on the initial task of laying the groundwork for the holistic officer wellness approach to becoming a standardized curriculum with their project titled Beyond Survival Toward Officer Wellness (Project BeSTOW) (Feemster, 2009).

Implementation of any new program within a police agency usually entails designation of funds and personnel. Police agencies continue to have budgetary constraints and with absence of a national standardized model, grants and funding, the

implementation can be costly undertaking. Law enforcement leaders need to see and weigh the value of retaining effective officers and having a solid workforce that is vibrant and well as a direct result of this type of training (Tovar, 2011).

Historically, police agencies have taken a reactive role in dealing with their officers who have exhibited outwards signs of maladaptive behaviors as a result of secondary victimization of their work. Many have a standardized process in which the trouble officer is directed towards the agency's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). This can include counseling by a professional that may not understand the dynamics of policing. This is a negative approach and can spotlight and label the returning treated officer as a weak and incapable of being effective.

Agencies that take a proactive approach have the unique opportunity to provide a format within their agency that continues to support the officer in his career journey. The agencies essentially makes an investment in the individual officer and his family and have the potential to reap the benefits of a well- rounded employee focused on longevity with the profession and the department. The proactive holistic approach is a positive step in addressing the complex and deeper impact of police work on the individual officer and his/her family (Tovar, 2011).

RECOMMENDATION

Law enforcement executives should recognize the importance and benefits of vocational vitality and put measures in place to accomplish this goal. The implementation of training that focuses on the officer and his/her journey throughout his career will lead towards a well-rounded officer able to remain at his agency until he/she is able to retire. The specific focus on physical, financial, and spiritual wellness will lead

to taking care of the whole aspects of the officer's live while employed in police work. The shift of balance in training is an agency's commitment to their officers and their families. The physical wellness component seeks to keep the officer physically vibrant and prepare them to deal with any encounter within the confines of their daily work. The financial wellness component of the holistic approach seeks to educate officers about the potential of financial based pitfalls that can be directly attributed to their chosen profession. This discipline also seeks to educate and prepare the officer for retirement by providing sound financial planning and advice. The spiritual component seeks to revitalize and encourage the officer among his/her career journey. The officer is provided education, support, and resources by the department to help remind them that police work is meaningful. It recognizes the emotional, psychological, and spiritual toll on the officer and seeks to restore the officer's sense of being.

The police paramilitary subculture embedded with antiquated ideologies and the preservation of perception is resistant to adopting the holistic approach. The implementation of such a broad complex approach can be problematic for agencies because of the lack of a standardized curriculum already in place. Agencies have taken a reactive stance with those officers displaying abnormal or self-destructive behaviors. Budgetary restraints serve as another obstacle to overcome for implementation.

A multi-disciplinary approach that is officer centered seeks to improve the quality of life and promotes longevity.

An example and recommended program was developed by the Huntsville Police Department (HPD) (Huntsville Police Department, 2013). HPD is a small agency in Texas that serves 35,000 citizens and employs 55 officers. They came up with a

creative and cost effective method to incorporate the holistic wellness approach to their officers. The agency partnered with their chaplain and incorporated the holistic approach in a volunteer program entitled “The Chaplain Series.” The police chaplain is a retired officer from another agency who served for 30 years in law enforcement work prior to becoming a minister. The chaplain series was designed for the officers of the department and surrounding agencies.

The meetings were conducted in the evening hours in the lobby of a local hotel. The hotel provided the meeting space at no cost to the group. The notice announcing the meeting was sent out via a department wide email and word of mouth. Officers from all of the adjacent areas were invited as well. Officers voluntarily showed up and met one day a week for the following eight weeks. The meetings consisted of a dinner provided by the chaplain’s church followed by a message chosen by the chaplain. The meeting enlisted and encouraged group participation. The chaplain’s message over the eight meetings incorporated a combination of discussions covering emotional, financial, and spiritual wellness. Resources used for this training were three books. The books were *Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement* by Dr. Kevin Gilmartin, *The Total Money Makeover: A Proven Plan for Financial Fitness* by Dave Ramsey (2007) and the *Holy Bible*. The program was so successful that the officers approached the chaplain and inquired if the course could be taught again and if their spouses could attend the training as well (Huntsville Police Department, 2013).

A few weeks later, the meetings reconvened on Sunday evenings with the spouses in attendance (Huntsville Police Department, 2013). A potluck meal was served each time and spouses got the opportunity to interact with each other. The

chaplain was accompanied by his wife who assisted in the training and breakout groups with the spouses. This was also highly successful and provided spouses with valuable insight into their husband/wife's unique world. This eventually led to several couples attending the "Weekend to Remember" weekend retreat on scholarships provided by the clergy community. This opportunity provided the attending couples to restore and revitalize their marriage.

The only component that was missing from this holistic approach was physical wellness. The program then solicited the assistance of two of the department's most physically fit officers to host and teach weekly "boot camp" style classes hosted both in the morning and evening hours. An empty airport hangar was acquired at no cost and a make shift gym was created. Officers showed ownership of this off site location and began bringing their own weights and equipment to contribute to the cause (Huntsville Police Department, 2013).

This case study is just one creative and effective example to incorporate the holistic approach in police agencies across the nation. Agencies that lack the funding to provide this type of training can set up an in house library with books and DVD resources that the officer can check out. The journey of a career law enforcement officer is one that is constantly in a state of change. It is important that their administrators take a proactive holistic role in helping officers deal with this change. Gilmartin (2002) explained, historically, agencies have trained officers to run a fast foot race, yet they end up running a marathon. The time has come for administrators to start taking care of their officers so that they can walk away from a long, successful career a winner.

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