

**The Bill Blackwood
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**Importance of Peer Support Team Assistance for Emergency
Personnel Involved In Critical Events**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to bring attention to the need and importance of having a peer support team available for all emergency workers. It does not matter if they are sworn law enforcement officers or civilian employees dispatching an officer to a critical incident call for service, they will all experience some level of trauma related to the event. Exposures to traumatic events are an inherent part of the job that police officers face every day.

Police officers are the first line of defense when it comes to serving the public and they have always given support to each other. Whether it is stress on the job or at home, they are always there for each other when they are needed. Having a well-trained peer support team made up of officers who have been involved with a traumatic event can help to minimize some of the after effects of exposure to a traumatic situation.

Most agencies have alternate avenues of support that may be available for officers to pursue when seeking assistance with dealing with traumatic events and stress such as talking to a psychologist or a psychiatrist. They may be helpful to some officers who might not seek assistance if they were not available but may seem to be insufficient to officers who feel like they (psychologist/psychiatrist) do not understand what they (the officers) need. Many times, officers do not or will not tell a psychologist or psychiatrist how they are feeling or what they are thinking because they are afraid that they may lose their job or have other repercussions if something negative gets reported to their supervisors. Agencies that have peer support teams in place fill this void and have recognized not only the importance of having these teams, but have also realized that they are one of the most valued resources that an agency can have.

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INTRODUCTION

Policing often is cited as one of the most stressful occupations (Anshel, 2000; Carlier, Lamberts, & Gersons, 1997). A unique source of stress for this profession is the constant risk of exposure to traumatic events, a burden that far exceeds that of the average citizen. Although he or she may not encounter such events on a daily basis, a police officer always faces threats of violent, dangerous, tragic, and unpredictable situations, any one of which can leave emotional and psychological scars (Abdollahi, 2002; Carlier et al., 1997; Evans & Coman, 1993; MacLeod & Paton, 1999; Martelli, Waters, & Martelli, 1989; Robinson, Sigman, & Wilson, 1997; Violanti, 1996; Violanti & Aron, 1994; Violanti & Gehrke, 2004; Wilson, Poole, & Trew, 1997).

A traumatic event has been defined as any event that has sufficient impact to overwhelm the usually effective coping skills of either an individual or a group. These events are typically sudden, emotionally powerful, and outside the range of human experience. These events may have a strong emotional effect even on well-trained and experienced individuals (Clark & Haley, 2007).

Officers who have been involved in a critical incident have experienced a very traumatic event that can cause a continuous psychological impact. Officers, in particular, are prone to underestimate the magnitude of their distress, particularly when it might affect their ability to perform their job duties. For instance, those who had been involved in shooting incidents (Martin, McKean, & Veltkamp, 1986) and who have had encounters with death (Robinson et al., 1997) exhibited more symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than those who had not been involved in such incidents.

Policing is a field that requires complex, delicate and often immediate decision making that can have dire and far-reaching consequences (Toch, 2002). As such, officers may attribute meaning to an event based on how well they were able to manage a difficult situation. An officer who reflects positively on his or her handling of a situation most likely will believe that he or she can manage future situations appropriately and will experience less distress over traumatic events than one who is completely overwhelmed and immobilized with self-doubt and anxiety.

Alternatively, police officers faced with repeated traumas may start to blame themselves for the negative outcomes and consequently, may begin to doubt their adequacy as protectors of the public (Toch, 2002). Such attributions of self-blame in response to negative events can hinder adjustment, as they can lead to a perception of hopelessness and futility (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). This is the reason why there is a need to have peer support teams that consist of officers who have gone through the same or similar type of event. These teams will be able to help those officers who are suffering from these kinds of thoughts and feelings and provide a needed form of support which can help to prevent “burn out.”

There have been studies about critical incidents but not many of them cover what an officer goes through at the time the event occurs. The goal of a peer support team would be to provide all employees in an agency the opportunity to receive emotional and tangible peer support through times of personal or professional crisis and to help anticipate and address potential difficulties (Clark & Haley, 2007).

Officers that have experienced these kinds of events have a myriad of mind boggling thoughts that are running through their heads. Some may wonder about what

is going to happen to them now that they have been involved in a critical event. Thoughts like; what just happened, what happens now. Some may wonder if their department is going to back them and what they are going to think. Officers may also wonder about what co-workers and officers from other agencies are going to say and how they may react to them.

As for the incident itself, some officers say that the incident had a “surreal” feeling to it, more like they were having a bad dream. Others try to “man up”, and pretend that it was just another day at the office and that the event is not bothering them at all. Having a member of a peer support team available would give these officers a chance to talk about what has occurred and may help keep distressing thoughts from continuously going through their minds.

It is assumed by the general public that the majority of all police officers male and female alike have a type “A” personality. A person with this personality trait does not want to admit when things are bothering them. They want to show that they are strong, that they can handle any type of incident without showing any kind of emotion especially weakness.

Many of these officers are traumatized to the point where they cannot get what has happened to them out of their mind. They think about it constantly, they cannot focus, they cannot sleep. Some say that when they close their eyes to try to rest they have a barrage of pictures of the event that have been burned into their memories that pop up before their eyes.

When the officer goes to see a psychiatrist or a psychologist for help in dealing with what is going on inside their minds they may receive some help that can take care

of a few things, but are many times left wondering why they cannot get answers to all of their questions. Police Officers often do not realize or do not want to admit to themselves or to other officers how much a traumatic event has affected them. This leaves them wondering if anyone really knows or understands what they are going through.

For all the reasons stated it is important to have a peer support team made up of police officers that have experienced the same / similar type of traumatic event accessible to officers that have been involved in a critical incident. Peer support in the aftermath of critical incidents is helpful to involved personnel, especially when it is provided by those who have been through a similar experience (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Clark & Haley, 2007; Miller, 2006).

POSITION

All officers should be encouraged to talk to members of a peer support team in addition to a psychologist or psychiatrists. Peer support team members will be able to establish a strong relationship with these officers. They know and understand what the officer is going through and how they are feeling. They know the questions that are continuously going through the officer's mind because they too have suffered through the after effects of being involved in a traumatic event.

Police officers are trained to not show any outward emotions when dealing with traumatic events. They hold everything inside. Some will not even tell family members what is going on, but will normally speak with and confide in a fellow officer that they trust especially when it is someone who has gone through a similar event. They need to

be shielded from the many questions that can come from not only the news media but from the citizens in their community and even other officers or administrators.

These officers also do not need to be second guessed by people who have never experienced the same type of traumatic situation. This is being questioned by others who are wondering why the officer did not utilize less than lethal force such as pepper spray or a Taser. Officers need to be shielded from this type of questioning because all it does is continue to keep the officers mind reeling and re-living the event over and over. Having a member of a peer support team with them for a period of time can help to shield the officer from these types of questions and help him or her learn how to deal with responding to them.

COUNTER POSITION

Although it helps to talk with someone of equal stature who has been involved in a critical incident that knows and understands what the officer has experienced and the mind games that they are dealing with, some departments only provide professional services such as a psychologist or psychiatrists. Some individuals do not trust talking to a psychiatrist or psychologist because of their concerns about what may be put in a report that goes back to their agency.

Members of a peer support team need specialized training. Additional budgetary expenses are often times not welcomed by some administrations. Research did show that most participants in the peer groups were usually volunteers; and there are grants available through state and federal health and welfare programs that provide support for these teams. With the member participating as volunteers and the training supported by State and Federal Grants the budget becomes a non-issue for administrator's

consideration. With the proper intervention, the likelihood of position burn out is greatly reduced.

It is beneficial for the Peer Support Team Person (PSTP) to be involved in supporting individuals involved in critical incidents, such as an officer-involved shooting, or any situation in which an officer is injured or killed. PSTP's also make an invaluable addition to group interventions in conjunction with a licensed mental health professional. This includes PSTP help for those in the outer circles of involvement (Clark & Haley, 2007).

RECOMMENDATION

The purpose of this paper is to highlight an area of law enforcement that needs more attention. Officers that have experienced a traumatic event need to have more support from not only their peers, but from the whole law enforcement community as well as the communities they serve. These officers all too often suffer in silence because they feel like no one understands what is going on inside of their minds. It is already extremely difficult for an officer to admit that they need help to deal with what is going on inside of them and not having a peer support team readily available makes it even more difficult.

This is why there is a need to have peer support teams ready to assist these officers in their time of need. A member of the peer support team should be called out to assist an officer who has been through a traumatic event as quickly as is possible and should be by that officer's side as long as he or she is needed.

Some may wonder about how much it will cost to have a peer support team. In the research that has been done by the author of this paper, most of the participants in

the peer team are volunteers. They are men and women that are dedicated not only to the police agency they work for; they are also dedicated to the men and women they work with. They want to assist these officers by helping them as much as they can.

Peer support teams can fill a void that has not been filled before. If law enforcement agencies want to do what is best for their officers, then they need to utilize all of the skills that their officers have. Peer support teams made up of officers that have survived a traumatic event have the experience that few people have. Why not use that experience to help other officers?

A peer support team could be one of the most valuable assets / resources that a police agency could have. Peer support teams have proved their worth many times and have shown how effective they can be. They have established their place and have become an important part of the law enforcement community.

Research shows that studies have not been conducted that show how officers are dealing with the events that they see on a daily basis or how it affects them. There is little to no information available as to how officers react to the traumatic incidents that they have been exposed to. Because of the cumulative effect of repeated traumatic events the unsupported officer could eventually give up and leave police work.

It could possibly be that officers are hesitant to talk about an event that affected them or give information to anyone because of possible repercussions that could come back to cause problems for them. Many officers are concerned about what their friends, co-workers or their employer may think about them since they have been involved in a traumatic event. The impact from being involved in a traumatic event and the after effects of that event on officers and their families is unknown. What is clear is that

officers who have been involved in a traumatic event will more often choose not to seek counseling fearing that there may be some type of repercussions if they do.

As a plan of action departments should develop and institute a policy that directs the process of responding and dealing with a post critical event. This policy would assist officers on understanding what the expectations of the aftermath will be. This policy would also outline the professional responsibilities of the officer and the administration. Attached (Appendix A) is a recommended policy example.

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APPENDIX A

POLICY RECOMMENDATION:

Peer Support Team (PST)

1.) Policy: (Example)

A.) The Department recognizes the need to have a “Peer Support Team” made up of Officers of the department who have experienced and survived a traumatic event and who would be willing to give support to help other officers or dispatchers who have been involved in or who have witnessed a traumatic event. Members of the Peer Support Team understand the importance of talking to and assisting a co-worker who has experienced a traumatic incident.

B.) The goal of the Peer Support Team is to provide assistance to a co-worker who has been involved in a traumatic event. The Peer Support Team is not intended to take the place of or prevent an employee from talking to a psychologist or a psychiatrist.

The Peer Support Team is another avenue for emergency services personnel to have opened to them if they should want to talk with co-workers who have been through similar events and what they did to make it through the “hard times”.

2.) Procedures:

A.) Participation in the Peer Support Team shall be voluntary and will not take the place of your regular duty assignment unless approved by the Chief of Police.

B.) Past experience in a critical incident will be taken into consideration for being a member of a Peer Support Team, along with having good communications skills.

- C.) To be considered to become a member of the Peer Support Team emergency services personnel must have completed their probationary period. This may be waived if an emergency services worker has prior experience from a different agency.
- D.) A Peer Support Team will consist of a supervisor, officer and a dispatch employee. A list of peer team volunteers will be placed in the Dispatch Office. Supervisors will also have a copy of the list for their use to call out a PST member for a critical incident response.
- E.) The Peer Support Team may provide assistance, when requested, under the following circumstances;
- 1.) When an officer of the department has been involved in a shooting incident or line of duty death.
 - 2.) When an officer has been involved in a critical incident, either on or off duty that may have an emotional impact on the officer.
 - 3.) When a supervisor feels that a situation warrants involvement of the Peer Support Team.
- F.) The Peer Support Team will be activated in the following manner;
Dispatch will contact a PST supervisor and request that they respond to the location of the incident to assist the officer that is involved.
The Peer Support Team supervisor will decide if other peer team members are needed.
- G.) The Peer Support Team supervisor who responds is responsible for maintaining contact with the officer involved and assures that the needs of the officer are met.
- 3.) Rules:

- A.) Communication between the Peer Support Team members and the officer involved in a critical incident will not be considered to be confidential if it involves any of the following:
- Criminal Activity.
 - Drug or Alcohol Abuse.
 - Administrative Violations.
- 1.) The information will be forwarded to a Supervisor, who will make sure that the proper notifications are made.
- 2.) An officer's use of the Peer Support Team is strictly voluntary.
- 3.) Peer Support Team members cannot be actively involved in the investigation of the critical incident that the officer they are assisting is involved with.
- 4.) All other communications that do not fall under A (1), (2), or (3) above shall be considered confidential and are not subject to disclosure to Internal Affairs Investigators.