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Police Stress: The Need to
Establish Guidelines for Recognition
and Stress Management Training

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ABSTRACT

Historically law enforcement has been remiss in recognizing the need to address stress and burnout by taking a proactive approach to the mental well being of its employees. Most police departments in Texas do not provide training to their employees on recognition and prevention of stress. Supervisors may receive stress management training in small blocks of instruction in a first line supervisors school or executive development training. Ongoing training is needed to educate employees on how to recognize the signs of chronic stress. After employee training, a support system should be developed and implemented to intervene before an officer suffers permanent physical and psychological damage from the effects of stress. Research shows that the incidents of divorce, suicide and alcoholism in the police population are higher than in the general population, with a direct correlation to traumatic events and this behavior.

Forty-eight Texas police agencies were surveyed to find out if training was provided to their employees on how to recognize and deal with stress. The study group consisted of agencies from a one-employee department to a thirteen hundred-employee department. While most of the agencies surveyed offered an Employee Assistance Program only a few offered any type of stress management training. Many agencies are now conducting a yearly physical assessment to gauge an officer's physical fitness and well being; however, none of the departments surveyed conduct psychological wellness screenings. It is not until an officer suffers from a traumatic event that impacts their work performance that they then are referred to a professional for help.

A system of training for early recognition and prevention of stress should be implemented and provided to all police employees. A yearly psychological wellness screening would be conducted in conjunction with a physical wellness program to recognize and treat personnel before stress adversely affects their lives and careers.

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INTRODUCTION

During the course of a police officer's career, the officer can be expected to experience periods of burnout lasting for weeks, months, or even several years as a result of being exposed to high stress situations and violence on a regular basis. There are several factors that can negatively impact the performance of the police employee society, lack of recognition, and family problems, all of which can contribute to feelings of hopelessness and apathy. Burnout is a state of emotional exhaustion characterized by heavy workload, organizational stress, and repeated exposure to a negative side of feelings of cynicism toward one's clients. (Cannizzo, 1955). Emotional exhaustion can adversely affect employees to the point of being unable to work through the burnout, resulting in diminished work performance. Burnout is often seen in police officers assigned to Criminal Investigations or Narcotics for a prolonged period of time.

Police officers are prone to experiencing heightened levels of depersonalization and detached concern, which can be described as establishing some psychological distance from the people they serve, while still maintaining a concern for their well being. They soon become emotionally exhausted and cynical toward both the public and themselves (Maslach, 1979). Emotional symptoms most common in burnout are anger and frustration that cannot be effectively expressed, leading to conflict with citizens and co-workers. This research paper will explore some of the ways supervisors can identify employees suffering from burnout to the point that their job performance is suffering, provide tools to assess the extent of burnout and discuss a strategy for dealing with the problem.

Research will be conducted using surveys, and reference materials. Area police departments were surveyed to see what their experience has been with recognizing and dealing

effectively with stress and burnout. Survey participants were asked if their departments have criteria to determine when an officer is no longer effective in his job assignment due to stress or burnout and what steps, if any, are taken to assist the officer in recovering and becoming a productive employee.

Research will establish that there is a specific set of signs or behaviors indicating serious stress or burnout in an employee that significantly affects their work performance. Once the signs are recognized, supervisors can refer the officer to a coach, mentor or psychologist for early intervention. A system of recognition and early intervention needs to be in place to salvage officers from the psychological and physical damage caused by chronic stress faced in the law enforcement work environment. This research will encourage the development of a system to train supervisors in the recognition of the symptoms of burnout that negatively impact job performance. Lastly it will illustrate the need for a proactive program to be in place to provide assistance for officers to work through burnout.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Maslach (1981) refers to burnout as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, a pessimistic, uncaring, or excessively detached response to other people, who are usually the beneficiaries of their care, a feeling of diminished personal accomplishment, a decline in feelings of competence and successful achievement that can occur among individuals who work in human service. At the University of California at Berkley, Dr. Christina Maslach created the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), an instrument to measure the four dimensions of stress: emotional exhaustion, negative attitudes towards people, negative self-evaluation, and a sense of closeness to the people they serve. (Robinette 1987)

Stress is a constant in the police profession, but it was not until the 1950s that efforts were made to deal with an officer that showed signs of burnout. The management attitude of the 1950's was to ignore the problem, assign the employee to a desk job, make a referral to Alcoholic's Anonymous or to a Chaplin. The 1960's brought the advent of an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Officer, a staff person, usually the Public Information Officer, that would be in charge of granting employees who requested it, sick leave with no questions asked, and without pay. If need be the EAP Officer would refer the employee to an outside mental health agency or counselor. In the 1970's larger departments formed in-house stress units consisting of a staff person, and a union official. They would meet with the effected employee and seek some type of resolution, mediation, or arbitration of the problem. Sometimes an outside counselor would be brought in for a debriefing after some type of major incident. The unit was also responsible for conducting stress seminars within the department. Ministry programs were initiated in the 1980's to combat the issues of burnout. Employees were assigned or referred to a victims survivor group, a law enforcement support group, a Chaplin, a church retreat, or some

other type of religious based program. The 1990's brought the about more concern for officers involved in traumatic incidents causing departments initiate Critical Incident Debriefings.

Critical incidents are comprised of line-of-duty deaths, suicide of a co-worker, homicides, death of a child, failed rescue attempts, mass causality incidents, or any other incident that may be traumatic to an officer. A critical incident may be a predecessor to post traumatic stress syndrome if it is not addressed with in 24-48 hours of a critical incident by a debriefing team. Debriefing teams usually consist of a mental health professional, a member of clergy and one or more peer support personnel. (Lauferweiler-Dwyer, 2001).

Sources of stress for police officers can be placed into five broad categories: issues in an officers personal life, work pressure, the publics attitude towards law enforcement and the officer, the criminal justice system, and the law enforcement organization itself. Organizational stress, the stress caused by management, policies or procedures, is the most common source of stress among police officers, more so than the uncertainty they face on the street. Reducing organizational sources of stress should lead to higher moral, improved productivity, and enhance overall efficiency within the department.

Memos from the department's administration acknowledging the stresses officers experience and offering support for actions to reduce sources of stress demonstrates managements concern for the officers well being. This type of action promotes the good will necessary to bring about change. Administrators need to work with supervisors and rank and file to identify sources of organizational stress and work together to resolve them. It is also imperative to educate supervisors and managers in communication, problem solving, conflict resolution, and supervisory skills that can help reduce organizational stress for employees. When

an agencies policies and procedures themselves become a major source of stress, it is time for a review to determine what policies or procedures should be changed. (Finn 1997)

Symptoms of prolonged exposure to chronic stress can be thought of as being made up of three components: physical, cognitive/emotional and behavioral.

Physical symptoms:

- Nausea, upset stomach, tremors, feeling uncoordinated
- Excessive sweating, chills, diarrhea, rapid pulse
- Muscle aches, insomnia, dry mouth
- Vision problems, and intensified fatigue

Cognitive symptoms:

- Low attention span, confusion
- Loss of short term memory, reduced math skills
- Poor concentration, flashbacks, bad dreams
- Disruption in logical thinking, blaming others
- Poor decision making ability
- Hyper-vigilance, decreased awareness of surroundings
- Suspiciousness
- Preoccupation with death

Emotional symptoms:

- Anxiety, fear, denial, survivors guilt
- Depression, guilt
- Hopelessness, overwhelmed, lost, helpless
- Angry, abandoned, wanting to hide

- Feeling numb, identifying with the victim
- Disenchanted or alienated
- Intensified or reduced emotional reactions

Behavioral symptoms:

- Withdrawal, change in normal activity
- Less or more communicative
- Change in interactions with others, excessive humor
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Unusual behavior
- Increased alcohol intake, increased smoking
- A voidance behavior
- Antisocial acts, angry outbursts
- Visits to the doctor for non-specific complaints.

(Chance, 2001)

Staff Psychologists with the Los Angeles Police Department have been conducting in service training with officers and supervisory staff on how to recognize and minimize the effects of stress in their lives. Officers are taught to reduce stress by first recognizing the source of their stress and the effect stress has on their body. Simple relaxation techniques are taught, as well as strategies for dealing with anger and understanding personal responses to anger, exercise diets are also emphasized. Officers are trained to recognize signs of stress in their coworkers and are encouraged to approach each other for peer support or suggest referral to the departments Behavioral Science Services Section for help. Most large metropolitan police departments have some type of system in place to assist officers suffering from acute stress,

usually a staff psychologist or a contract with a mental health provider. In contrast most mid to smaller sized agencies do not provide access to a mental health professional until a critical incident has occurred.

Repeated exposure to stress can lead to both mental and physical illness, family problems, alcoholism, and in some cases suicide. Research has shown that police officers are more than two times as likely to develop cardiovascular disease than people in other professions. (Franke, 1998). Police officers are also found to die at a higher rate of cancer than the general population. (Vena, 1986). The national divorce rate in 1998 was 50%; divorce rates among police officers are two and one half times that of the national average. Police officers kill themselves at a rate six times greater than in the general population, and kill themselves at a rate 8.3 times greater than those that die by the hands of criminals. (Violanti, 1996).

Research has shown that chronic stress among police officers is of serious concern for the officer, their families, and the organization in which they work. Stress impacts all aspects of ones life and health. Small to midsize police departments have a need for training on how to recognize and deal with the damaging effects of stress on their employees. Implementation of in-house peer support groups and access to professional counseling services are needed to aid officers and their families in working through periods of burnout.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper will explore some of the ways that a supervisor can identify employees suffering from stress or burnout to the point that their job performance is suffering, provide tools to assess the extent of burnout and discuss a strategy for dealing with the problem. It will further demonstrate the need to institute an ongoing program to train all departmental personnel how to recognize sources of stress, provide tools to deal with that stress, develop a peer support group and lastly, provide access to professional counseling services specializing in police stress disorders.

Small law enforcement agencies in Texas are well behind the times in regards to providing training for their employees in dealing with chronic stress. Only large metropolitan police departments have the financial ability to maintain ongoing training on stress recognition and reduction. Research will show the need to establish a system to assist officers in dealing with stress and burnout.

Forty-eight agencies in the State of Texas were surveyed by questionnaire and asked if they had a program in place to recognize and deal with stress. Twenty-seven agencies or Fifty four percent of the group surveyed responded. Respondents included county agencies, municipal police departments, college campus police departments and school district police departments that employ as few as one employee to departments with 1320 employees. Results will be analyzed to determine how many agencies have systems in place to deal effectively with stress and its effects on employees.

FINDINGS

Burnout recognition surveys were distributed to forty-eight Texas law enforcement agencies throughout the state, twenty-seven agencies responded to the survey. The sample included a diverse group of agencies consisting of a sheriff's department, a constable's office, municipal police departments, school district police departments, and college campus police departments. The size of the departments ranged from a one-employee rural police department to a 1320-employee metropolitan police department.

Participating agencies were asked if a system was in place to identify burnout in an employee. Four percent of the agencies responding stated that they had some type of formal system in place to recognize employee burnout (see Figure 1). One college campus police department relies on supervisors to recognize changes in the behavior of the employee and counsel with them to determine the cause of the problem. Referrals are then made to an employee assistance program if necessary.

Figure 1: AGENCIES WITH A SYSTEM TO IDENTIFY STRESS

The study group was next asked if their agency provided training to its employees in stress recognition and management. Three agencies responded that employees and supervisors received training in stress management as part of some other type of training (see Figure 2). None of the agencies surveyed conducts stress management training within their departments.

**Figure 2: DEPARTMENTS THAT PROVIDE STRESS MANAGEMENT TRAINING
FOR EMPLOYEES**

The study group was asked if their departments participated or provided access to an Employees Assistance Program. The majority of respondents did indeed provide employee assistance programs to their employees (see Figure 3). Small departments of 15 employees or less tended not to provide access to Employee Assistance Programs.

Figure 3: DEPARTMENTS WITH EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

The study group was asked if their agencies conduct critical incident debriefings following a traumatic incident involving an employee (see Figure 4). The majority of agencies surveyed do indeed conduct critical incidents debriefings as a matter of course after a critical incident involving an officer involved shooting, homicide, suicide, or when needed by the employee.

Figure 4: DEPARTMENTS THAT CONDUCT CRITICAL INCIDENT DEBRIEFINGS

Respondents were asked if job reassignments were made based on burnout (see Figure 5). Agencies that made transfers based on burnout waited until the officers' productivity fell before making a transfer. Most departments used yearly performance evaluations to gauge a drop in the employee's performance, based on that information transfers were made. Other departments depended on supervisors to identify officers in need of a transfer based on adverse changes in their behavior.

Figure 5: DEPARTMENTS MAKING REASSIGNMENTS DUE TO BURNOUT

A study conducted on police officers use of sick time in the United Kingdom in 1990 found that over 1 million work days were missed that year, an average of 11 sick days per officer, and that approximately 25% of those absences were attributed directly to stress. (Brown 1994). A comparative study in the United States to the United Kingdom data has not been done, but stress and burnout can be expected to cost the U.S. law enforcement community countless lost work hours annually.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

In the law enforcement community, stress or burnout receives little recognition until it negatively impacts the employee's work performance. Police work is a high stress occupation in which stressors can emanate from many different sources i.e. heavy workload, repeated exposure to violence, lack of recognition, family and personal problems. All of these things attribute to burnout during the course of an officer's career. Stress can be expected to last weeks, months, and even several years without some course of active management.

This research paper explored the physical and psychological warning signs of stress and demonstrated the need to implement a system to train officers in the recognition and management of stress in their lives before it adversely impacts their work performance, health and quality of life. Survey results of the sample group dramatically illustrated the lack of stress recognition and management training programs being offered to officers throughout Texas. Little if any training is being done in this area, three officers responding in the survey group received from 4-8 hours stress management training at the academy level or as part of another training course. None of the departments participating in the survey conduct regular stress management programs for employees. Over one half of the departments have employee assistance programs, allowing the employee and their families' access to free counseling services for a fixed number of sessions. Most departments recognize the need for critical incident debriefings; seventy eight percent of the departments responding to the survey routinely conduct critical incident debriefings.

Law enforcement has been slow to address the need for stress management, instead viewing it as a problem of the employee. Asking for help has been viewed as a sign of weakness, not something an officer did unless forced to do so during a fitness for duty evaluation. Many

departments conduct wellness evaluations every two to three years, these evaluations check the physical well being of the employee. Perspective employees are subject to several psychological evaluations during the hiring process for their job, at no other time during their careers do they submit to additional testing unless done so for a fitness evaluation. Departments should examine the possibility of routine psychological evaluations at the time the wellness evaluations are conducted. By conducting burnout or stress inventories it will allow for early intervention before the officer may show outward signs of stress illnesses. A proactive approach to recognition of stress and training for stress management will improve the well being of the employee, his family and the department.

Research supports the critical need for stress management training to help reduce stress related problems in law enforcement. Police officers are more than two times as likely to develop cardiovascular disease than people in other professions. (Franke,1998). Further they die at a higher rate of cancer than the general population. (Venna,1986). The national divorce rate in 1998 was 50%; divorce rates among police officers are two and one half times that of the national average. Police officers kill themselves at a rate six times greater than in the general population, and kill themselves at a rate 8.3 times greater than those that die by the hands of criminals. (Violanti,1996).

One of the limitations noted in this research is the response rate of the survey group, forty-eight departments were surveyed and only twenty-six responded. A larger sample group may have slightly changed some of the results, but not enough to disprove the argument that mandated stress management training should be conducted with in Texas police agencies. Another limitation to the research was the absence of up to date studies of stress related problems

in the law enforcement community. Most of the literature on how stress affects health, marriage, and suicide rates in the police community were dated by several years.

The police community will maintain healthier employees, reduce sick time, stress related workers compensation claims, and retain valuable employees, if a proactive program of screening for stress is implemented, along with training in stress recognition and management. This study illustrates the need to address the problem of exposure to chronic stress as a law enforcement problem with in the agency and not simple ignore it as a problem of the employee.

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APPENDIX

BUNROUT RECOGNITION SURVEY

AGENCY: _____

NAME/RANK: _____

EMAIL: _____

DATE: _____

NUMBER OF SWORN PERSONNEL: _____

- 1) Does your agency have a system in place to identify burnout? If so, what is it?**

- 2) Does your agency provide training to supervisors in the recognition of burnout? If so what type of training?**

- 3) Does your agency train officers and supervisors how to recognize and deal with burnout? If so what type of training? How often?**

- 4) Does you agency have an employee assistance program (access to free counseling for the officer and family)?**

- 5) Does your agency conduct critical incident debriefing?**

- 6) Does your SOP or General Orders address burnout? If so How?**

- 7) Is a time limit placed on duty assignments to CID, Narcotic or other specialty assignments? If so, how long?**

- 8) Does you department make job reassignments based on burnout?**