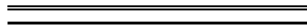


**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**



**Law Enforcement Survival at Home**



**A Leadership White Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**



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## **ABSTRACT**

It is said that the field of law enforcement has some of the highest rates of suicide, alcoholism, and divorce (O'Hara, 2012; Constant, n.d.). Recognizing that job stressors have drastic effects on law enforcement officers and their loved ones is an important aspect for law enforcement agencies. This is an area that a lot of police agencies do not look at or even think about until it is too late.

Law enforcement agencies need to implement resources (i.e. training, counseling, etc.) to assist officers and their loved ones in dealing with these issues caused by stress. Law enforcement officers not only have to deal with the problems caused by their profession but so do their spouses and children. Training sessions of different types need to be set up for not only the officer but also specialized training for their spouses and children to help them understand the effects of the job and how to recognize the signs of stress. With proper training and support, agencies can help reduce suicide rates, divorce rates, and alcoholism. Through training, agencies can also see a reduction in sick time being used and an increase in productivity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement can be a very stressful job. A lot of times officers are bringing the stress home from the job and spouses do not understand and know how to handle the stress their spouse just brought home. In past history, it has been said that law enforcement officer's rank high in the areas of suicide, alcoholism, and divorce (O'Hara, 2012; Constant, n.d.). The question that should be asked is why police agencies are allowing this to take place and why they are not helping to change these statistics.

Some law enforcement agencies have asked themselves these questions and have taken the initiative to help not only their officers, but the family members of their officers. For example, the Kentucky Department of Criminal Justice Training created and implemented training for their recruits and their loved ones. They developed a program that is taught by senior officers and their spouses regarding the hardships of the job and how they have overcome those (Johnson & Huffman, 2008).

By implementing training for law enforcement officer's and their family members, it will help spouses and loved ones understand what their officer experiences while he/she is on duty. It will also assist loved ones in how to see early warning signs of depression, alcoholism, and thoughts of suicide. Family support is a very important part of a law enforcement officer's life.

According to studies done by the National Study of Police Suicides (NSOPS), in 2008, there were 141 law enforcement officers who committed suicide; in 2009, there were 143 law enforcement officers who committed suicide; and in 2012, there were 126 law enforcement officers who committed suicide (Badge Of Life, 2013). These statistics show a decrease in law enforcement suicides, but any officer suicide is a tragedy.

On the side of law enforcement divorces, the numbers are, again, very tragic. In Law Enforcement Today, it was said that the nation has around a 50% divorce rate, but what is staggering is that the divorce rate for law enforcement officer's is 60% to 75% (Khan, 2013). Marriage is suppose to be a sacred union between two people that will end when death does them part. Often, marriages and home life take a back seat to a law enforcement officer's life. A officer has such an emotional stress-loaded baggage when they get home that they just want to be left alone, so they can go into their own little world. When this takes place, marriages collapse.

The one area that most people do not think of in the case of the effects of the law enforcement job is on how it affects the children. Children of law enforcement are just as much on duty as their law enforcement parent. Children on duty see their mommy or daddy police officer as their hero. These children also see what happens not only to their law enforcement parent but what happens to other law enforcement officers and they worry about the safety not only of their parent but also the safety of other law enforcement officers (Uribe, 2014).

With the number of suicides and divorces so high as well as the effects on law enforcement children, law enforcement agencies should offer training and education for officer's and their family members in the effects of the job. Walsh (2006) stated, "All families have the potential for resiliency; we can maximize that potential by encouraging their best efforts and strengthening key processes" (p. 26).

## **POSITION**

In the field of law enforcement, there is a high level of stress caused by the everyday situations that law enforcement officers have to deal with. There are other

careers that have a high level of stress but not many in which they have to see the worst of society. Past studies have examined whether careers involving shift work and the presence of a high level of physical danger were factors in suicide. After looking at numerous occupations, it was shown that the suicide rate for law enforcement officers is significantly higher than other occupations that deal with the same level of presence of physical danger (Hill & Clawson, 1988).

At the end of the day, an officer goes home with the thoughts of how his/her day has just gone. He may have arrested a man who had just murdered his spouse, two children, and mother-in-law, or just finished a pursuit three hours prior that almost claimed his/her life and other people's lives because of the fugitive who was running from the law. That officer now has to go home to their spouse and children and leave their day back at the office. Some law enforcement officers do not know how to leave their work at the office and would rather not deal with their home or work life. This is especially true if their marriage at home is not doing so well, which could be caused by the lack of communication he/she is having with their spouse.

Dr. Kevin Gilmartin (2002) wrote about the hyper vigilance biological rollercoaster which is caused by the officer struggling with the two different worlds that they have to deal with. These two worlds are on-duty and off-duty. This rollercoaster of the officer not knowing how to balance their two different life roles can tear them apart if not treated daily. This daily cycle of high vigilance, being detached and physical/mental exhaustion can change an officer's daily life (Gilmartin, 2002).

Communication is a big part of a law enforcement officer's job as well as their home life. If there is a lack of communication between an officer and their loved ones,

their relationship and their job performance will suffer. Family members are often the first to see problems arise and know when an officer is in need of help. Training for law enforcement officers loved ones will provide them with the know how to deal with such issues as well as the resources available to help (Harrison, 2005).

Fields (1999) quoted Robert Douglas of the National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation as saying "If a 747 airliner with approximately 300 passengers on board crashed each year, the Federal Aviation Administration would ground 747s until the problem was discovered and corrected, yet we lose 300 police officers every year to suicide and we think that is just the cost of doing business" (p. 1A). Law enforcement officers are expected to protect and serve and be there when they are needed, but who is going to be there for them. This is where police agencies need to step up, equip officers and their families on the issues at hand, the warning signs, and how to handle such problems. If problems or early warning signs are ignored, a larger problem can arise such as suicide, divorce or alcoholism.

Most law enforcement officers' spouses go through life not understanding how they deal with him/her now. What the spouse or loved one needs to be informed of is that from the start of a law enforcement officer's career, they are taught that they have to be emotionless in the face of the public and to be in ultimate control. What is really happening is that the stress from hiding this emotion is causing even more stress on them (Kirschman, 1997 p.18).

A National Institute of Justice (NIJ) program showed the results of a training seminar designed for law enforcement officers and their spouses in a combination of two groups (Didactic group and Therapy group). A few of the topics covered were

couple communication skills, relationship strengthening, emotional control, hyper vigilance, depression, trauma, coping and stress reactions. The NIJ advised that after completion of the eight week program there was evidence that it had been reduced (Arredondo, Shumway, Kimball, Dersch, Morelock, & Bryan, 2002).

A training program designed to equip officers and their loved ones with the essential tools necessary to not only identify problems as they arise but to also provide support when necessary is an important tool that is a lot of times overlooked. An officer often will not feel comfortable in talking to their loved one about problems at work or what they just went through because they think either their spouse would not understand or they are trying to shield them from the gruesomeness of the situation. The reality of the situation is that a law enforcement officer's greatest support is their loved ones (Nicoletti et al., 2011). An agencies greatest asset is its officers and an officer's greatest asset is their loved ones.

Training that would help law enforcement officers and their loved ones could consist of orientation seminars or counseling (Not So Obvious Police Stress). Another way to reduce stress is by a regular physical fitness program (Gilmartin, 2002). Law enforcement agencies could have personal trainers give courses of instruction on physical fitness and the benefits of exercising.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Funding for training to any police agency can be a big budget hit, especially to smaller agencies with limited budgets. A few years ago, a lot of agencies in Texas experienced budget cuts as well as having to cut some, if not all, of their force. For example, the City of Alto Texas laid off all of their officers to help with budget issues



("Tiny Texas city," 2011). Police agency budgets are not just dreamed up and approved; there is a lengthy process to the madness. A normal budget item takes several trips to city council or commissioner's court before it is approved or rejected.

Before items can even get to the level of the city council or commissioners court, it first has to be approved by the police agencies administration. Getting an item approved by administration can be a difficult task in itself. A police agency's administrator has a job to look out for the interest of its city as well as its agency.

Once a law enforcement administrator has approved the training, it is now time for that sometimes daunting task of getting it approved with the city council or commissioner's court. They too have to look out for the best interest of the city or county. Not only will this impact the city or county but also the citizens (voters).

The problem should not fall into the category of an additional cost to the police agency or to city/county. Emotional training is a need for not only just the safety of the officer or his loved ones but also for the liability of not doing anything. A lot of times doing nothing is worst than not making a small attempt at it. There are several resources out there that reduce if not elevate cost for awareness training for law enforcement officers and their loved ones.

One such avenue to reduce or elevate training program cost could be to identify internal resources such as veteran officers and their spouse as the instructors. Veteran officers have seen and experienced things that might make a normal person cringe with fear and disgust. Veteran officers and their spouses could be approached to see if they would be interested in volunteering in the training program. The stability and the background of the veteran officers could be checked and if training is needed they

could be sent to training instead of hiring expensive instructors. Having a few trained veteran officers on the agency's staff would reduce the cost of having to pay cost to have instructors come in and train.

Another avenue that an agency could take to reduce or elevate cost is to look at outside resources. These outside sources could be in the form of grants or corporate and university resources. Many sources of grants are available such as through the states Attorney General's Office or through The United States Department of Justice (Office of Justice Programs). Police agencies all but sometimes forget the support they have with their business owners and local universities. One such program is the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT) located at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville Texas. LEMIT offers officers who have been involved in a traumatic event free training to help them with support and recovery methods ("Post Critical Incident Seminar," n.d.).

A problem that could also be faced in having training for law enforcement officers and their loved ones is in getting them to participate in the training program voluntarily. Some officers may feel that the training is a sign of weakness or that the administration is trying to pry into their personal lives. The law enforcement officer's loved ones may feel that if they talk about any issues they are having at home it could potentially cause their officer to be respected less or looked down upon by their peers.

Law enforcement officers take great pride in their code of ethics and to do that they must keep not only their work life in order but also their personal life (Texas Police Association, 2013). So for an officer to go to someone and say they are having problems at home or having thoughts of suicide would be to dishonor their code of

ethics. Spouses and loved ones may also feel that if they talk to someone about the problems they have seen or that has developed at home may cause their officer to lose his/her job.

Spouses and loved ones may also feel that they do not have time to go through a training program; they have their own jobs, kids, house work, or any number of other things to do instead. Some may ask how attending a law enforcement training program can help with all of the other priorities they have in their lives. When this type of thinking starts to take place, it is time they take a step back and look at their lives.

What a law enforcement officer and their loved ones needs to do is start thinking about all the reasons they should go instead of why they should not go. This training would first be voluntary; no one would be forced to attend. The freedom of choice is there, it is as simple as not ever going to the dentist, letting teeth rot and not being able to chew food. One thing to keep in mind is that a clear and healthy mind can save a life ("A new police suicide prevention," 2012). Not only can a clear and healthy mind save a life, it could also save a marriage. The law enforcement officer is not coming home with all of the troubles of the job and society, but coming home with a healthy mind.

A persons physical, emotional, and mental health affect not on the person but also their family members and specifically the spouses and children. Communication is a big part of maintaining personal relationships as well as family functioning (Renteria, 2009). So again the question that the law enforcement officer and their loved ones need to ask is a healthy family relationship more important than pride.

Sometimes law enforcement officers feel that if this type of training is another way for big-brother (administration) to have more control over them. In designing and

planning of this training program, law enforcement officers need to be included so that all aspects of the training program are out there for them to see. A police agency could have group meetings or one on one sessions in which officers could provide input and suggestions for the training program. Officers being involved and having a first hand look at the information will feel more comfortable in not only attending the training, but having their loved ones attend as well.

Another way to get officers and their family members involved is by incorporating a confidentiality policy into the police agency's policies and procedures. Once the confidentiality policy is incorporated, a copy should be provided to all officers at the agency to let them know it will be strictly enforced. As everyone knows, confidentiality in the law enforcement profession is a big deal. If confidentiality is broken, it could be the difference between life and death for the officer.

Another way to remedy the big-brother syndrome is to locate law enforcement veterans from outside agencies that would be willing to volunteer their time to help other officers and their loved ones. Veteran law enforcement officers and their spouses from outside agencies could share their experiences and what training programs such as this did for them. The training program could also be set up to be a one on one confidential meeting between veteran officers, their loved ones and the officer wanting help or training. When it comes down to it, whatever will make the officer and their family members comfortable is what needs to take place.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

With the high rate of suicides and divorces that plague the family of law enforcement (Khan, 2013; Badge Of Life, 2013), it is time all police agencies stepped up

and stop the madness. Police agencies, fellow officers, and loved ones of law enforcement officers have a duty to protect their own. Law enforcement officers back each other up on a daily basis at calls so continue the support to a healthy physical as well as a healthy mental well being. To start the support, police agencies should begin to offer training and education to their officers and their loved ones on the stresses of the job as well as how to handle them.

With divorce rates and suicides so high in the family of law enforcement (Khan, 2013; Badge Of Life, 2013), there needs to be some intervention. The law enforcement career has a high level of stress which is usually carried home and this, in turn, affects not only their spouse but also their children. If nothing is done to help, suicide and or divorce is the outcome. Spouse and loved ones is a law enforcements greatest support tool. Spouses and loved ones are also the first to see the early warning signs that a problem exist (Harrison, 2005).

In including the spouses and loved ones of law enforcement officers, a greater chance for support and survival exist. A concern that should not exist is how this will be funded. As the example, the City of Alto dissolved its entire police agency to try and rectify budget issues ("Tiny Texas city," 2011). Through research, it was shown that there are alternatives to taking the daunting task of getting additional training funds added to a budget. Such alternatives were shown to be grants to pay for the training or in some instances, the training itself is offered at no charge.

Law enforcement officers sometimes have a hard time expressing or even dealing with problems that come with the career in law enforcement. Officers and the loved ones may not want to share personal information out of fear of being looked down

upon or this is a way of administration keeping track of them. These ideals need to be put to the way side and look at what is most important, a health and happy family life. Policies to protect the officers can be implemented, allowing the officer to be involved in the planning and to offer suggestions for the training program are all ways that can ease the uncertainty.

Recognizing that stress does exist and that it affects officers is the first step. Children are affected and process stress differently than adults do (Bond, 2014). With the joint effort of police agencies and their officers, a much needed training program can be created to help officers and their loved ones. Law enforcement officers are trained to protect the public; it is time they are equipped to protect their spouses and children as well as each other. With an officer who has a healthier and happier life, there will be a reduction in suicides, divorce, lost work time and they will have a longer, healthier career.

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