

**The Bill Blackwood
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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Law Enforcement

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ABSTRACT

If mandatory training was implemented for law enforcement personnel to recognize the signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, it would provide the ability for all employees to intervene and seek help for one that appears to be suffering from PTSD. Often, police officers and other law enforcement personnel will not ask for or seek help for PTSD due to the stigma associated with it, or the fact that they simply may not be aware that they are even suffering from PTSD. By implementing mandatory training for all law enforcement personnel, the stigma associated PTSD would be lessened from the simple knowledge of what PTSD is, and the signs, symptoms, causes and effects of the disorder. If agencies were mandated to provide training to all employees to identify the signs and symptoms of PTSD, then the cost of replacing officers suffering from long-term PTSD would probably balance out and could even save the entity money over time. By making this training mandatory and putting policies in place that address PTSD and other mental health concerns, employees would find it easier to rid themselves of the stigma associated with PTSD and receive the help that would prolong their career and help to make it more enjoyable and productive.

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INTRODUCTION

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a very real issue that impacts numerous officers and employees within the law enforcement community. Unfortunately, this issue is seldom discussed, often ignored, and often goes unidentified and untreated. There are many agencies that do not have policies, procedures, or training in place to identify employees with PTSD. Additionally, there is no plan in place to offer or suggest that employees receive help to overcome what could be a career or even a life ending problem. All law enforcement personnel should receive training on the signs and symptoms of PTSD.

At one time, PTSD was only thought to effect military personnel, and it was labelled as shell shock, battle fatigue and many other names (Scoville, 2013). PTSD is now recognized in law enforcement because of the exposure to highly stressful and dangerous duties that are performed on a regular basis. This paper will explain the signs, symptoms, and effects of post-traumatic stress on employees when they have been involved in what is normally described as a critical incident. It will also explain the need for all employees in law enforcement to be trained to recognize the signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

It is not only the patrol officers who answer the initial calls for service who are effected by post-traumatic stress. While it is normally a patrol officer who is first on scene to witness the aftermath of victims who have been beaten, shot, or countless other scenarios, post-traumatic stress can and does affect detectives, crime scene investigators, and the dispatchers and civilians who answer the calls for help. Call takers listen to the pleas for help when the caller has been raped or beaten, the calls

from a parent saying that their child has been shot, seriously injured, or is not breathing. The detectives and crime scene investigators are constantly called on to work crime scenes, fatality accidents, and to interview victims and witnesses. Maguen et al. (2009) stated that it is not only work related incidents that can cause PTSD. Negative life events can also be a factor in post-traumatic stress. The death of a child, spouse, parent or another family member, a divorce or child custody issues, and even financial problems can cause or add to PTSD.

Most personnel will not seek out treatment or counselling for PTSD. Some will not even know that they are suffering needlessly with PTSD, and most will not want to admit that they need help because of the stigma that has been associated with PTSD in the past (Stark, 2016). Stark further explained that some officers and employees are able, or, have the inherent ability to overcome the problem on their own, while others, may need outside counselling and treatment to overcome this obstacle.

If mandatory training was implemented for law enforcement personnel to recognize the signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, it would provide the ability for all employees to intervene and seek help for one that appears to be suffering from PTSD. Additionally, it would likely improve work performance for those dealing with PTSD and save money for the agencies in lost time, sick time usage, and overtime usage. It would also improve the employee's personal life as well as their career. Most importantly, it could save lives.

POSITION

Every law enforcement employee will undoubtedly experience stress during their career in some form or fashion; this stress can be from calls for service, critical

incidents, and stressful 911 calls. The stress employees feel can be from past experiences or from current and future demands. Training should be mandatory for all law enforcement personnel including administrators that would explain post-traumatic stress disorder, the signs and symptoms associated with PTSD, and the long-term effects. Often, police officers and other law enforcement personnel will not ask for or seek help for PTSD due to the stigma associated with it, or the fact that they simply may not be aware that they are even suffering from PTSD (Scoville, 2013). An article from the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) (2014) explains that it is common for officers to attempt to work through problems on their own because they do not want to appear weak in front of their peers or the public. Law enforcement employees may also fear that they are putting their career at risk by admitting that they suffer from PTSD and need professional counselling or treatment to overcome this obstacle or feel shame for needing this assistance.

The National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) (2016) defines PTSD as “a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event” (para. 1). The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) (2016) defines PTSD as a “serious potentially debilitating condition that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a natural disaster, serious accident, terrorist incident, and sudden death of a loved one, war, violent personal attack such as rape, or other life-threatening events” (para. 4). It has become clearly obvious that employees of law enforcement agencies are subjected to these types of incidents on a regular, if not daily, occurrence. These incidents can have a long-term impact on employees and leave them suffering from PTSD. Some of the signs and symptoms of

PTSD are anxiety, depression, numbness, fatigue, insomnia, loss of appetite, nightmares, and fear of personal safety, inability to maintain or express intimacy with loved ones and can even manifest into severe depression which can lead to suicidal thoughts (Scoville, 2013). Police officers are taught and led to believe from early in their career that they should hide or mask their feelings (Scoville, 2013). Because it is vitally important to be in control in any given situation, it becomes a way of life for many employees and carries over in to their personal lives and can become a barrier for them to deal or cope with the everyday stress that is encountered on the job. By implementing mandatory training for all law enforcement personnel, the stigma associated PTSD would be lessened from the simple knowledge of what PTSD is, and the signs, symptoms, causes and effects of the disorder. Mandatory training would also educate employees of the long-term effects of PTSD if it is left undiagnosed and untreated. It would help the agency to guide and support administrators to understand that the cost of counselling and treatment for PTSD would likely be made up by the money saved for use of sick time, lost time, and the amount of overtime paid to cover shifts for employees that are suffering from PTSD.

The mental wellness of employees should be a concern at the forefront of law enforcement administrations. PTSD and severe depression can lead to employees essentially self-medicating to deal with the problems they are experiencing by turning to drugs and/or alcohol as the answer. A study conducted Violanti (2009) listed some of the symptoms of PTSD as fatigue, insomnia, nightmares, withdrawal, anxiety, loss of interest in hobbies, guilt, depression, and increased alcohol or substance abuse. With proper training, employees and supervisors would be able to identify the signs and

symptoms of PTSD and get help for those personnel in need. An article from International Association of Chiefs of Police (2014) stated, "Ensure that all officers from recruit to retiree are properly trained to identify indicators of significant emotional problems, mental illness, and suicidal behavior and ideation" (p. 15).

COUNTER POSITION

Many law enforcement agencies, administrators and supervisors believe that the cost for training would be too much to absorb into an already strained budget. Over the past several years, agencies have seen budget cuts, some severe, and often those cuts harshly affect the dollar amount dedicated to training (Fielder, n.d.). There is also the concern of cost for employees who might require professional counselling and treatment for PTSD or severe depression, specifically if it turned into long term care.

A consideration to look at is the cost of initially hiring, equipping, and the training of officers. For most agencies, the hiring of officers and civilian employees start in the same fashion with the same initial costs. Typically, once applications for the available positions are received, they are screened and then a notification is sent out for testing. After testing, the scores are accumulated and an extensive and sometimes costly background investigation is conducted. For the applicants who have passed the written test and initial background check, most organizations will then conduct psychological testing, interviews, hiring review boards, polygraph examinations, drug and alcohol testing, a medical physical, physical fitness testing and sometimes more. These procedures vary from department to department and the position applied for determines the number of tests, but it is a costly process for much of law enforcement agencies. After personnel are hired, they're usually submerged in to a four to six-month training

program which is typically followed by an additional probationary period. During this time, there are also state and agency specific mandated training for employees that varies depending on their job function. For employees who are hired as peace officers, there is also the additional cost of equipment such as body armor, weapons, duty gear, and uniforms. It is also very difficult to calculate the cost to replace a well-trained seasoned officer lost due to suffering from PTSD. Add to that the overtime required to cover that position until a replacement can be hired and trained, the cost could be quite extensive. An example of cost was listed in an article, "Issues in Small Town Policing" (Lindsey & Kelly, 2004). The authors stated that if it costs \$50,000.00 a year for wages and benefits for a single police officer, which over a ten-year period the cost for that officer would be \$500,000.00. If you add in salary increases along with benefits and training that cost could easily reach \$600,000.00. It also stated that if a department did not take steps to "recognize and reduce stress" and the department had to replace that officer with one of similar training and experience it could equate to 1.2 million dollars. If agencies were mandated to provide training to all employees to identify the signs and symptoms of PTSD, then the cost of replacing officers suffering from long-term PTSD would probably balance out and could even save the entity money over time.

Agencies could also consider implementing the use of the Law Enforcement Stress Survey (LEOSS) to help identify employees in need of professional help in dealing with PTSD or other mental health issues (Nanavaty, 2013). This could possibly be a complication for budget reasons but might possibly be offset by the money saved for absenteeism because of health, emotional or health problems. It might also decrease burnout, mistakes, and, also early retirement (Violanti, 2009).

Felt (2014) explained that another concern that surrounds PTSD is the stigma that is associated with it. In the past officers, have been taught that they should learn to keep their feelings to themselves and always be in control. They are lead to believe if officers are not capable of handling the stress, they should leave law enforcement and get in to a different career. Often, officers may work hard to appear to be free from PTSD or other mental health issues that can affect their professional and personal lives. Brown (2003) stated that an individual may not be aware of, or be able to tell you that they are suffering from PTSD.

In an article, Felt (2014) stated that often law enforcement confuses mental disorders with being “crazy” and sometimes feel that they are weak for having emotional responses to critical incidents or trauma. Law enforcement personnel must come to the realization that they are human beings and subject to react in normal ways to critical incidents, traumatic events and long-term exposure to the violence and incidents that they are called on to deal with. In the same article, it was stated that “to this end, education becomes most imperative” (Felt, 2014, para. 12)! It is past time for the law enforcement community to put aside this stigma, to educate all employees and seek help for those in need. In an article, Skeffington (2016) discussed PTSD and reducing the stigma and individual barriers to obtain early “intervention”. By identifying PTSD early and applying professional counselling and/or treatment the employee has a much better chance for recovery.

RECOMMENDATION

All employees of law enforcement agencies should receive mandated training that would help them identify the signs and symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Law enforcement employees often believe it is a sign of weakness to need help to combat a mental health issue such as PTSD. Officers are taught that they must take on the persona of a super hero or robot that shows no emotion and asks for no help. These stigmas' must be done away with, and the mental wellness of employees needs to be made a priority. Employees need to be made aware that it is acceptable and encouraged to seek assistance to help overcome PTSD, depression, or any other mental health or medical issue.

While budget concerns will always be an issue for law enforcement agencies, administrations need to be made aware that the cost for mental health treatment would probably be offset by the usual cost of replacing, training, and equipping officers. And, that it could save money over time by retaining seasoned, well trained employees. By providing mandated training it would improve the quality of life for those employees suffering from PTSD and not only improve their personal lives, but, likely improve the quality of work performed while on duty, improve morale, and create an environment where employees feel empowered and productive.

It is the responsibility of every employee, supervisor and administration to intervene when they see another employee in need. By implementing mandatory training all law enforcement employees would have the ability to recognize the signs and symptoms of PTSD and take appropriate action. By making this training mandatory and putting policies in place that address PTSD and other mental health concerns, employees would find it easier to rid themselves of the stigma associated with PTSD and receive the help that would prolong their career and help to make it more enjoyable and productive. Additional research needs to be conducted that could also help

departments offset some of the cost. If the employees are also military veterans, then additional help and assistance can be obtained from the Veterans Administration.

Agencies that do not have programs or policies in place that cover mental health issues can seek help and guidance from those that do. Training and education are the keys that will help to alleviate the stigma associated with PTSD and get the help needed for those suffering from this disorder.

Critical incidents are not the sole reason that most law enforcement personnel feel undue stress every day; it is also not only stress brought on by personal life events, organizational issues or the daily call load of most law enforcement agencies. It is a combination of these stressors that can bring about PTSD and a myriad of other health issues. Research has shown that stress can relate blood pressure disorders and heart disease in the law enforcement community (Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003). The same research shows that there is a related increase to alcohol and drug abuse, along with an increase in domestic violence in law enforcement families.

In conclusion, healthy, balanced officers usually are critical for a healthy, productive organization. Law enforcement agencies should create relationships with other shareholders and promote proactive, complete officer wellness and development programs. As these programs become the norm, organizations will gain impetus in hiring and retaining healthy officers (Nanavaty, 2015).

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