

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

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**Home Survival  
For the Law Enforcement Officer**

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

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## **ABSTRACT**

Law enforcement agencies should dedicate a portion of the Field Training Program to discussion and training on the effects the job can, and will, have on the home life. With law enforcement officers being subjected to the things they are exposed to they often turn to sometimes undesirable things to relieve that stress. Alcohol, cigarettes, promiscuity, drugs, and many other things can lead to health and family problems. New officers often over look the effects of the job and the toll it can have on a person's home life. While most police academies touch on the subject of stress, the recruits do not understand how to apply this information without being in a position to actually use it. If departments will address this during the end of the field training of that officer and include friends and family members, then that officer's chances of making it to retirement may improve greatly. If approached toward the end of the FTO program, they will be able to apply this information and training to things they have personally experienced and not just be reading something out of a book. This will also allow the friends and family members to hear what that officer has already experienced and will have someone there to help them ask questions of how to support that new officer.

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## INTRODUCTION

Young men and women sometimes look at police officers with starry eyes and a dream of one day putting on that badge and gun. But those young men and women do not see past the uniform, they do not see the sadness on that officer's face from the many things he or she has dealt with today. As those young men and women start a police academy, they spend months learning all the laws they need to know and all the codes they need to be familiar with such as the Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, the Health and Safety code, and so on. They spend time doing practical exercises, learning how to defend themselves and how to take offenders into custody. They do not learn how to deal with the stress of the job.

After graduating from the academy, those same officers are put on the streets with a Field Training Officer (FTO) to learn how to apply everything they were taught in the academy. This time is often used to see if that officer has what it takes to do the job and to see if they can handle themselves in stressful situations. They can be exposed to everything from hours at a computer typing reports to a homicide or mass casualty incident during this FTO training to ensure they are ready for the job.

At this point, these new officers are ready for anything the world can throw at them. These officers may have a question or two for the sergeant but overall they have the knowledge to handle the job. An officer spends the first year responding to every kind of situation imaginable, to include theft reports, civil matters, motor vehicle accidents, suicides, sexual assaults, and child abuse just to name a few. After the first year, the officer may start feeling a little out of place or like they do not fit in with old friends. They do not talk to their fellow officers because they do not want to appear

weak. They no longer talk to their spouse because they do not want them to know the things going through their mind, because their spouses have not been offered training in this part of the job or talked to about the warning signs.

The stress endured by the average law enforcement officer is unknown by most people. The number of officers that abuse alcohol or other drugs, and are involved in domestic disputes and divorce are alarmingly high. According to The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (TCLEOSE, 2011), in 2009, they took action against 14 officers for assaultive offenses, 23 officers for Driving While Intoxicated, and five officers for drug related offenses. This number just represents the number of officers they took action against and only in Texas.

It is the duty of the Field Training Officer to prepare these new officers for surviving more than a shift on the street. They should also assist the officer and their families how to recognize signs of traumatic stress. Things like depression, alcoholism, domestic issues, and even suicide are possible results of the stress in law enforcement. If there is one place in law enforcement training that is lacking, it would be that of educating not only the officer but the families in recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress long before they lead to issues at home.

Law enforcement agencies should dedicate a portion of the Field Training Program (FTO) to educating and training on the effects the job can, and will, have on the home life. When done at the FTO level, the new officer will have learned the dynamics of that department and the support system in place instead of reading it out of a book in a classroom and then trying to apply it in a department that does not fit the academy model. If officers, and families, are prepared in the beginning, they have a

much better chance of making it through a long career without the issues so many officers have at home.

## **POSITION**

Stress comes in many shapes and sizes and causes many different problems. The most frequently discussed type of stress recently is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). But there are many other types of stress that can occur during the career of a new law enforcement officer and many over looked effects of that stress.

The most common yet overlooked type of stress is called chronic stress. This is the everyday things such as finances, relationships, poor work environment, car problems, and so on. This type of stress may not seem like much but over time it can add up and actually cause medical issues, such as obesity, diabetes, cardiac issues, blood pressure, and even kidney issues (Miller, 2007).

Additional contributors to chronic stress in the law enforcement community can be shift work, little or no training, little or no room for advancement, poor leadership within the department, lack of pay, poor equipment, perceived dangers of the job, and fear of backing units arriving in time if needed. A common complaint from officers to family members is the lack of time at home. Many departments require their officers to be on call at all times resulting in the officer always waiting for the phone to ring preventing their ability to relax (Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003).

These chronic stressors, if left unchecked, can begin to lead to those effected officers having some of the medical issues previously mentioned as well as turning to other means to help them relax. It is not uncommon for these officers to resort to tobacco use, alcohol, drug use, and promiscuous behavior as a coping mechanism.

While a drink and a smoke occasionally is accepted by society in general the use of illicit drugs and promiscuous behavior can easily cause career and family problems almost immediately.

As that same officer continues through the day to day stressors of the job and life, they also get exposed to things that most people do not even think of. As a law enforcement officer, they deal with people who are at their worst. Even the wealthy executive who was involved in a minor collision has the potential to be rude to the officer for no other reason than having a bad day. While the minor collision in the officer's eyes may not be a tragic event, it is to the person involved and the stress felt by that person can easily be added to that officer's chronic stress. Compounding the chronic stress is a different category known as traumatic stress (Miller, 2007). Miller (2007) defined traumatic stress as an immediate stress of a person by the introduction of a real or perceived traumatic event. An example could be when an officer is exposed to some sort of traumatic event such as a hostage situation or stand off, an Emergency Medical Services (EMS) call, or a homicide. Then that same officer could be called to a scene where a small child has been struck by a drunk driver while that child was riding their bicycle. The officer is having to face, quite literally, a life or death situation but must remain calm for the benefit of the child and onlookers. At the same time the, officer must also deal with everything they are seeing such as blood, a child screaming, onlookers wanting the officer to do something, and the knowledge the incident was caused by someone who was drinking and driving.

In addition to all of this, officers can also be exposed to vicarious trauma- a result of "empathetic engagement with traumatic experiences" (Tovar, 2011 p.2). This means

that officers who respond to motor vehicle accidents, traumatic abuse scenes, or mass casualty incidents can be traumatized by the people they are trying to help. They begin to feel traumatized by hearing and seeing what these other people tell them and by the trauma they can see (Tovar, 2011).

Officers are trained to face negative situations head on and not show fear or any other emotion, but the officer's body is biologically wired for fight or flight for survival. The officer then has to stand in those situations and show they are in control while remaining calm, and non-wavering as their body is telling them to "do something" (Lindsey & Kelly, 2004). If that officer did not have a support system already in place, there is a very good chance they may never seek out someone to help them.

If this officer continues their career without developing a support system and continues to hold their stress in, they are very likely to experience moderate to severe negative consequences. These consequences can easily lead to alcohol or drug abuse, which in turn, can lead to health problems and depression. If the officer resorted to substance abuse which led to health problems and depression, the end result is all too often the loss of their career, and more importantly, their family.

Alcohol consumption in itself is not a major issue for most people, but when a person begins to turn that occasional wanted drink into a needed drink, it can start to really affect that person's life in so many ways. One drink can easily turn into many drinks while discussing work and family problems with other people experiencing the same issues. Before the officer realizes it, they could be intoxicated and now running late to get home and this causes a situation where they risk being pulled over on their way home and arrested (Territo & Sewell, 2007).



It is thought that 25% of law enforcement officers are considered alcohol dependent with officers drinking an estimated six to eight alcoholic beverages per week (Cross & Ashley, 2004). Alcohol abuse is not only a law enforcement issue, but officers are held to a higher standard. When officers are caught in alcohol related incidents it is sure to be exploited in the media resulting in negative consequences, not only for the officer involved but all those in the law enforcement community.

The use of alcohol can not only lead to an arrest for DWI, but it can cause a strain at home because of the officer's staying out late, staying intoxicated while at home, and spending time alone drinking instead of spending time with family members. In addition to the strains at home there are the medical problems associated with alcohol abuse, such as liver problems. Alcohol abuse can also cause periods of depression for the officer, as well as their family, especially when left untreated. It is a commonly accepted belief that the problems created by alcohol abuse often result in an increased abuse of alcohol or other substances. This, in turn, only serves to create more problems for the officer. The ultimate result is typically a compounding and self-perpetuating cycle of devastating behavior.

Nearly all Americans suffer some degree of depression at various points in their lives. The most important factor lies in how these individuals choose to cope with it that will dictate the duration and severity of their depression as well as the ultimate end result. When officers turn to alcohol as an immediate remedy, the therapeutic result is usually only temporary. They unfortunately fail to see the future problems that usually result from the temporary remedies they chose.

Depression can lead to alcohol abuse itself or can be a result of alcohol abuse. It is often hard to figure out what came first, but either way, the combination of the two can have extreme results. Officers who are stressed to the point of depression and alcohol abuse can start to develop problems at home with a spouse and or children. Those officers can sometimes bring the control they have to show at work to their home and become more forceful with their family. This can lead to discipline problems with the child as well as the spouse resisting the officer's perceived need to control the home. That officer can then sometimes try to regain control of the home by violent outburst and sometimes striking a spouse or child. There is no doubt that these actions do not happen overnight when the officer starts in law enforcement, but the possibility is there from day one and it is up to the officer to decide how they will handle the stress of the job and how it affects their life.

While there have been numerous studies investigating domestic abuse, substance abuse, and depression, very few of these have focused on specific occupations that accompany these abuses. There is however, an increasing amount of investigative research being conducted by various mental and behavioral science experts associated with the Bureau of Veterans' Affairs. This research resulted in the recognition of PTSD in troops returning home after serving combat tours. The majority of these individuals did not fit the typical profiles of abusers which rendered the known research into this phenomenon invalid for explaining and treating this particular issue. This research indicates the underlying root cause for this negative behavior is a direct result of the horrors these troops have seen. Similarities are now being compared to our nations law enforcement officers who are exposed to the same horrors and

tragedies as our combat veterans. This research is also, finally, addressing the issues that the family members of these troops have to deal with (Galovski & Lyons, 2004).

If an officer continues on a negative path of alcohol and or substance abuse and if the officer lets the stress of the job affect their home life and job performance to the point they suffer from clinical depression, then they put themselves at a very high risk of suicide. According to research there were 143 police suicides in 2009 (Kulbarsh, 2010). That number is incredible, since the number of police deaths in the line of duty for that same year was 138 (<http://www.odmp.org>, 2009). That means that there were five more officers that took their own life in 2009 than were killed in the line of duty. Obviously, law enforcement officers are not the only people that commit suicide, but considering the chronic stress the officers share with the rest of society, they also have all the stressors shared among law enforcement including traumatic stress, not to mention the possibility of internal investigations and that officer second guessing themselves in a situation that could have caused harm to themselves or another person. While exact numbers are hard to find for law enforcement suicides, it is believed that an officer takes their own life every 22 hours (Hamilton, 2003).

If those officers are given the opportunity in their FTO program or soon after to talk to other officers about the effects of stress, less of this might happen. Officers sometimes receive training about the effects of stress while in the academy, but, at that point, they have not experienced traumatic stress, or the shift work and other tolls the job takes on them and their family. If given that training during the FTO program or soon after, the officer will be able to recall real life events they experienced and not something read in a book. Then the officer can see they are not the only ones who feel

the way they do, and they can also see, firsthand, that there are positive ways to handle those feelings. They will also be able to talk to peers and family members and/or professional counseling if needed. Along those same lines, the family members need to also go through similar training, so they can understand the effects the job will have on their spouse or family member as well as understanding the stress they are feeling at home worrying about the person they love. This training could assist them in recognizing the issues their spouse may be having. It can also educate them on how to set aside time to talk about how things are going and open that line of communication. Most officers often have difficulty opening these lines of communication themselves. This training can also help the family members recognize problems they may be having in the handling of stress and show them ways to cope as well as avenues to take to relieve that stress before it becomes debilitating for them as well. This very idea has been used in the Irvine, CA Police Department and includes an orientation period for families of the officer including tours on the department as well as information of what to expect from the new recruit when returning home from shift including many aspects of personality changes and the resources available to assist the family unit before relationships are damaged (Torres, Maggard, & Torres, 2003).

### **COUNTER POSITION**

While many large departments in Texas have an entire division just for officers experiencing psychological issues like stress, depression, and alcohol abuse, it is not common in the majority of departments statewide. By the time an officer is tested, hired, trained, and put on the street, a department has invested approximately \$100,000 that first year (Lindsey & Kelly, 2004). The additional money it would take to train FTOs

to perform this additional assignment and finding an officer willing to take that role may be harder than one might think.

While the expense of hiring a new officer is great, an officer who remains with the department for ten years or more is a worthwhile investment. Departments can usually invest four or five hundred thousand dollars including pay, benefits, and training throughout an officers career. Administrators in these departments need to decide where they want to incur this expense, either in the beginning, by investing a little more into the FTO program, or after having invested years and hundreds of thousands of dollars into one officer. After investing that time and money, administrators risk watching those officers walk out the door because they can no longer handle the strain the job has put on them and their family.

An officer with the British SAS named Andy McNab was interviewed due to a statement he made, which was that Post Traumatic Stress disorder was an “excuse” used by service men and women to get out of assignments. He further stated that, "It is in effect the new 'back problem', an injury that is very difficult to diagnose" (Doward, 2010, par.4). In any line of work, sports, military, or any group, there are those people who are weak and look for reasons to step down without the appearance of being a quitter. In that respect Mr. McNab is right, there are people that use this diagnosis as an excuse, and it is in effect the new “back problem.”

Certainly there are some officers who may be making a bigger deal out of a problem than they are having, but, in reality, this is a very serious issue affecting many officers and their families. According to research, PTSD, as well as many other types of stress, are serious issues affecting not only members of the military but all aspects of

public servants. In addition to the buzz words often used like “PTSD, Traumatic Stress, and Chronic Stress,” one must also look at the affects of that stress. This stress, no matter the form, can have significant impacts on the officer’s health, such as cardiac issues, hypertension, and diabetes, just to name a few. Other things that can be linked back to stress are nightmares, being unable to sleep, and being uncomfortable in unfamiliar surroundings (Territo & Sewell, 2007).

## **CONCLUSION**

There are many types of stress in all aspects of a person’s life. A law enforcement officer is no different than anyone else in society; however, there are some additions to the normal stressors that law enforcement officers experience that are far above and beyond what the average person does. The day in and day out stressors that everyone has, like paying bills and spending enough time with family, is the same for everyone. In addition to this stress, though, is the chronic stress a law enforcement officer experiences, such as responding to numerous real and perceived threats against them on a regular basis. Further, this stress is coupled with everything the officer sees, hears, smells, and feels, and this can have a serious negative impact on the officer as well as the friends and family members of that officer. The Irvine, CA Police Department started a pilot program in 2002 in which new officers and their families were brought in and shown around the department. The family members were given tours and informed about the types of stress the new officers would experience and how these new experiences would affect the officer and their home life. The officers were also informed about the stress of the job and common ways officers sometimes seek to relieve the stress they felt. Both good and bad ways of

handling stress were discussed, and tools were offered to help the officer find positive ways to manage their stress as well as their family members (Torres, Maggard, & Torres, 2003).

Many administrators struggle with training costs as it is. When additional costs are presented to them for training the same officers, it can often be a challenge to find economic support for the idea. Additionally, it is often difficult to prove the officers are having true episodes of traumatic stress or PTSD until the negative effects begin to manifest themselves. With it being so hard to prove, it is often referred to as the “new back problem” (Doward, 2010, par.4).

More law enforcement agencies should provide stress management training for officers and their families to help them cope with the traumatic incidents the officers’ experience and the chronic stresses they endure. This training needs to be a part of the FTO program the officer goes through and also needs to include the families of that officer in order to coach them in being a significant part of the officer’s foundation of support. As stated earlier, it can cost a department upwards of \$100,000 to put one officer on the street, including the money to hire and train an officer in the first year of their career. When one looks at the cost of training and salary for that officer over the first ten years, not to mention the knowledge that officer gains through their tenure, the department could easily have invested over “\$600,000” (Lindsey & Kelly, 2004).

Most departments issue their officers the necessary implements to accomplish their mission: a car, badge, gun, ballistic vest, handcuffs and so on, along with tools and training to survive hostile physical encounters on the street. Many departments, however, are falling short on giving those new officers the tools to survive at home.

Officers in smaller departments often have difficulty finding that “down time” because a simple trip to the grocery store can easily become a work related incident because community members know who they are, what they drive, and may ask questions of them even though they are not “on duty” (Lindsey & Kelly, 2004). Additionally, these officers are often traumatized at work, so it should be the responsibility of the department to provide them with this training. It would be far more feasible for the department to spend a little more money up front to ensure the officer continues a long and healthy career with that department, instead of risking the loss of that officer to one of the many issues brought on by the stress created by their job.

If the officer is provided this training, shown there is support within the department, and given the tools to create their own support network at home, then that officer has a greater chance of making it to retirement without having to experience the damaging effects of long term work related stress. These officers need to receive training toward the end of their field training. This way the officer has had some experience with traumatic stress specific to law enforcement, such as long hours, shift rotation, and the day to day dealings with the general public. This training should include the people closest to the officer, their spouse, friends, and family. Including the people this officer is closest to will prepare them to be ready for what could possibly happen with that officer, as well as being prepared for the stresses the family will have to endure.



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