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**The Grief Process of Surviving Spouses of Police Officers Killed in
the Line of Duty and the Responsibility of the Agency**

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ABSTRACT

The grief process of surviving spouses of police officers killed in the line of duty and the responsibility of that agency is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it is not a matter of if an officer will be killed in the line of duty, but when. Many of those officers have a family of some type, whether it is a wife, child, parent or sibling, and the police agency will be expected to deal with not only the burial, but the aftermath for the family as well. According to Violanti (1999), the type of response provided by the police agency to the family after the officer is killed often determines how intense the grief is and how quickly the family is able to move on with their lives.

The position of the researcher is that each police agency should have a written plan in place, or an agreement with a neighboring agency, that establishes a policy but remains fluid to adapt to the changing needs of that agency and the surviving family. Whenever a law enforcement officer is killed, it is not just the police agency that mourns, but the entire community. Having a plan already in place enables that police agency to effectively provide for the fallen officer's family, continue to perform daily operations, and reinforces to the public that agency's professionalism and commitment not only to their employees, but to the public as well.

There is a plethora of information available regarding law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. Almost daily police media outlets relay information on fallen officers and their families. The types of information used to support the researcher's position are a review of articles, Internet sites, books, and journals. The conclusion drawn from this position paper is that every police agency devise a policy or make an

agreement with a neighboring agency to enable that agency to deal with the death of a police officer in the line of duty and a guide on how to handle the surviving family.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research paper is to explore the grief process of surviving spouses of police officers killed in the line of duty and what responsibility the police agency has to the surviving spouse and family. Grieving is normally experienced by everyone in some form or fashion, and most police agencies will lose an officer in the line of duty at some point. Therefore, it only stands to reason that having a policy in place, outlining what steps to follow, would ensure a smoother transition and help the family and department deal with a horrible situation.

Each year across the United States, an average of 52 police officers are killed in the line of duty (Miller, 2007b). On January 6, 2009, in Dallas, Texas, Senior Corporal Norman Smith became the 79th officer of the Dallas Police Department killed in the line of duty ("Fallen Officers: Killed in the Line of Duty," 2009). His wife, also a Dallas Police officer, was left behind to deal with her grief. The Dallas Police Department provides a wealth of support from the time of the officer's death through the burial. After the burial, the support is still there but is lessened considerably. Many people wonder how long a police agency should render assistance to a grieving widow and the family. Questions arise as to how much time is enough, whether the assistance, support, and resources should last longer than a year, what happens if an agency loses more than one officer in a single incident, and what happens if multiple officers are killed in a single year from the same agency.

Research showed several police agencies have had to deal with multiple in the line of duty deaths stemming from a single incident as well as multiple deaths from separate incidents in a single year (Officer Down Memorial Page, Inc., 2009). How an

agency divides needed resources between the officers' families can affect how that family perceives their loved ones value to that department. Even though many police agencies have a policy in place, most do not specify how to divide the needed resources between the deceased officers families.

The grief process lasts an average of 18 months (Rubin, 1990); however, the length of time assistance and resources are made available is usually left to the discretion of that agency's chief. The time line begins with notification of the officers death, followed by assistance in planning the funeral, processing legal paperwork, grief counseling, manpower (sending officers to assist with day-to-day matters), and time off from work if the surviving spouse is also an officer. The family usually has to relive the loved one's death multiple times due to media coverage, the investigation, and trial of the perpetrator. Even though research shows the grief process lasts about 18 months (Rubin, 1990), police agencies should provide assistance and resources for as long as the surviving spouse needs it. The researcher will demonstrate the various stages of grief and how some police agencies deal with this matter. The researcher will further show that police agencies of all sizes should establish policies that address in the line of duty deaths and how to deal with the surviving spouses.

POSITION

A police officer's job is to respond to calls for service where, generally, one of the people involved will not be happy the officer came. Many times, a simple call for service can escalate, and sometimes an officer gets killed. When this happens, the family of that officer is notified of the tragedy and the grief process begins. Because police officers hold an important role in society, when one is killed in the line of duty, the entire

community and sometimes the country watches to see what happens next. The spouse, along with the agency plans the funeral, the media coverage is extensive, and when the burial is complete, the family often is left wondering what happens next. Research showed that, often, the spouse does not receive the “police family” support they have been taught to expect (Miller, 2007b). To further complicate things, not all spouses and families are treated the same. Often, fellow officers and the community treat officers killed by violent criminal acts as more special than those killed in motor vehicle accidents (Miller, 2007a).

After an officer is killed in the line of duty, the surviving spouse goes through a rollercoaster of emotions as they work their way through the grief process. Many spouses will obsess about the details of the officer’s death, such as what type of weapon was used, how many times he was shot or stabbed, and whether or not he suffered. Another emotion of the grief process can be intense anger at not only the killer, but the agency as well. They are angry at the killer because that person took away their loved one. Anger at the agency is usually based on the assignment that officer had been given because it placed the officer in greater danger than necessary. Yet another emotion commonly displayed is a pervasive fear of everything that can be so extreme it can be crippling. The length these various emotions last can range from six to 18 months. There are instances where the normal grief process morphs into something more: complicated grief. Research indicated that complicated grief is when the survivor is mired in a heightened state of mourning (“Complicated grief”, 2009). Complicated grief lasts well past the norm of 18 months and often lasts years.

As line of duty deaths are inevitability in law enforcement, having a written policy or an agreement with a neighboring law enforcement agency will enable that agency to act immediately in an appropriate manner, assisting the family in a pre-arranged but fluid way. Research showed that one of the best line of duty death policies is a 20-page document created by the Dallas Police Department (Rachlin, 1994). The group that makes that policy work is the Police Family Support Team, which is activated whenever an officer is critically injured, falls ill, or is killed in the line of duty; they also respond when a retired officer dies. The team springs into action before the survivors are notified, and if the surviving family does not live within a reasonable driving distance, the team notifies the proper local law enforcement agency to make notification. Each team member is assigned a specific task, such as funeral arrangements, traffic control, media relations, travel and accommodation coordination, benefits coordination, or family liaison officers. Research showed that members of this team, working with officers from other units, strive to fulfill the spirit of the policy which is one of providing assistance to the department's police family when an active or retired member suffers a serious injury/illness or death (Rachlin, 1994).

When an officer is killed in the line of duty, the surviving family members are not the only people affected. Fellow officers working at the agency and often across the country feel the loss. Responses to the loss range from shock and disbelief to numbness and anger. Research showed that every officer as well as family members of officers identifies with the loss, feeling "There but for the grace of God, go I" (Rachlin, 1994). Many officers recant stories about the deceased, using it as a form of narrative therapy and look anxiously toward the funeral as an opportunity to openly show their

grief. Showing one's grief at the funeral is often viewed as a sign of respect for the fallen officer. Surviving officers generally expect the affected law enforcement agency to "be there" for the fallen officer's family and assist with burial arrangements. If the proper "respect" is not reflected by the agency, often, surviving officers become angry and resentful, wondering what will happen to their families if they die in the line of duty.

Having a policy or an agreement with a neighboring agency prior to an officer dying in the line of duty shows that a law enforcement agency is prepared for stressful situations and is concerned for the mental health and well being of its officers, surviving families of officers, and its community. If an officer is killed in the line of duty and no policy exists, that law enforcement agency has to overcome their lack of planning during an extremely emotional time. Trying to organize personnel, work with the grieving family, manage the media, and address the many things that occur would be overwhelming. The unprepared law enforcement agency would appear insensitive and inept not only to the surviving family, but to fellow officers as well. Therefore, it is always better to be prepared for what may come than to exist with the wait until it happens attitude. The agency that is prepared will present a more professional image to the surviving family, its own officers, and the community.

COUNTER POSITION

Smaller law enforcement agencies may argue they are too small to have a formal policy addressing line of duty deaths and barely have enough funds to address day-to-day budgets. Additionally, if a law enforcement agency is in a rural area, often those officers believe it is less likely they will be killed. This belief comes from knowing most, if not all, of the people living in their communities.

There are numerous law enforcement agencies in the state of Texas, and the March 2010 Officer Down Memorial Page (<http://www.odmp.org/>) shows 1,726 officers have been killed in the line of duty in Texas since records have been kept. The Officer Down Memorial Page details the manner of death, showing gunfire leading the way with 1,028 and automobile accidents second with 147. Adopting the attitude that a police agency does not have the manpower or enough funds is not facing the very real fact that law enforcement officers die across the nation every day. Most communities show an overwhelming desire to support their law enforcement agency any time an officer is killed. Leaders of those agencies should reach out to community groups and churches prior to an officer being killed in an effort to come to an agreement of what assistance they can offer when the time comes. Leaders of those agencies should also reach out to larger surrounding agencies and devise a memorandum of understanding, ensuring a cohesive merger of the two agencies during their time of tragedy. Additionally, the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (TCLEOSE) website (n.d.) has a link indicating resources for a peace officer line of duty death. This link has nine federal assistance programs, four state assistance programs, and numerous private and support organizations that offer assistance not only monetarily, but emotionally and educationally. Another possibility to raise funds would be to have officers of that agency begin an Assist the Officer fund. This can be done by each officer having a set amount of money withdrawn from his or her paycheck each pay period and deposited into an account specifically labeled and managed for officers killed or seriously injured in the line of duty. Fundraisers can add additional money to the coffers, so the excuse that no resources are available is not acceptable..

Another concern for a smaller agency is that the grief process of surviving spouses often lasts up to 18 months and can cause a serious drain on manpower. During this time, family members can become very needy and demanding as they often look to their loved one's law enforcement agency to continue being their "police family." The smaller law enforcement agency has the very real obligation of getting back to business, which generally is going to utilize all available officers and resources, leaving little to nothing available for the surviving spouse.

Law enforcement agencies have been criticized for not providing adequate follow-up services to surviving spouses and families (Miller, 2007). Additionally, the grief process is greatly impacted by how the agency addresses the needs of the survivors in the long term. Knowing that the grief process usually lasts around 18 months should be an indicator to the smaller law enforcement agency that they need to work with local community groups in an effort to obtain support services for the surviving spouses. There are many local support groups, such as Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS), the Family Badge, Under the Shield, and others that can be located in the local phone book or online. A little advanced preparation will enable the smaller law enforcement agency to steer the surviving spouse and family members in the direction of recovery.

CONCLUSION

The matter of line of duty deaths is very real and should be addressed head on by every law enforcement agency. With an average of 52 officers each year dying in the line of duty (Miller, 2007b), it is not a matter of if it will happen in an agency, but when. Research showed that in Texas alone, 1,726 officers have died since records

have been kept. Many of the agencies listed are not large departments (Of(<http://www.odmp.org/>). Their areas of responsibility range from colleges, process servers working for constables' offices, county sheriffs', as well as state and local agencies. When a law enforcement officer is killed in the line of duty, it is not just the officer's agency that is affected, but the officer's family and often the entire country. An example of the outpouring of emotions can be during the newscasts of a slain officer's funeral. Often, as the funeral procession proceeds to the cemetery, hundreds of citizens may line the streets and overpasses, paying their respects to the fallen officer. Newscasts also report that officers from neighboring agencies join in the procession to pay their respects, and memorial videos are posted on the internet ("Senior Corporal Norman S. Smith Dallas Police funeral memorial dedication video", 2009). Research showed that the tragedy and sense of loss for a fallen officer can extend into other countries as demonstrated in Lakewood, Washington. On November 29, 2009, four Lakewood police officers were slain. Fox News reported that 1,000 members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police marched into the Super Dome to pay their respects to their fallen comrades ("Over 1000 RCMP's Pay Respect For Fallen Lakewood Officers," 2009).

If a police agency does not have a policy or agreement with a neighboring agency dealing with line of duty deaths and how to deal with the surviving spouses in the aftermath, it would be advisable to begin working on one. The most logical way to begin would be to research other agencies' policies, such as the one created by the Dallas Police Department, which researchers cite as being one of the most comprehensive (Rachlin, 1994). Seeking assistance from local community groups and

enlisting their cooperation as well as meeting with surviving families of previous officers killed in the line of duty to determine what helped and what did not while they were dealing with their grief could prove invaluable to starting a program.

As stated previously, being prepared is always better than being caught during an emotional time with no plan of action and no idea of where to start. Further, a law enforcement agency with a policy detailing what to do when a line of duty death occurs says to their officers and community that their agency is professional and has concern for their police family's mental health and wellbeing. The argument of not having the manpower, funds, or feeling the probability is low of an agency to lose an officer in the line of duty is an irresponsible stance to take. Public support of law enforcement goes up when a line of duty death occurs, so reaching out requesting support prior to the tragedy occurring is advisable. Also, many neighboring law enforcement agencies are willing to assist if needed. As surviving spouses and families needs can often last 18 months or longer (Rubin, 1990), the manpower issue can be very real. However, compiling lists of local support groups, churches, psychologists, psychiatrists, and internet sites that deal with the loss of a loved one puts an agency one step closer to preparedness. Law enforcement agencies have long fostered the feeling of being a police family; therefore, being prepared to assist with that family in their time of tragedy is in the best interest of everyone involved.

In conclusion, all law enforcement agencies should have a policy in place detailing a plan of action when dealing with line of duty deaths. If having a policy is not feasible, at the minimum, have an agreement with a neighboring agency. Law

enforcement agencies prepare for many types of major events; this is one that needs to be added to the agenda.

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