

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

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**The Silent Killer  
The Reason for Mandatory Stress Management Training**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The issue of stress in the career of law enforcement is not a new one. It has been around since law enforcement itself. The problem is that the effects of cumulative stress is killing police officers. Agencies have turned a blind eye to problems that come with the job. The job of law enforcement has always been one with inherent risks, which for some has always been the allure. Others embark in the career for the opportunity of humanitarian service. Whether it is for the risk or service, law enforcement officers get more than they bargain for. Law enforcement officers get sights, sounds, smells, and memories that linger in their minds. The waves of memories and emotions that are stored begin to fester and eventually come to a head. They are often presented in the way of physical symptoms and develop into mental health disorders or other self-destructive behaviors. The cumulative results of the stress can consume all aspects of the officers' lives to include their careers, families, friends, and even life itself.

Law enforcement officers receive training to confront many of the dangers that are inherent to the job. They are prepared for all but one. They are not given the tools they require to recognize and deal with the effects of cumulate critical stress and its impact on their lives. Law enforcement officers should have mandatory training in stress management. The officers need to be given the tools to survive their profession. They deserve the know-how to succeed not only in their careers but in their relationships and families too. Mandated training can start on the onset of their chosen profession and should continue throughout their career. Law enforcement officers deserve the knowledge of not only how to survive but to have a successful career.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are many issues that law enforcement officers face on a daily basis. It is no surprise that law enforcement is consistently ranked as a high stress job. A recent report listed law enforcement in the top nine most stressful jobs in America. Out of those nine, law enforcement was ranked fourth (Picchi, 2018). Law enforcement officers are under constant scrutiny by the media and the citizenry they serve. Yet the law enforcement officer, armed with his knowledge and ideals, goes out every day and confronts the ever changing adversarial conditions that is his career. There have been many technological advances in the field of law enforcement that have helped keep the officers safer through modern times. There has been many advances in vehicles, equipment, armament, ballistic protection, and even education. Law enforcement officers have had to keep up with the never ending demands for better equipment, better training, and more technology. Officers currently have to go through a minimal 643 hour basic peace officers course (TCOLE, n.d.). The course is known as the police academy, and it covers the essential knowledge objectives and skills established by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) necessary for state licensure.

Officers are prepared with the knowledge and insight to go out and perform the job. Officers are taught law, penal code, transportation code, and code of criminal procedure to survive the legal battles. They are taught how to survive in these areas. They are taught how to use a firearm, defensive tactics, and restraint techniques. Training has gone to the area of dealing with people who are in a mental crisis in the form of crisis intervention training. TCOLE (n.d.) has recently mandated a new 40 hour training course in crisis intervention and another course in de-escalation. They have

identified areas in need of special training, but have neglected a crucial piece: The officers' mental health wellbeing. The area that has been grossly overlooked is one that is killing law enforcement officers which is stress and how to deal with it. There is no training in the recognitions and handling of this silent killer other than the four hour block in the Basic Peace Officers Course (BPOC). Officers are killing themselves, their relationships, and careers are falling apart due to the cumulative effects of stress and the inability to cope, yet agencies still do not respond to this threat. Officers need the skills to deal with people in mental health crisis.

What has been overlooked and is killing law enforcement officers is the stress of the job and how to deal with it. In 2017, more officers died from suicide than from line of duty causes (Heyman, Dill, & Douglas, 2018). This is a main reason why there should be mandatory training in stress management for officers.

## **POSITION**

Hosea 4:6 in the *Bible* states, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." knowledge is not inherent in people, people must learn it. The issue of stress and cumulative results of critical stress can lead to the devastating results of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and ultimately end the career or life of a person. In 2017, more officers died from suicide than from in-line deaths. There were 140 officers who died from suicide, and 129 died in the line of duty (Heyman et al., 2018). There is more than just suicide that is affecting law enforcement. There are all those other small signs and symptoms that are overlooked. Some of those symptoms can come in the form of anxiety, fear, avoidance, flashbacks, and preoccupation about the stressful event. Stress can also manifest itself in the officer's body in the form of muscle tension,

fatigue, headaches, nausea and bowel problems. (Mayo, Clinic 2016b) The signs and symptoms not only affect the officer but usually spill over to the officer's family and friends. Officers suffering from critical stress or PTSD behavior may also engage in self-destructive behavior such as alcohol and drug abuse. They may have higher incidents of domestic violence and family strife. One study stated law enforcement officers are in the top five jobs with a high chance of divorce (Blank, 2017).

There is no way around the fact that a law enforcement career is more stressful strictly by its nature. In addition to the "normal" stressors, officers are exposed to certain calls for service that fall in the realm outside the normal coping mechanism of humans ("Critical incident," 2007). Calls for service where death is witnessed, such as vehicle crashes, murders, burn victims, or calls for service where deep emotional acts are elicited, such as where children are involved, can fall into the category of critical stress. It has been shown that 87% of emergency responders have experienced critical stress as least once in their career ("Critical incident," 2007). The effects of stress can last hours to days. The effects of critical stress can even last from days to weeks and months ("Critical incident," 2007). Once an officer begins his/her career, they are likely to be functioning in a constant state of stress with no time to decompress. The untreated and unrecognized effects of cumulative critical stress can lead to mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) ("Critical incident," 2007). There is an array of signs and symptoms that are associated with chronic cumulative stress that can lead to an officer ending his life.

The 5<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Sun-tzu wrote hundreds of years ago, "If you know your enemy and know yourself, you don't have to worry of the outcome of a hundred

battles” (Sun-tzu, Sawyer, & Sawyer, 1994, p.178). This statement still holds true to this day. One thing continually done in law enforcement is to overlook important issues or deny they exist because of the negative connotation and stigma (seen as weak or defective) they may bring to the profession. Most will agree that law enforcement is inherently a stressful profession, yet there is very little done about it. Learning all about what is killing law enforcement officers is essential. As a profession, police officers must understand the ins and outs, the why and how, of stress. Oftentimes, law enforcement officers respond to what they see, the spill over, and the end result. By learning how it effects the body, the law enforcement officer can identify some of the signs and symptoms that develop over time. By doing so, the law enforcement officer can learn to avoid the ugly consequences of the cumulative effects of stress which can end up with the loss of the officer’s life.

First things first, the unseen killer has to be named. It is often confused and called stress. Although that is a component of it, it is not stress itself. The term stress was first coined by Hans Selye in 1936 as the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change (AIS, 2017). The word took on a negative connotation; when in reality, there is bad stress (distress) and good stress (eustress). Stress has also been defined as any event that requires us to adjust in some manner, whether it be physiological reactions, thinking, feeling or behaving (Anderson, Swenson & Clay, 1995). The human body is designed to react instinctively to stress. The system responsible for this is known as the autonomic nervous system. The system responsible for the “fight or flight” response is known as the sympathetic nervous system (“Fight-or-flight response,” 2018). The system produces adrenaline. The human

body is designed to seek balance. In doing so, the fight-or-flight system has a counter called the parasympathetic nervous system. This system is responsible to counter the adrenaline by producing its own body chemical called acetylcholine (“Parasympathetic nervous,” 2018). The production and release of this counter is to bring the body down from that heightened sense of danger and alertness that adrenaline puts it in. It brings the body down, lets it relax, helps improve sleep, and stimulates appetite so that the body can recharge, refuel, and ready itself for the next time it has to go into a state of readiness. All these things have a compounded effect on the body. Long term continuous exposure to stressors such as those that are inherent to the work of law enforcement can cause some serious side effects. Things like anxiety, depression, digestive problems, headaches, and heart disease may be the result of exposure to long term stress (Mayo Clinic, 2016a). The cumulative effects of stress on the body and mental health is what ends up killing law enforcement officers.

Law enforcement has come a long way from making a law enforcement job into a law enforcement profession. They have done this through the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE). The commission establishes rules and regulations that govern licensing as well as training. They also review courses that are submitted for approval. They mandate the hours and the courses required to maintain licensure as well as oversee the compliance of such. In the last few years the commission has had training trends that have been geared more to issues that seem to be politically correct and popular. New officers have to take classes such as K-9 encounters as part of obtaining their next licenser certificate (TCOLE, n.d.). Although training is always good, some of the training seems to be misguided. In the latest changes, TCOLE (n.d.) added



a mandated increase in crisis intervention training from 8 to 40 hours. The increases came in response to the frequency in which police officers had negative contact with people in a mental crisis. While this is great and will do a lot of good, the officers are overlooked. The critical training in stress management has not made it to the priority list of legislation, thus law enforcement officers are losing their lives, families and careers to the cumulative effects of critical stress. Mental Health issues are being addressed in the public but not in the officers. Establishing mandated stress management training for officers could save their life. The officers are issued ballistic vests for protection while the most exposed and sensitive areas of themselves are exposed and susceptible to long term injury or death. Mandatory training in stress management could be that safety layer of mental and emotional protection that officers so desperately need.

## **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

One of the biggest arguments when it comes to obtaining resources for training in any agency usually revolves around fiscal restraints. Public service agencies do not have unlimited funds and have to be, understandably, frugal with their resources. The issue turns to what the needs of the organization are verses what the wants are. Areas of training are often the first to be cut or decreased because they are considered the non-essential items to the organizations immediate needs (Hollowell, 2011).

The reality is that the lack of training in crucial areas such as stress management training is costing agencies more than they realize. Hollowell states that how an officer reacts to stress is the most important response in an emergency situation. (Hollowell, 2011, para. 2). Officers will only respond to a situation like they are trained to. This is why it is essential that law enforcement have mandatory training in the area of stress

management. As discussed previously, the unchecked signs of continuous chronic stress or critical incident stress that is inherent to a law enforcement career may have a direct effect on an agencies' budgetary needs whether it is a small, medium or large agency.

Officers must be trained to identify the signs of chronic stress in themselves and others they work with. The training will give officers the essential knowledge and skills to recognize and combat some of the debilitating results of chronic stress or even post-traumatic stress syndrome that may develop. Having an ill officer impedes an agency's ability to function effectively and efficiently. According to one study, absenteeism is an important source of productivity loss (Fekedulegn et al., 2013). When an officer does not show up to work, someone has to cover that job responsibility or assignment. The majority of the time another officer has to step up and take the place of the absent officer and that comes at a premium to the agency. It has clearly been pointed out that absenteeism is a sign of stress. These issues continue and can eventually lead to the officer leaving the field of law enforcement all together. The cost of losing an officer is much greater than the cost of educating the officer to manage the stress that comes from the job. Failing to educate new officers on how to better cope with their stressors of the job has been associated with a high attrition rate in new officers, with the new officer averaging a 33-month tenure (Heibutzki, 2017). When it comes to putting a real dollar amount to the cost of not training an officer and the potential of losing them, Territo and Sewell (2007) had this to say: "It costs a department approximately \$100,000 to replace a five year veteran" (p. 325).

One of the things that is continually done in law enforcement is to overlook important issues or deny they exist because of the negative connotation and stigma (seen as weak or defective) they may bring to the profession. People who get into law enforcement are expected to be physically and mentally tough. They are supposed to be able to handle all the perils of the job. Lindsey and Kelly (2004) state, "It is inbred into us in the academy, probationary training, and all aspects of law enforcement that, if we cannot handle the stress, we need to get out" (p. 1). This is the stand that most law enforcement agencies take. If no one is complaining, there is no issue to address. Law enforcement agencies follow the American proverb philosophy of "the squeaky wheel gets the oil" when it comes to addressing this sensitive topic. They see it in terms of, if the wheel is not squeaking, it does not need oil. If the officers are not complaining, then there is nothing to be done.

The law enforcement environment is not conducive for the openness of asking for help, much less seeking help. Some experts have described the field of first responders as having a lack of empathy for mental health issues (Bell & Eski, 2016). Unfortunately, these views and attitudes are wide spread throughout the entire spectrum of law enforcement from cadet to chief. These attitudes have created an environment of self-destructive situations and behaviors that have come to be the norm for the men and women of law enforcement. There is the premise that if you cannot handle a critical incident then you cannot handle the job. It is also looked down upon if the officer goes to seek professional help or counseling for issues that may arise on the job. Getting past the bravado of law enforcement is a challenge. Many law

enforcement officers do not want to be labeled as defective for developing or having a mental health issue.

The solution to this problem is quite a simple one and does not involve replacing the wheel. The solution lies in maintaining the wheel in pristine working condition. This is done in the form of mandating stress management training for the officers. Officers need to be continuously reminded of what is out there lurking in the memories of their minds.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Law enforcement agencies have a responsibility to properly prepare police officers for the dangers that may threaten their life, whether they are obvious or not. Territto and Sewell (2007) state, "Police agencies can be held liable in court for ignoring lingering stress-related problems or for disciplining workers who exhibit the behavioral effects of trauma from a job related critical incident" (p. 324). That continuous stress develops into an array of physical and mental problems that take a toll on the officer. Some of the mental health issues that affects people, such as PTSD, can directly impair officers' ability to effectively perform their work. The agency may be held liable for negligent retention. Negligent retention is retaining an employee, whose potentially damaging behavior was known or should have been known by the employer (Gaul, 2011). Law enforcement has an obligation to equip officers with all the tools they will need to survive their career. Often time's officers survive the physical violence they face but succumb to residual mental scars that linger and if left untreated can cost them their life.

The same clichés of excuses are well known. Things like limited monies and budget restraints are not valid arguments anymore. Law enforcement agencies have traditionally been a reactive force. In the issue of preventive care in the form of mandated training in stress management, the same applies. In order to have a better, more productive, citizen oriented officer for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the issue of law enforcement's mental health must be addressed. The way this issue can be addressed with minimal resistance and from agencies and officers is to mandate the training. In doing so, the negative stigma associated with the cumulative effects of stress on the officer will decrease.

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