

Peer Support in Law Enforcement; A Helping Hand

By Dell Hackett

Peer support within law enforcement agencies is hardly a new concept. Law enforcement officers have always confided in their peers when the going gets tough. Each agency seems to have those individuals that are natural, often informal leaders in which others are drawn to during difficult times. These trusted co-workers are usually natural listeners and very adept at communication skills. Most of all they are trusted, approachable, and compassionate. In a nutshell, they have that ability to help others through difficult times and get them back on track.

It is no secret that our profession can be wrought with emotional turmoil. Critical incident exposure, cumulative stress, organizational (leadership) stress, family and relationship difficulties can all seem overwhelming at times. As we all know, the reasons for emotional problems within the law enforcement profession are many, complicated, and varied. Shift work, high case loads, the court system, and the very organizations we work for can all be ingredients in a recipe of overwhelming personal stress. Depression, substance abuse, reduced work output, domestic problems, and even suicide can be the end result. Any of us that have been in the business for any length of time also know that inept department leadership and supervision can make an already difficult job seem impossible. On the flip side, strong compassionate leadership can get individuals and agencies through some of the most difficult of times. True law enforcement leaders never forget the day to day experiences and exposures of line officers. They never forget, "What it was like to be out there." Further, effective law enforcement leaders are compassionate, approachable, and show legitimate concern for their subordinates. These are the types of supervisors and managers that officers stand in line to work for. Confident and progressive leaders realize the potential of structured peer support programs within law enforcement agencies.

Peer support and counseling can most accurately be described as a process whereby officers who feel a need to communicate their feelings about the job, their home life, or a combination of the two, may do so with other officers that are trained to assist. In structured law enforcement peer support programs, peer counselors are formally trained by mental health professionals in topical areas such as counseling skills, crisis theory and intervention, early warning signs of prolonged or acute stress, suicide assessment, alcohol and substance abuse, and matters of confidentiality. In Oregon, Chapter 455 of the Oregon Revised Statutes provides for privileged communications in law enforcement peer counseling situations. The state of Washington has a similar law. Departments with structured peer support programs must provide those officers selected for the assignment with the training and knowledge to be effective in what can best be described as some very trying and emotionally charged situations. Overall, the peer counselors mission is to provide a confidential outlet then decide if further referral to a mental health professional is necessary.

Peer support personnel should never attempt to conduct clinical therapy. Only certified professionals who are trained in treating law enforcement officers can provide therapy and determine the proper course of treatment for an officer in need of professional assistance.

The selection of peer support personnel is critical to the success of the program. Much like other specialty units within an agency (SWAT, Negotiation Teams, Bomb Squads, etc.), the success or failure of the unit depends on the selection of only the best and most qualified for the assignment. Those selected must be trusted and held in high esteem by their co-workers. They must be sensitive to racial diversity and multicultural issues within their agencies. In determining the number of peer support personnel to train, the size of the department is the obvious consideration. An entire article can be written on the selection of peer support personnel. Suffice it to say that only the most respected and trusted volunteers should be considered. Anything less can doom a program to failure.

Summary

I can personally attest to the success of structured peer support programs within law enforcement agencies. Within my own agency, the Thurston High School Shooting and an on duty suicide of a detective put our program to the test. I am proud of the peer support personnel that took part in the aftermath of both incidents. They assisted my agency in getting through some very difficult and trying times.

Peer support and counseling has been the critical intervention point in many situations that have made career saving differences. As we head into the 21st century it seems that critical incident stress management programs as well as structured law enforcement peer support is quickly taking hold in progressive departments across the United States. In the past two years, the New York Police Department has documented ten suicide prevention's as a result of their peer program .

For the law enforcement managers and executives that may be reading this article, the FBI Law enforcement Bulletin had an excellent article in the February / March 1996 edition. The topic was critical incident stress exposure in law enforcement. The article states that the budgetary impact of replacing a five year veteran is roughly, on average, \$100,000. This expense includes the costs of retraining, overtime, benefits, testing for replacements, and the overall knowledge that is lost when an officer leaves the department. In contrast, one study showed that when an officer was experiencing psychological problems (as a result of critical incident exposure) and early intervention and treatment took place, the average cost to the department was \$8,600. When treatment was delayed, the average cost rose to \$46,000. Even the delayed treatment was less than half the cost of losing an officer due to early medical retirement. Peer support can be that early intervention point. Trained peer support officers can recognize the early warning symptoms of those headed for trouble and get them the assistance they need.

In closing out this article, I would hope the above quoted monetary savings would only be a small part of why progressive law enforcement agencies may choose to institute or continue peer support programs. The compelling reason should simply be that it is the right thing to do. As a law enforcement administrator, my duty is to insure the welfare of the fine men and women I am asking to do an extremely difficult, complex, and stressful job. I simply want all the best physical and psychological tools available to them that will get them through their day, and ultimately their careers, safely.

About the author

Dell Hackett is a lieutenant within the Police Services Division of the Lane County Sheriff's Office in Eugene, Oregon. His law enforcement career spans 28 years. He has eight years of SWAT experience. Dell is a graduate of the FBI national Academy, Session 182. He holds senior instructor ratings in both firearms and emergency vehicle operations (EVOG). He has presented at the national and international level on the topics of law enforcement stress and suicide and police leadership issues. Lt. Hackett is a board certified expert in traumatic stress. He can be reached at (541) 682-4458 or e-mail at: DHACK84469@aol.com