

Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Law Enforcement Collaborative on Mental Health

Overview

Persons who work in law enforcement are exposed to trauma daily. Whether that be breaking up a fight, responding to a suicide, redacting a domestic violence video, speaking with a mother whose child stopped breathing, or getting injured on a call, the deputies, custody deputies, dispatchers and support staff that work at the Santa Barbara Sheriff's Office (SBSO) are keeping our community safe with professionalism, integrity, and sacrifice. Over time, exposure to traumatic events (coupled with late nights and mandatory overtime) take a toll on their mental and physical health. Research shows that persons in law enforcement experience a higher-than-average number of physical injuries, mental injuries, divorce, substance abuse and suicide, when compared with the general population. The Behavioral Sciences Unit (BSU) at the Santa Barbara Sheriff's Office, under the direction of Police Psychologist Dr. Cherylynn Lee, has taken on the challenge of bringing a culture of well-being to the agency by creating a Wellness Team that has been tasked with mitigating the effects of the job for our employees.

Challenge:

Wellness is a new concept in the policing profession. Generally speaking, law enforcement has a culture of "suck it up" and positive coping skills for how to deal with trauma are not usually taught or encouraged. There is good news, the tide is changing for the better. A recent example of this is legislation that was just passed in California making Post Traumatic Stress Injury claims presumptive for law enforcement. The law now recognizes and has codified the psychological hazards of the job. That is the good news. The not so good news, we are still losing people to divorce, alcoholism, depression, and suicide. To put it simply, we cannot go back to the way things "used to be" and we have a long way to go.

Innovative Solutions:

Since the inception of the Wellness Team in 2018, the initiatives that have been launched include:

- Healthy Warrior Meal Program

- Tactical Fitness Program

- Peer Support

- Internal Wellness App

Partnerships with agencies that provide culturally competent debriefs and psychological services

Originality:

Perhaps the most unique initiative thus far is our Healthy Warrior Meal Program. We partnered with a local chef who prepares healthy meals, snacks, and drinks, and brings them to the stations 3x/week. The employees can choose to purchase these healthy meals as they go about their workday or can pre-order meals and snacks that can be delivered prior to their arrival for their shift. We know that if our employees are eating nutritious meals, they are happier, more productive, and less likely to be injured and require time off.

Cost Effectiveness:

In 2021, the Behavioral Sciences Unit obtained a \$120,000 *Concerns of Police Survivors* (C.O.P.S) grant, as well as solicited some private donations. These funds have allowed us to pay for the fitness app, debriefs, peer support training and infrastructure for the nutrition program. In addition, all positions including peer support are collateral, thus the costs we are incurring are directly benefiting our employees and not going towards salary or overhead.

Results:

The feedback we have received from members of our organization has been overwhelmingly positive. We have seen an increase in healthy eating and removed some of the vending machines filled with candy and soda. We have had our peer support teams respond to incidents and provide crisis support ranging from delivering groceries to a severely depressed employee to responding to shootings, to helping train others in trauma mitigation. We are still in the beginning stages of our program and look forward to more positive outcomes for our employees.

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