

Addressing Law Enforcement Mental Health

GUIDANCE FOR AGENCY LEADERS

Law enforcement leadership plays a crucial role in creating a culture that supports mental health and well-being for its officers. Mental health and well-being need to be built into standard operating procedures, policies, and practices. It is not enough to have a policy that enables access to mental health treatment when needed. An agency's leadership needs to actively and publicly support mental well-being, enable help-seeking, encourage discussions about mental health, and create an atmosphere of camaraderie. Camaraderie can be created when all ranks support each other in strengthening resilience, acknowledging and addressing the impacts of the job, and prioritizing mental well-being.

This resource is designed to be used along with the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Officer Health & Wellness (OHW) Agency Assessment Tool and Action Planning Roadmap. The OHW Agency Assessment and Action Planning Roadmap tool refers to best practices for agency interventions to improve the mental health and stress level of officers. For more information and detailed implementation steps, please refer to the full [assessment tool](#).



Importance of Addressing Stress and Mental Health

The unique challenges of police work and day-to-day stressors may contribute to officers using unhealthy coping mechanisms and developing mental health challenges. In addition to the nature of the job and the adversity officers face daily, a perceived lack of support from leadership, stigma surrounding mental health within the agency, and lack of knowledge about how to address their own mental health can also contribute to officer stress.¹

Police officers may experience:

 Mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression	 Challenges with sleep	 Substance misuse
 Physical health impacts, such as a higher chance of developing illnesses due to immune system deficiencies	 Increases in risk for physical injury	 Relationship and interpersonal conflicts

Officers' mental health can affect their work performance, including aspects of their job that are critical to public safety such as making quick, effective decisions in stressful situations. Mental health challenges can also lead to a decrease in job satisfaction, confidence, commitment to the job, professionalism, and productivity, as well as an increase in absences, burnout, and early retirement.^{1,2}

Not all police officers will experience mental health issues. However, proactively addressing mental health and overall wellbeing is an essential component to maintaining a safe, healthy, and productive department. Therefore, it is critical that law enforcement leaders take steps to address the mental health of their officers.

WHAT LAW ENFORCEMENT LEADERS CAN DO

Below are some strategies for law enforcement leaders to consider for improving officer wellness and mental health:

Develop Active Leadership

- Obtain buy-in. As seen in step one of the assessment tool, identify stakeholders within the agency and have the strongest supporters and critics come together to discuss the importance of improving wellness and mental health.³
 - During these meetings provide statistics and resources that will support why this is a critical issue in policing. For example, a 2018 study showed 69 percent of officers reported that stressful experiences have caused unresolved or lingering mental health challenges.⁴
- This can lead to involvement from executives, command staff, supervisors, and informal leaders in creating an agency culture that supports mental health and well-being by allocating and embedding resources into policies, protocols, and systems.
- Solicit feedback from enthusiastic supporters of these efforts as well as those more skeptical of agency efforts to improve mental health.
- Show the agency's efforts in supporting mental health and well-being by publicizing these efforts and the feedback to all officers.

Designate an Agency Wellness Leader

- Empower an individual to assess and lead efforts to systematically review and improve the agency's policies, programs, and support for the mental health of its department.
 - To incentivize staff to participate, consider providing staff with a small budget for these extra activities.
 - Many of these activities can be done at little to no cost to the department.
 - Also consider allowing staff to have time on shift to plan for these programs.
- Ensure this individual is knowledgeable and trained to handle the role appropriately and has support from agency leadership.
- Ask for a volunteer for this role who is passionate about the issue to ensure that the work is sustainable.
- Encourage others who are interested in strengthening the agency's wellness initiatives to get involved. Ensure you have representation from diverse ranks, racial/ethnic backgrounds, genders, and other groups to join and make this an inclusive effort.
- Develop guidance to ensure proper data collection and handling and to avoid HIPAA violations.
 - To ensure accurate and confidential data is collected and analyzed, refer to step ten of the Assessment Toolkit for what is acceptable to be collected, along with the sample wellness survey for ideas of what questions to ask.
 - Examples of collected information include "the number of officers who accessed the program, the number of officers referred by a supervisor or colleague, and the number of family members who accessed the program throughout the course of a fiscal year."⁵
- Following step three in the assessment tool (reaching out to other agencies of similar demographics) is another great way to strengthen the development of these programs.

Improve the Organizational Structure

Examine how work/shifts are divided up and managed to improve wellness and increase work performance. Consider the following strategies:

- Monitor work shifts so they can be kept to lengths that support the health of officers.⁶ Consider implementing policies that require a minimum amount of time off to allow for adequate sleep in between shifts or periods of high demand.
- Create a culture that supports taking breaks during shifts. Also, provide education in roll-call trainings to all officers and supervisors about the science behind taking breaks.⁷
- Encourage officers to take time off and use vacation time.

Improve the Organizational Culture

- Encourage officers to take care of themselves and each other, including having command staff lead by example.
- Provide opportunities for support after critical incidents, in collaboration and consultation with trained culturally competent mental health professionals. Show appreciation, empathy, and compassion, and encourage this among all staff.
- Understand that every officer may react differently to different incidents. Something that is not typically considered a “critical incident” can still be incredibly difficult to process. Personal experience, background, and other individual factors can impact this reaction. Ensure officers are provided support, whenever they need it, not solely after a critical incident.
- Build a culture that encourages officers to work together to support each other.
- Conduct an agency climate survey to assess issues that might be negatively affecting the agency. If possible, work with an organizational consultant to address issues identified in the survey or occurring in the agency. Get input from officers and their families in developing policies, procedures, and trainings.
- Consider diversity including, race, gender, age, and length of service and assignments when developing policies, procedures, and trainings.

Provide Training on Mental Health and Wellness⁸

Partner with national, regional, and local mental health organizations, and/or former law enforcement officers to provide training to leadership, supervisors, and officers on:

- Improving stress management and resilience
- Educating about mental health and wellness
- Reducing stigma about mental health challenges, including talking about them in the agency
- Promoting help-seeking as valuable and a sign of strength
- Recognizing signs of mental health concerns within oneself and other officers and how to respond, including referring them to get help

Collect and Organize Mental Health Resources

- Keep all resources available for police mental health and wellness in one centralized and easily accessible place so that leadership and officers can learn more about the issues and how to address them.
- Consider placing mental health resources in a location that also allows for privacy.
- Consider creating an information bulletin or email that each staff member receives that clearly provides information on resources.

Provide Access to Health, Wellness, and Mental Health Programs, Peer Support, and Officer Resiliency Programs⁹

- Provide onsite programs or partner with a local gym, recreation center, and/or stress reduction/mindfulness program.
- Consider partnering with local hospitals or health systems to provide services to officers as needed.
- Offer free, routine, on-duty mental health check-ins and support that provide all personnel the opportunity to talk with a qualified, culturally competent professional.⁹
- Reduce any barriers to using these services by making the location accessible and, when possible, manage scheduling to accommodate various shifts.
- Publicize in-house services and the employee assistance program (EAP), if available.
- Partner with local mental health organizations to provide easy access to services that are culturally appropriate for law enforcement officers and their families. Services outside the agency are important for officers who are concerned about confidentiality.¹
- Establish a clear and specific policy on mental health services that minimizes impact on an officer's job status to the extent possible. Create an environment that shields an officer from a negative impact and encourages help-seeking behaviors.
- Do not automatically mandate fitness for duty exams if an officer seeks mental health services. A specific job-related concern must be present, and the lawful threshold must be met in order to require a fitness for duty exam. If unsure, consult a police psychologist and legal advisor to see if the criteria for a fitness for duty has been satisfied.⁹
- Provide confidentiality and privacy protection to the greatest extent possible to encourage officers to use mental health services and support.
- Develop a peer support program in the agency or in partnership with other local agencies.

Develop an Evaluation Plan to Assess Success on Mental Health and Mental Well-being among Agency Staff²

- Use anonymous surveys to collect data on mental health, work stressors, and any help individuals obtained. This information can assist agencies in providing access to services needed and make organizational changes to reduce stressors.
- Keep data confidential to preserve staff privacy and communicate the privacy protections when disseminating surveys.

Continuing Engagement and Promotion of Services through Innovating and Implementing Findings from Evaluation Plan

- After reviewing the information from the surveys, look at what areas the services can improve upon and what could be changed. Utilizing feedback maintains buy-in from staff and shows their input is valued, which may increase participation.
- If the surveys show a need to increase services or incorporate new ones, investigate what can be done to provide these accommodations.
 - For example, if staff express a desire for more family involvement in services, look into implementing family wellness services, or find a place to start with incorporating families into the program. Refer to step eight of the assessment tool to learn more about reaching out to families to get them involved.

By following these steps, agencies will be on a path to developing programs that will be beneficial to staff, their families, and the agency. To assist in successfully developing these programs, a series of resources have been included below. These resources include information from the IACP, along with resources from the Bureau of Justice Assistance's (BJA) **VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Initiative**. Both provide comprehensive resources on officer safety and wellness. Please use the resources below, as they correspond with the strategies included in this document.

RESOURCES

- International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Officer Health and Wellness - Agency Assessment Tool and Action Planning Roadmap
<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/officer-health-and-wellness-agency-assessment-tool-and-action-planning-roadmap>
- IACP Public Safety Survey for Smaller Law Enforcement Agencies
<https://www.theiacp.org/public-safety-survey-for-smaller-law-enforcement-agencies>
- IACP Officer Safety and Wellness, resources for agencies, command staff, officers, and families on a variety of safety & wellness topics
<https://www.theiacp.org/topics/officer-safety-wellness>
- IACP Family Matters: Executive Guide for Developing Family-Friendly Law Enforcement Policies, Procedures, and Culture
<https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Executive%20Guide.pdf>
- IACP Peer Support as a Powerful Tool in Law Enforcement Suicide Prevention
https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/244736_IACP_NOSI_PeerSupport_p5.pdf
- IACP Police Psychological Services Section – Peer Support Guidelines
<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/peer-support-guidelines>
- IACP National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide
<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/national-consortium-on-preventing-law-enforcement-suicide-toolkit>
- IACP When Stress Builds Up: Strategies to Overcome Cumulative Stress and Burnout Guidance for Agency Leaders
https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/253826_IACP_Stress%20and%20Loss_Leaders_p4.pdf
- IACP Leadership, resources for command staff on a variety of leadership topics includes the Women's Leadership Institute and Leadership in Police Organizations <https://www.theiacp.org/topics/leadership>
- IACP Supporting Officer Safety Through Family Wellness: The Effects of Sleep Deprivation
<https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/Axon%20Family%20Wellness-Sleep%20Deprivation.pdf>
- National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers (SAFLEO): Enhancing Resilience by Embracing Courageous Vulnerability
<https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1448/Enhancing-Resilience-by-Embracing-Courageous-Vulnerability>
- VALOR Kick Stress to the Curb: Strategies for Healthy and Resilient Law Enforcement Families
<https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1423/Kick-Stress-to-the-Curb-Strategies-for-Healthy-and-Resilient-Law-Enforcement-Families>
- VALOR Voices Podcast: Understanding Mindfulness for Law Enforcement
<https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1335/Understanding-Mindfulness-for-Law-Enforcement>

ENDNOTES

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- 4 International Association of Chiefs of Police. "When Stress Builds Up: Strategies to Overcome Cumulative Stress and Burnout Guidance for Agency Leaders," October 2021. https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/253826_IACP_Stress%20and%20Loss_Leaders_p4.pdf.
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- 7 Selig, Meg. "How Do Work Breaks Help Your Brain? 5 Surprising Answers." Psychology Today, April 18, 2017. Accessed 8/31/21. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/changepower/201704/how-do-work-breaks-help-your-brain-5-surprising-answers>
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