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U.S. Department of Justice
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120501-
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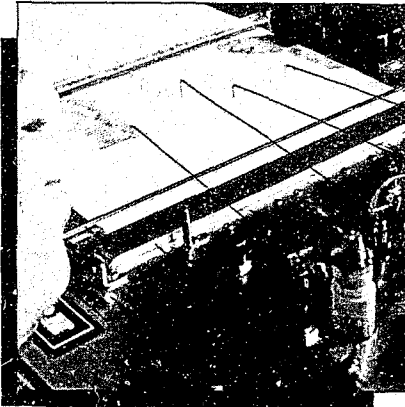
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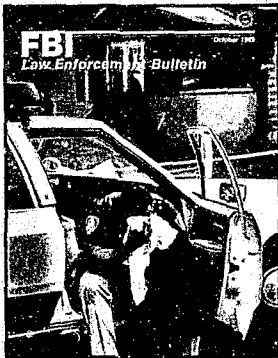


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The Cover: An Orlando, FL, police officer weeps after telling a mother that her child has died in a house fire. Photo courtesy of Bobby Coker/The Orlando Sentinel.

United States Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, DC 20535

William S. Sessions, Director

The Attorney General has determined that the publication of this periodical is necessary in the transaction of the public business required by law of the Department of Justice. Use of funds for printing this periodical has been approved by the Director of the Office of Management and Budget.

Published by the Office of Public Affairs,
Milt Ahlerich, Assistant Director

Editor—Stephen D. Gladis
Managing Editor—Kathryn E. Sulewski
Art Director—John E. Ott
Assistant Editor—Alice S. Cole
Production Manager—Andrew DiRosa

The FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (ISSN-0014-5688) is published monthly by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 10th and Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20535. Second-Class postage paid at Washington, DC. Postmaster: Send address changes to Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, Washington, DC 20535.

Police Peer Counseling Officers Helping Officers



By
SGT. ROBIN KLEIN, Ph.D.
*Police Department
Long Beach, CA*

People have always relied on their fellow employees for understanding and support, especially during stressful situations, but it has not always been in the formal, supervised and constructive fashion that is now being advocated. Today, the purpose of peer counseling in law enforcement is to train police officers to help others deal with stressful situations in a more positive, structured manner. It has been said, and probably rightfully so, that no one better understands the prob-

lems of a police officer than another officer. With this built-in trust that police officers have for each other, peer counseling becomes a "natural."

However, men and women in general, and police officers in particular, are still supposed to be able to handle their own problems, i.e., "real men and women don't have problems." This damaging myth costs police officers up to 14 years of their lives—they die that much earlier than those in other occupations.¹ In fact, it probably

won't be the bullet that will strike down an officer, but the effects of chronic stress.

An Historical Perspective

Police peer counseling began in the 1950s when the Boston Police Department began a stress program which focused mainly on alcohol-related problems. Five years later, the Chicago Police Department also began a peer counseling program as an approach to dealing with alcoholism within the department. Modeled

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OCT 25 1989

after the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program, officers in both police departments were helped by fellow officers who were themselves recovering alcoholics.

New York City established an alcohol program in 1966. This program's premise was that when the department helps officers recover from alcoholism, it gains a highly motivated person, a more compassionate officer, and a grateful family. In this program, both the individual and the organization benefited. However, although individuals with various problems were helped by the program, its primary emphasis was still on alcoholism.

The Los Angeles Police Department, under the direction of Dr. Martin Reiser, established an in-house behavioral science unit. This department was one of the first to develop and implement a fully department-supported peer counseling program using officers and civilians as volunteer counselors.

In 1982, Dr. Jim Linden and the author conducted the first peer

counseling training program for the Long Beach Police Department. Later that year, this program was certified by POST (The Commission on Peace Officer's Standards and Training) and has since been used by over 40 departments throughout California. In 1984, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department followed suit and developed its own peer counseling training program using in-house psychological services.

The California Peer Counseling Program

Today, as in the past, police officers have an obvious need to distance themselves from the negative aspects of their profession before going home. Police officers operate in a unique and often unrealistic environment. They spend their days and nights being problem solvers; they typically see only a skewed view of society; and they are expected to perform their job without any fear or sense of danger. To accomplish this task it is necessary, for the maintenance of their own sanity,

to maintain a sense of detachment, yet not be cold and uncaring. However, they are then expected to be able to go home and be involved in an egalitarian relationship with their spouse and/or family and to be in touch with their feelings and emotions. Often they have trouble making this transition. In the past, many have used what Waumbaugh called "choir practice"² to make this transition. However, this "practice" of using alcohol to drown the day's negative aspects has tragically resulted in the creation of a large number of alcoholics.

The California peer counseling program attempts to address these and other problems of police officers. The California program is co-taught by a clinical psychologist in private practice and a police officer who has a Ph.D. This combination of a psychologist and a police officer allows for theory and practice to be effectively merged in a classroom setting.

The program lasts for 3 days and is divided into three parts—explanation, demonstration, and performance, thus using the basic psychological principles of the three-phase Rogerian model consisting of establishing rapport, active listening, and taking action.³ During the training, psychological principles are presented to the class and later demonstrated in a counseling setting by the instructors. The class is then broken into groups to practice the skills.

The purpose of peer counseling training is to teach a group of peers to recognize problems and to counsel their fellow officers. The peer counselors are also trained to recognize those problems that are



Sergeant Klein

“ ... it probably won't be the bullet that will strike down an officer, but the effects of chronic stress. ”

beyond their abilities, such as hallucinations, delusions, suicidal and homicidal tendencies, or chronic depression. Officers with such problems are referred to an outside professional agency or to a psychologist.

In determining whether the peer counselors have the capability of recognizing these problems and counseling their fellow officers, one must keep in mind that police officers typically deal with mentally ill individuals in their day to day work. In fact, police officers are probably in contact with more people who are mentally ill than the typical psychologist in private practice.

Even so, opposition to police peer counseling occasionally arises, primarily from two sources. First, a police chief may decide against peer counseling in the department for one reason or another. A second opposition is sometimes heard from psychologists who feel threatened that the peer counselor will "take business away from them." However, establishing a peer counseling program usually has the opposite effect; peer counselors usually generate business when they recognize serious problems in officers and refer them to psychologists for treatment.

Benefits of Peer Counseling

Because peer counselors are fellow police officers, they often have more empathy for other officers than an individual who has not had similar experiences. Some police officers find it very difficult to ask for help, especially from an outside professional. And, to make an appointment with a psychologist is a big first step

which forces them to admit that they have a problem they are unable to handle. To talk casually with a peer counselor is a much smaller step, one that many police officers are more willing and able to make, and one that can either resolve the problem or lead to further assistance. The peer counselor

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As well as being trained to recognize those areas that are beyond their ability or training, peer counselors can also be trained to handle a wide range of problems, including stress, post traumatic stress, relationship problems and chemical dependency.

Officers experiencing the adverse effects of stress is one of the areas that the peer counselor deals with frequently. The concept that stress can predispose an individual to physical illness is not new. Now, however, research has finally proven this to be true. People may not have control over the stressful event but they can control their perception and response to it. The peer counselor can assist the officer in developing constructive ways of dealing with stress, recognizing what they can change and what they cannot, and helping them learn not to spend an inordi-

nate amount of time on those areas that they cannot change.

A related area that the peer counselor can provide invaluable assistance to fellow officers is in the area of post-traumatic stress disorder. Peer counselors primarily encounter this disorder in officers who have been involved

in shooting incidents. However, dealing with events such as the death of a child, a fatal traffic accident—especially when an officer is involved—rape, and major disasters, such as an airplane crash, can also trigger post traumatic stress. If counseling is provided to troubled officers in a timely manner, the prognosis for a fast recovery and adequately dealing with the event is very good.

Another area that the peer counselor often deals with is relationship problems. While these problems may not be directly related to law enforcement, they can be exacerbated by the demands law enforcement places on the individual officers and their families. In the majority of these cases the problem lies in not adequately communicating one's feelings, needs or wishes to the other person. This problem can occur quite frequently in law enforcement, because those behaviors that function very well, and for which police officers are often rewarded

Police Practices

on the job, do not make for good behavior in a relationship. For example, on the job, police officers are accustomed to being in charge. For some officers, the daily transition from being in charge on the job to going home to an egalitarian relationship can prove difficult.

One of the most difficult areas that the peer counselor will encounter is the chemically dependent individual. In the case of law enforcement officers, this usually means alcohol. Typically, with chemical dependency, there is so much denial that the person does not or will not seek treatment. However, even when such a condition exists, peer counselors can make a positive difference.

Conclusion

Much can be done by the peer counselor to help an officer who is involved in these and many other situations. The limited research that has been done in this area indicates that if counseling is provided to troubled officers in a timely manner, the prognosis for a fast recovery and adequately dealing with the event is very good. Peer counseling for police officers is one of the very few training programs that is geared specifically toward officers helping themselves. It is a win-win situation; the officers benefit, their families benefit, the department benefits, and the citizens benefit. **FBI**

Footnotes

¹Video-tape entitled, "The Silent Killer: Introduction to Stress Management," by Motorola MTI Teleprograms, Inc.

²Joseph Waumbaugh, *The New Centurions* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1970).

³James I. Linden, *Police Peer Counseling*, unpublished manual, California State University, Long beach, CA.

Criminal Investigation Response Teams

CIRT—Criminal Investigation Response Team—is an innovative development by the California Attorney General's Division of Law Enforcement. The concept of CIRT originated in 1985 when two criminalists from the State's Bureau of Forensic Services were teaching a course on crime scenes. These criminalists realized that investigative personnel view the same crime scene in different ways, according to their training. Combining personnel with different skills into an investigative team, complete with specialized training, would provide more extensive assistance to local law enforcement.

The CIRT team concept employs special agents from the State's Bureau of Investigation and criminologists and latent print analysts from the Bureau of Forensic Services. Those assigned to CIRT teams receive extensive training in a variety of fields,

including forensic odontology, forensic anthropology, forensic pathology, crime scene reconstruction, satanic cults, crime scene management, serial murders, psychological profiling, interrogation, and officer-involved shootings. Special agents culminate their CIRT training with a 2-month assignment to a major metropolitan homicide unit in a California city. To date, 2 latent print analysts, 12 special agents, and 17 criminologists have received CIRT training.

Team members carry out their normal investigative or forensic responsibilities during the day-to-day operations of both Bureaus. However, they are available to provide immediate on-site investigative services—from case consultation to full investigative responsibility—to local law enforcement throughout the State. CIRT is designed to respond to homicide or violent crime scenes of a complex or multijurisdic-

Services Available From CIRT

- Evidence collection, preservation, and analysis
- Crime scene reconstruction
- Video taping
- Crime scene supervision
- Search warrant preparation
- Suspect apprehension
- Expert testimony
- News media coordination