

PREVENTING SUICIDE AMONG
AMERICA'S LAW ENFORCEMENT:

SERVING OUR PROTECTORS



Suicide among law enforcement officers demands urgent action: any officer death is unacceptable, a death by suicide all the more so because suicide can be prevented. The **Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)** is bringing together the resources and experts necessary to equip law enforcement agencies with the tools they need to end the culture of silence around mental health problems, which can lead to suicide.

A Test for Our Communities

Suicide is perhaps the greatest human capital challenge facing American law enforcement today, but to date it has not been met squarely at a national level, or even reported broadly. In 2018, at least 158 officers died by suicide, *nine percent more than the total number of deaths by line-of-duty causes.*

The Facts

Responses to a recent nationwide survey of nearly 3,900 police officers conducted by Humanizing the Badge:

- ✓ Are you personally aware of a department/agency that has lost an officer due to suicide?
More than 78 percent said yes.
- ✓ Have you ever personally known an officer or former officer that has died by suicide?
More than 43 percent said yes.
- ✓ Would you ever consider suicide an option if [choose from list of nine reasons]?
Approximately 41 percent said yes to at least one reason.

Lost in the silence is a simple fact: **most suicidal people don't want to die—they want help.** Suicide is more often than not a desperate attempt to ease suffering that has become unbearable.

The Stigma of Seeking Help

Law enforcement is stressful work, precisely because the nature of the job is to meet head-on challenges—many of them physically and emotionally demanding—that members of the community cannot address themselves. That stress exacts a heavy toll on many officers, making it difficult for them to maintain resiliency.

Historically, resiliency has taken the form of toughness, both mental and physical, which is required when public safety is at stake and officers daily face dangerous and disturbing scenarios. But the flip side of that toughness is an intolerance for weakness. And that intolerance produces a **stigma if officers seek professional help.** This stigma is dangerous, because it leads too many officers to believe they have no options for getting help.

*“There has been a stigma attached to mental health and police officers: **they're expected to have all of the answers but none of the problems.** And so they've tended to keep all their problems inside.”*

—Sergeant Rich Creamer,
Critical Incident Stress Management Officer,
Norfolk, Virginia, Police Department

Changing Culture

Removing the stigma surrounding mental health issues requires a culture change in law enforcement that begins with raising care for officers' mental and emotional health to a level on par with their safety and physical health.

Law enforcement agencies must believe in and promote wellness and safety at every level of the organization. Employees need to have the tools, training, and resources necessary to deal with the stress that comes with the profession. A healthy workforce is one that is better suited to serving the public.

In truth, many people have a role to play in preventing suicide among law enforcement officers. The attitudes and behaviors of chiefs, supervisors, peers, health care providers, family, friends, faith leaders, and others can all influence officers' health.

We must support those who are struggling, who may be unaware of how to seek help for themselves. The approach *must* be this: *If you are struggling with stress, hopelessness, or thoughts of suicide, it's okay to seek help; that takes courage and is not a weakness.* Many people with similar struggles have been able to find hope, be resilient, and demonstrate that recovery is possible. *There is hope. There is always another way.*

BJA: Marshaling Resources

BJA has as a priority to support and protect our protectors — our nation's law enforcement. BJA has begun the process of culture change in law enforcement by assembling cutting-edge resources, training, and leading experts to equip agencies around the country with the tools they need to increase officer mental wellness and thereby, hopefully, prevent officer suicide.

In FY 2018, BJA provided \$3 million in funding for two programs expected to help institutionalize increased officer mental wellness and suicide prevention efforts. These two critical programs are working hand-in-hand to ensure that BJA is providing a comprehensive national approach to smashing the stigma and saving lives.

National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide

Funded by BJA's National Officer Safety Initiative (NOSI), the **International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)**, with support from BJA, will convene the **National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide** to develop a report on the current state of the field in law enforcement suicide and to provide recommendations on policy and procedure updates, effective messaging strategies, and best practice programs and strategies. It will also include recommendations on how to *engage families* in suicide awareness and prevention at all phases of an officer's career, including retirement. The consortium will also develop the first national standardized reporting database to accurately capture law enforcement suicide data, as well as provide links to credible, confidential treatment. The IACP is working in partnership with BJA and its National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program to help guide and inform that program's work.

National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program (SAFLEO)

Funded under BJA's Preventing Violence Against Law Enforcement and Ensuring Officer Resilience and Survivability (VALOR) Initiative, the **Institute for Intergovernmental Research (IIR)**, with support from BJA, will develop the **SAFLEO Program** to deliver national training and technical assistance focused on increasing awareness and recognition of law enforcement suicide and strengthening mental wellness, with the aim of preventing officer suicide. The program will also develop a post-suicide assistance response toolkit to assist requesting agencies with debrief sessions; customized reviews of, and recommendations for, modifications of agency policies,

procedures, and/or trainings; and assistance with addressing agency and officer aftershock following a law enforcement suicide. IIR is closely partnering with BJA and the Consortium to address findings and recommendations identified through the consortium within resources being developed by SAFLEO.

Resources:

- VALOR: <https://www.bja.gov/programs/valor.html>
- National Officer Safety Initiative: <https://www.bja.gov/national-officer-safety-initiatives/index.html>

Getting Officers the Help They Deserve

While families, friends, faith communities, and health care providers all have a role to play in addressing officer suicide, at the end of the day it is a daunting problem that requires urgent action by *all* stakeholders. Each must consider itself the first line of defense. Law enforcement officers are not untouchable islands. The many influential people in their lives and the many stressors in their duties all play a part in determining an officer's mental wellness — and in their acceptance of the belief that asking for help is okay and courageous.

Accordingly, law enforcement agencies have a duty to proactively encourage and enforce a culture of support that prides itself in accepting and seeking assistance for positive mental wellness. Agencies must provide officers experiencing hardship with access to wellness resources, including counseling services.

Smash Stigmas, Save Lives

Suicide is preventable. Hopelessness is reversible. Support and options are available. This national movement requires the proactive and interactive effort of law enforcement and community. Together we can make a change, support our protectors, and save lives. We all have the responsibility to smash the stigmas surrounding law enforcement asking for help. This is the service we owe them.

Through the consortium and SAFLEO, BJA is dedicated to helping officers lead healthier, well-balanced, and mentally strong and resilient lives and careers and ending the tragic loss of officers' lives.

“Stigma, pride, embarrassment, sense of weakness, and the perception that his/her career will be taken away or stymied — these are just a few reasons first responders do not reach out for help. As a first responder that has struggled with depression and suicide ideations, I can attest to these deterrents.

However, police suicide prevention is possible through education and organizational buy-in. I know, because without it, I would not be here.”

*— Sergeant Chris Scallon (Retired),
Norfolk, Virginia, Police Department*

Sources:

The Signs Within, International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2018.
National Organization Addresses Police Suicide, *Law Enforcement Today*, July 1, 2017.