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Police Primary and Secondary Danger

The primary danger of policing is comprised of the inherent risks of the job, such as working in motor vehicle traffic, confronting violent persons, and exposure to traumatic incidents. Sadly, there is an insidious and lesser known *secondary danger* in policing. This danger is often unspecified and seldom discussed. It is an artifact of the police culture and is frequently reinforced by police officers themselves. It is the idea that equates “asking for help” with “personal and professional weakness”, and in one sense is the number one killer of police officers.

The “Make it Safe” Police Officer Initiative

Make it safe for officers to ask for psychological support

The Make it Safe Initiative is a concerted effort to reduce the secondary danger of policing.

The Make it Safe Initiative seeks to:

- (1) make it personally and professionally acceptable for officers to engage peer and professional psychological support services without fear of agency or peer reprisal or ridicule.
- (2) reduce officer fears about asking for psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming job or other life difficulties.
- (3) change organizational climates that discourage officers from seeking psychological help by reducing explicit and implicit organizational messages that imply asking for help is indicative of personal and professional weakness.
- (4) alter the profession-wide law enforcement culture that generally views asking for psychological help as a personal or professional weakness.
- (5) improve the career-long psychological wellness of officers by encouraging police agencies to adopt long-term and comprehensive officer-support strategies such as the Comprehensive Model for Police Advanced Strategic Support.

How serious is police secondary danger? So serious that some officers will choose suicide over asking for help.

The twelve primary elements of the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative

The Make it Safe Initiative encourages:

- (1) every officer to "self-monitor" and to take personal responsibility for his or her mental wellness.
- (2) every officer to seek psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming difficulties (officers do not have to "go it alone").
- (3) every officer to diminish the sometimes deadly effects of secondary danger by reaching out to other officers known to be facing difficult circumstances.
- (4) veteran and ranking officers to use their status to help reduce secondary danger (veteran and ranking officers can reduce secondary danger by openly discussing it, appropriately sharing selected personal experiences, avoiding the use of pejorative terms to describe officers seeking or engaging psychological support, and talking about the acceptability of seeking psychological support when confronting stressful circumstances).
- (5) law enforcement administrators to better educate themselves about the nature of secondary danger and to take the lead in secondary danger reduction.
- (6) law enforcement administrators to issue a departmental memo encouraging officers to engage psychological support services when confronting potentially overwhelming stress (the memo should include information about confidentiality and available support resources).
- (7) basic training in stress management, stress inoculation, critical incidents, posttraumatic stress, police family dynamics, substance use and addiction, and the warning signs of depression and suicide.
- (8) the development of programs that engage pre-emptive, early-warning, and periodic department-wide officer support interventions (for example, proactive annual check in, "early warning" policies designed to support officers displaying signs of stress, and regularly scheduled stress inoculation and critical incident stressor management training).
- (9) agencies to initiate incident-specific protocols to support officers and their families when officers are involved in critical incidents.
- (10) agencies to create appropriately structured, properly trained, and clinically supervised peer support teams.
- (11) agencies to provide easy and confidential access to counseling and specialized police psychological support services.
- (12) officers at all levels of the organization to enhance the agency climate so that others are encouraged to ask for help when experiencing psychological or emotional difficulties instead of keeping and acting out a deadly secret.

If law enforcement officers wish to do the best for themselves and other officers, it's time to make a change. It's time to make a difference.



Implementing the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative

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Initiative Implementation Action Plan Checklist:

- ✓ Read and comprehend
- ✓ Bring to the attention of administrators
- ✓ Become an advocate
- ✓ Implement the elements
- ✓ Move methodically
- ✓ Contact if you get stuck

Implementing the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative is not difficult. In fact, many police agencies have already implemented or are planning on implementing several elements of the Initiative.

The Initiative is not an “all or nothing” proposition. Various elements of the Initiative can be implemented independently of one another. Although it is best to move forward with the entire Initiative, a partial implementation is better than no implementation.

There is no “one right way” to implement the Initiative. It is ok to be creative. Make the *Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative* work for you.

Changing the police culture will not be easy. It helps to keep in mind that many departments have already made significant strides in officer-support efforts. Some departments and officers will welcome the Initiative and will work for its implementation. Others will not. If you feel that the Initiative has merit, take care of yourself, and do what you can for others and your department. Do not get discouraged and do not give up.

The elements of the Initiative are easily implemented by initiating processes, strategies, and programs already well known to law enforcement agencies.

Considerations and recommendations for implementing the elements of the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative:

The Initiative encourages: (1) every officer to “self-monitor” and to take personal responsibility for his or her mental wellness.

Implementation: Many officers are pretty good at picking up signs of distress in others. But as an officer, have you ever thought of applying this skill to yourself? Accomplishing this simply requires you to make an honest and *ongoing* self-assessment. Although denial can be or become an issue, many officers know when they are in trouble. However, knowing you are having difficulty is not enough. You must also know what to do about it. One of the things that you can do about it is to seek appropriate assistance.

The Initiative encourages: (2) every officer to seek psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming difficulties (officers do not have to “go it alone”).

Implementation: Why limit yourself to personal stress management ideas and strategies when dealing with stressors that begin to tax your coping abilities? You can supplement your solo stress management efforts by engaging outside support. Outside support comes in many varieties, ranging from talking with a trusted friend to professional counseling. The next time you feel stressed, take a chance and talk to someone you trust. You may be pleasantly surprised at the outcome.

The Initiative encourages: (3) every officer to diminish the sometimes deadly effects of secondary danger by reaching out to other officers known to be facing difficult circumstances.

Implementation: Even if an officer is not exhibiting outward signs of distress, if you know that he or she is dealing with circumstances that would be difficult for nearly everyone, try reaching out. Too often, officers will shy away from other officers in distress for a variety of reasons, including not knowing what to say or do. But think about this - in years of policing and psychological practice I have had officers time after time talk about how an unanticipated kind word from another officer made a positive difference. It does not take much, and it's not like you need to form a life-long relationship. Sometimes just a few supportive words can make a remarkable difference.

The Initiative encourages: (4) veteran and ranking officers to use their status to help reduce secondary danger (veteran and ranking officers can reduce secondary danger by openly discussing it, appropriately sharing selected personal experiences, avoiding the use of pejorative terms to describe officers seeking or engaging psychological support, and talking about the acceptability of seeking psychological support when confronting stressful circumstances).

Implementation: Veteran and ranking officers are in a unique position to influence the police culture generally and organizational climate specifically. They can do this for better or for worse. If you are a veteran or ranking officer, make a positive difference. As mentioned, you can help to reduce secondary danger by openly discussing it, appropriately sharing selected personal experiences, avoiding the use of pejorative terms to describe officers seeking or engaging psychological support, and talking about the acceptability of seeking psychological support when confronting stressful circumstances.

The Initiative encourages: (5) law enforcement administrators to better educate themselves about the nature of secondary danger and to take the lead in secondary danger reduction.

Implementation: The conceptual distinction between police primary and secondary danger is relatively new. Police administrators should think through the notions of police primary and secondary danger, and consider ways to reduce secondary danger within their agencies.

The Initiative encourages: (6) law enforcement administrators to issue a departmental memo encouraging officers to engage psychological support services when confronting potentially overwhelming stress (the memo should include information about confidentiality and available support resources).

Implementation: This is easily accomplished by administrators that support the Initiative. All it takes is an understanding of what support services are available, learning about the limits of confidentiality, and a commitment to write and distribute this information in a departmental memo. If you are a police administrator, whether or not you support the entire Initiative, implementing this element would clarify your position, help to define your philosophy, contribute to a supportive organizational climate, and help to reduce secondary danger. This step alone has the potential to help officers in distress.

The Initiative encourages: (7) basic training in stress management, stress inoculation, critical incidents, posttraumatic stress, police family dynamics, substance use and addiction, and the warning signs of suicide.

Implementation: In nearly every jurisdiction, there are qualified persons that are willing to train officers in the specified areas. Resources for this training include local or regional mental health facilities, community psychologists and counselors, area community colleges, local universities, academy cadre, and specially trained officers already within the department. Training in these areas should begin in recruit academy and continue throughout an officer's career.

The Initiative encourages: (8) the development of programs that engage pre-emptive, early-warning, and periodic department-wide officer support interventions (for example, proactive annual check in, “early warning” policies designed to support officers displaying signs of stress, and regularly scheduled stress inoculation and critical incident stressor management training).

Implementation: Initiating pre-emptive, early-warning, and periodic support programs is nothing new for law enforcement agencies. Many departments offer stress management refresher training periodically and have early warning officer-assist policies and programs already in place. These programs are designed to help officers cope with everyday stress and potentially overwhelming stress before it becomes an issue.

The Initiative encourages: (9) agencies to initiate incident-specific protocols to support officers and their families when officers are involved in critical incidents.

Implementation: It takes some work, but it is possible for an agency to develop a standardized protocol for dealing with a critical incident. Such protocols not only help to standardize incident investigation, but can also be designed to reduce second injury, secondary trauma, and secondary danger. Incident protocols can be developed by individual law enforcement agencies or encompass multiple jurisdictions. To implement this element of the Initiative, it takes someone to introduce the concept, secure administrative support, develop the protocol and have it approved, then put it into effect.

The Initiative encourages: (10) agencies to create appropriately structured, properly trained, and clinically supervised peer support teams.

Implementation: The efficacy of police peer support teams is well understood by police psychologists. To be most effective, police peer support teams must be formally established in policy and function under departmental written guidelines. Peer support team members should be trained by qualified personnel and receive ongoing training and clinical supervision. Clinical supervision provides a “ladder of escalation” and “support for the supporters” (see Chapter 5, “Police Peer Support Teams” in *Reflections of a Police Psychologist* for more information). Several states have enacted legislation which provides members of police (and some other) peer support teams with a degree of statutory confidentiality.

The Initiative encourages: (11) agencies to provide easy and confidential access to counseling and specialized police psychological support services.

Implementation: Most departments provide insurance coverage for private psychologists and counselors, and many have developed Employee Assistance Programs. Some agencies also provide in-house psychological services. Regardless of the services provided, they must be easily accessible and remain confidential within the limits prescribed by law if officers are to view them as viable resources.

The Initiative encourages: (12) officers at all levels of the organization to enhance the agency climate so that others are encouraged to ask for help when experiencing psychological or emotional difficulties instead of keeping and acting out a deadly secret.

Implementation: Police officers must remain aware that even seemingly innocuous verbal exchanges and unintentional nonverbal gestures can contribute to police secondary danger. To avoid this, officers must act conscientiously, proactively, and consistently to reduce police secondary danger.

Questions about the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative or Initiative implementation?

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