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Law enforcement breaking through silence to address officer mental trauma, stress

By Joe Green, staff writer Dec 2, 2016



Tracie Van Auken / For the Burlington County Times

Evesham police Sgt. Jason Siitonen patrols the streets of the township Thursday, Oct. 20, 2016.

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Few people understand the stress and mental trauma that police officers and other emergency responders suffer as they protect and serve.

Fatal crashes, suicides, homicides, vicious assaults, police-involved shootings and an array of other incidents take a heavy toll that has traditionally been ignored. All too often, experts say, the failure to address the trauma — and the silence of those suffering — leads to depression, substance abuse, marital problems and even suicide.

But police departments throughout Burlington County and elsewhere have adopted programs to let officers know they no longer have to bury their pain. Among them is Evesham, which has created an initiative to help officers cope.

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The program is mandatory for the department's 77 officers, including Chief Christopher Chew, and consists of discussions with Dr. Jennifer Kelly, a Haddonfield clinical psychologist who specializes in issues faced by law enforcement officers.

Chew said the program takes a gentle approach to officers' issues.

"We're trying to create a culture in which it's OK to be normal," he said. "We're people just like everyone else. We're expected to be superheroes, but at the end of the day, we're just people.

"We want the officers to process (trauma), to cope with it."



Evesham Police Chief Christopher Chew sits in his office Thursday, Oct. 20, 2016. The Evesham Police Department received recognition during its state accreditation process for its proactive attitude toward officers' mental health.

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Officers have an eightfold risk of killing themselves over being killed by a perpetrator, according to Copline Inc., the first national law enforcement officers hotline in the country manned by retired officers.

Officers can be exposed to more trauma in a day than civilians are in a lifetime, according to the national nonprofit, based in Freehold, Monmouth County, which said as many as 38 to 58 percent of all active officers have post-traumatic stress disorder and few are treated.

That's why it's critical that officers have access to support services, local officials said.

Under Evesham's program, each officer attends an initial session with Kelly that includes a family member or friend. Kelly explains to the relative or friend the stressors the officer faces from day to day.

"She'll talk about what (officers) are being called, how they're being assaulted, the late-night eating (during night shifts), missing their kids' soccer games," Chew said.



Evesham Police Sgt. Jason Siitonen checks his car before going on patrol on Thursday, Oct. 20, 2016. The Evesham Township Police Department received recognition during its state accreditation process for its proactive attitude toward officers' mental health.

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In the second portion, the officer attends a mandatory annual session with Kelly.

"They'll see her in a confidential setting, where they'll have the opportunity to talk about their stress and the things that are affecting their lives," the chief said.

Officers are provided with resources for further help if they need it, he said.

The township's insurance covers the program with no increase in its budget or local taxes, Chew said.

Identifying signs

At the Willingboro Police Department, Richard Coupe III is an emotional assistance officer who helps colleagues deal with what they encounter on the streets.

"I'm an officer, and I see them go through the things I went through," said Coupe, who volunteers in the role and is available to officers around the clock.

He has been trained in identifying signs of mental illness, addiction and other problems, as well as suicide prevention and officer stress.

When he sees signs that an officer needs help, Coupe intervenes and refers the officer to services.



Evesham Sgt. Jason Siitonen stops to speak with the driver of a disabled vehicle while on patrol Thursday, Oct. 20, 2016. The Evesham Police Department received recognition during its state accreditation process for its proactive attitude toward officers' mental health.

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Willingboro officers can access a variety of programs, including those offered by the Lester A. Drenk Behavioral Health Center and Delaware House Mental Health Services, both in Westampton.

The department allows officers two sick days per year specifically to handle stress. If a third day is needed, the municipality offers referrals to a service such as Drenk and pays for the first five visits.

Coupe emphasized the importance of tailoring help to each officer's particular needs. For instance, while the police often say that current or former officers know firsthand what job-related trauma can be like, not all officers want to talk about their problems with colleagues.

"You have to open up every possible avenue," Coupe said.

He said it's important that the officer is able to air his or her feelings, although those feelings don't always come right away.

"For the first 24 hours, you may not feel anything," he said.

But the trauma may kick in the next day and lead to a variety of problems. Eventually, those problems can compound and conceal the traumatic event as the root cause, Coupe explained, and it can take time and help for the officer to find it.

Police officers and first responders in New Jersey can also get assistance from the Mercury Critical Incident Response Team, an Evesham nonprofit that deploys volunteers to help them deal with traumatic incidents.

The team members hail from the ranks of police officers, firefighters, other emergency responders, chaplains, nurses and mental health professionals. They serve their colleagues in police, fire, EMS and corrections departments, as well as emergency communications staff, hospitals and schools.

Team members provide one-on-one, small-group and large-group sessions, and can refer officers to providers that can offer further care. Services are confidential and privileged.



Evesham police Chief Christopher Chew in his office Thursday, Oct. 20, 2016. His Police Department received recognition during its state accreditation process for its proactive attitude toward officers' mental health.

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Burlington is among eight New Jersey counties that Mercury serves, although the group can offer help in any other county if needed as part of mutual aid agreements. The group is part of the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation.

'Opportunity to vent'

Florence Capt. Brian Boldizar said his force is among those served by Mercury teams. Participation is optional, he said, and sessions are typically held at the fire station.

"Officers see things that most people don't have to see," Boldizar said. "It's good to have this program available to them.

"It gives them an opportunity to vent to someone they don't know. It's a police officer talking to another police officer."

Police departments, including Florence, also typically hold debriefing sessions — discussions about what the officers experienced at a potentially traumatic scene shortly after their response.

"The biggest help, psychologically, is when the officers come back from a scene and have a debriefing," Boldizar said. "They can talk about it and get it off their chests before the end of the day."

Supervisors in his department can quickly pick up on signs that an officer may need help in dealing with trauma, he said.

"Our squad supervisors are in contact with these guys every day," he said. "Any change in (behavior), they'll pick up right away."

Officers who need to take time off and take advantage of mental health services will do so, Boldizar said, and return to work when the department's psychologist clears them.

Boldizar also noted a hotline, Cop 2 Cop, through which officers can talk literally any time about what is bothering them.

The free service is staffed 24/7 by retired officers who are licensed clinical social workers known as cop clinicians, as well as mental health professionals and volunteer retired officers trained as peer supporters.

Willingboro Lt. Craig Vetter said it also benefits public safety to address a first responder's issues.

"We've had many traumatic incidents," Vetter said. "It's going to happen. It's the nature of the business.

"And it's tough, because we have to be the pillar of strength, the ones who remain in control. But at some point, you have to let your emotions out," he continued.

"If you want someone to be in control at those times, they have to vent."

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Protecting law enforcement

The Badge of Life, a nonprofit aiming to reduce the effects of trauma on active and retired police officers, has been compiling statistics on police suicides since 2008.

So far, the group has gathered data on active duty police suicides in the United States reported during 2008, 2009, 2012 and the second half of 2015. A 2016 study is pending.

The studies revealed that in 2008, 141 officers committed suicide. The rate of suicide among police officers was 17 for every 100,000 officers, compared to 11 of every 100,000 people in the general public.

The following year, 143 officers took their own lives, while the suicide rate among officers and the general public remained the same.

In 2012, 126 police suicides were reported. The police versus general public suicide rates were 14 and 13, respectively, of every 100,000.

The average time on the job for an officer who committed suicide in 2012 was 16 years. Additionally, 15 to 18 percent of officers dying by suicide suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Eleven percent were military veterans.

A sampling for July through December of 2015 tallied 51 police suicides, which was on pace for another decline.

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