



Best Practices in Working with Law Enforcement

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Employee Assistance Professionals have an unusual opportunity to provide workplace expertise during these unprecedented and stressful times. Law enforcement in particular is one population that is under unusual pressure these days. Law enforcement has always been a challenging and stressful occupation, but there has been an increase in their need for emotional support within the last year.

An officer's stress level impacts not only themselves and their ability to perform on the job, but also their family members and community. In one state where an EAP agency provides services to approximately 56 of the 102 police departments, a significant increase in the demand for EAP services was noted. A majority of these police departments experienced either double or sometimes even quadruple the number of requests for EAP services within the last two years.

With this increase in demand for behavioral health services, opportunities arise for EAPs. However, for opportunities and partnerships to be successful, EA professionals need to better understand the subculture of law enforcement in the United States.

Background

Two major cultural barriers that deter police from using EAP services in today's world are the fear of appearing weak to others and distrust of confidentiality promises (Powell et al., 2014). Police are trained and socialized into being in control and maintaining a masculine identity. Historically, the law enforcement culture discourages help-seeking behavior because it is considered a sign of weakness.

Distrust towards confidentiality protections in EAPs have been documented, and high levels of distrust are associated with the fear of negative consequences if police leadership learns that an EAP service was used (Patterson, 2009). Police have reported the fear of confidentiality breaches resulting in being "de-gunned", placed on desk duty, deemed "unfit for

duty," skipped over during promotional opportunities, and not being considered for special assignments (Barber, 2020).

Key Knowledge

Before an EA professional engages with law enforcement it is imperative that they understand the basics of police culture. By far the majority of police officers are committed and dedicated professionals who truly want to protect and serve their communities. However, as a society we expect much from this profession and yet do not always provide them with sufficient tools and training.

We expect them to be not just law enforcement professionals, but social workers, conflict mediators, substance abuse professionals, marriage counselors, and even educators. Many police calls relate to social and mental health needs, (i.e., substance abuse, domestic violence or homelessness).

One of the most important things an EA professional can do is discover ways to convey to the officers who you are as a person and that they can trust you. Here are some basic suggestions to increase their level of comfort:

- If possible, spend time one-on-one with officers.
- Introduce yourself to command and union leadership.
- Go on a ride-a-long if offered.
- Attend a Citizen Academy if it is offered. Some police departments invite community members to attend informational sessions to establish bridges and build trust.
- Meet with existing peer support teams.
- Meet with the chaplain, if there is one.
- Be aware of young officers who have experienced their first trauma (such as a child abduction).
- Drop off food or deserts around holiday times or special occasions – or for no reason other than to thank them for their service.

Becoming more involved in their daily working world will enable the EA professional to learn and understand important aspects of their culture like their strong bonds of brotherhood. Also, humor is one of their favorite and most effective ways to de-stress, blow off steam, and gain some distance from whatever misery they've encountered. This is known as gallows humor; strong, crass, with more than a touch of mockery. (Kirschman et al, 2014).

Police officers are a diverse group of professionals, who differ in aptitude, physical ability, training, religion, political persuasion, and outlook. One needs to be careful not to make general assumptions or biased stereotypes upon initial meetings.

An EA practitioner may be surprised to learn that once officers do commit to counseling, *they work hard to "figure it out"*. EA professionals quickly realize that the toughest part is encouraging them to reach out for help. Sometimes even after making that initial call, they may hesitate and not follow up with an appointment. EA professionals need to be creative in these situations.

In the process of understanding police culture, it will quickly become evident how the "job" impacts an officer's family. *Thus, it is always important to extend services to family members.* That's because the skill set that enables an officer to do their job well frequently does not translate to a healthy home environment, which can lead to divorce, domestic violence, substance abuse, and even suicide in frighteningly large numbers. (Donnelly, 2015)

Working with police officers can be very challenging and difficult yet it can also be one of the most rewarding experiences an EA professional will ever experience. Helping officers regain their psychological health increases their quality of life, family relationships, and equips them to better protect the communities they serve.

Case Example

Late afternoon on Dec. 14, 2012 company X EAP was contacted by AFSCME Law Enforcement Division in Washington, DC as well as the union of the Newtown Police Department. The request was for assistance after the tragic mass murders at Sandy Hook Elementary School. On December 21 the company X team, at the request of the Newtown Police Chief, along with the municipal EAP provided by a private for-profit firm to Newtown, met with the members of the Newtown Police Department for a full department meeting.

At this time company X was surprised to learn that although the municipal EAP was on-site on the 14th and again on subsequent days, many officers did not have any formal debriefing.

(*As a result, company X EAP was brought in due to dissatisfaction with the EAP that responded on Dec. 14 and because they were highly recommended by local police chiefs and the AFSCME union.)

Once this information was relayed, company X recommended to the Newtown Police Chief that they set up mandatory wellness checks for the entire department. In mid-January 2013, approximately four weeks after the tragic event, the Newtown police chief contacted company X to arrange for on-site wellness visits for all Newtown police staff.

The purpose of the wellness checks was to see how the officers who responded to the mass murder to see how they were functioning. Wellness checks typically last 15-30 minutes and consist of the following questions:

- How are you doing now?
- How is your family doing right now?
- Are there any issues or problems with sleep, appetite or cognitive functions?
- Are you experiencing Acute Stress, PTSD or increased use of alcohol?
- If yes, is treatment being sought?
- If the individual is in treatment, is he seeing a counselor familiar with police culture?

Comments from an EAP clinician: On the first day of the checks, I walked in and met one of the command staff who said: "I need to talk with you." I informed him where I was meeting with staff and asked him to join me. All my previous wellness checks that morning had averaged about 10-20 minutes with each officer. Then the commander who greeted me that morning walked in.

The commander began his "wellness check" by describing what he experienced when he first walked into the Sandy Hook Elementary School. He mentioned the gunpowder the officers smelled when they opened the door. He then proceeded to "walk" me through what he experienced that day. Next, he proceeded to share with me what was behind the closed door of a room he entered - 20 bodies of slain young children

piled on top of each other. The commander vividly described what he saw next, which I am leaving out due to the horrific carnage he witnessed. I sat in disbelief and horror but maintained a modicum of professionalism and simply encouraged this commander to talk about what he had experienced that tragic day.

About an hour into the “check” I learned, not surprisingly, that the commander was having trouble sleeping; could not get certain images out of his head and had many other symptoms of PTSD. He was not in therapy nor talking with any of his colleagues about this experience. Thus, this was the first time he was able to verbalize some of his experiences and feelings from this traumatic event.

I confirmed that he had PTSD from this experience and encouraged him to schedule an appointment with one of my EAP colleagues, who was a trauma-informed therapist. He began therapy with my colleague later that week. *To this day this commander remains a staunch advocate of EAP services.*

Discussion

There are several important takeaways to highlight from this case example:

➤ **Letting the police get to “know you”** exemplifies why having a respected source to provide a refer-

ence opens the door for the EAP; as well as increasing the level of comfort for the police officers who may need debriefing following a critical incident.

Company X was recommended to the Newtown Chief of Police by a number of surrounding police chiefs as well as the departments’ union. This *initial buy in* was instrumental in setting the stage for trust. If credibility was not established at this point, subsequent EAP efforts would probably have failed.

There are many ways to ensure that a particular police department feels comfortable with EAP service providers. Some suggestions were offered earlier in the [Key Knowledge section](#) of this article.

It is also important to keep in mind that each police department is different and has its own particular and unique culture. By spending time with officers one can begin to better understand their normal routine and thus be ready when an emergency arises, and they need support.

➤ **Whenever there is a mass shooting or other mass casualty, everyone involved should be debriefed.** The EAP’s mere presence on site stating “*We are here to talk if you want*” is not sufficient. The debriefings should be announced and scheduled so that officers understand these sessions are available. They should include support staff, dispatchers and other department personnel. The interviews should be conducted with staff who are trauma informed, and understand psychological first aid, as well as the culture of first responders.

The *third* point to consider revolves around the scope and kind of services offered. If possible, one should never just “show up” at the police department. As mentioned, appointments should be scheduled, and timing is important. When possible every officer and employee in that department should meet with the EAP soon after major events. Although an EAP was present the day of the incident at Sandy Hook, five weeks later more support was needed. This illustrates the importance of ongoing follow up.

In addition to police personnel, *attention needs to be offered to family members.* A week or two after a significant event, family support meetings should be scheduled. This is especially true after horrific events like Sandy Hook, the Las Vegas shooting, etc. Company X reached out to family members of the police department and those who attended seemed to benefit greatly from this service.

Mental Health Concerns of Police Officers

- 701,000 sworn officers sworn in, in the U.S. (Department of Justice [DOJ], 2019)
- 56,034 police officers reported being assaulted on duty (DOJ, 2020)
- 89 police officers were killed in line of duty in 2019 (DOJ, 2020)
- 2019 had the highest annual police suicide rate ever recorded (228 suicides), an increase of 32.5% from prior year (Blue H.E.L.P, 2020)
- Estimated PTSD rate: 15%
- Alcohol abuse rate: 25% (Meyr, 2020)
- 1 out of 15 officers suffer from depression (Meyr, 2020)
- Domestic violence rate: 24% (Cheema, 2016) ❖

➤ **When responding to police, the vital concept of hesitancy needs to be considered.** The discomfort and vulnerability of reaching out and having to ask for help is a barrier that deters police from using EA services. “Wellness checks” ensure that everyone can receive appropriate services without the concern of being labeled unfit for duty. There are times when mandatory services are appropriate such as after a major event, otherwise it really needs to be left to the officer themselves whether they want some form of mental health intervention. The decision of whether to make these services mandatory is up to the police chief, although there are times when the EAP may offer a suggestion depending on the circumstances.

These takeaways focus on concerns around a response to a mass casualty event. In addition, police officers may need other forms of assistance for depression or suicidal ideation. In addition, harmful behavior such as substance abuse or domestic violence will require counseling as well as organizational intervention. The key issues are establishing a level of trust for police officers to seek help, and that EA professionals have a solid knowledge of law enforcement culture.

Summary

This article is designed to encourage EA professionals to understand the “secrets” of successfully working with law enforcement. Although there has been a long history of police being hesitant to seek help, as noted there are effective ways to overcome these barriers.

As the statistics in the accompanying sidebar highlight, there have been significant increases in suicides, depression, alcohol use, and domestic violence within police departments. If EAPs are to help address these concerns, they need to become more knowledgeable about police culture and officers’ valid concerns about opening up to a mental health professional.

This article also offers specific suggestions in the context of a case study related to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, but many of the suggestions are also applicable for ongoing concerns of police officers.

The main takeaway from this article is that EA professionals need to do a better job understanding

police culture and how doing so will increase their comfort level with EAP. Once trust is established it will allow officers to speak freely about their concerns of being a law enforcement officer in today’s complex world. ❖

Patricia A Herlihy, PhD, RN, grew up in a police family in the Boston area. Her uncle John Donovan was the Chief of Police for Boston. Patricia’s family has been immersed in police culture for over 80 years. For more information, check out www.rockymountainresearch.us

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