

## Tips for EAPs Working With Law Enforcement

**Editor's note:** Law enforcement has long been a challenging and stressful occupation that has come under immense pressure due to civil unrest stemming from recent police shootings and related events. James Rascati, MSW, LCSW, is the Director of Organizational Services at Behavioral Health Consultants, LLC, which provides EAP services for 145 organizations including 54 police and 28 fire departments. *Employee Assistance Report (EAR)* had the opportunity to speak with Jim about the challenges facing EAPs who count municipal unions (including police officers and firefighters) among their clients.

**EAR:** *Why is it so important for EA professionals to better understand the subculture of law enforcement in the United States?*

**JR:** Law enforcement has been under attack in our country for a while and it appears to be getting worse. The fact is there have been some terrible police shootings that should have never happened in the first place. It is also true in my experience that by far the vast number of men and women who protect and serve our communities are professionals who truly care about the work they do. What other profession, outside of the military, leaves their home in the morning and may not return home to their families?

Many progressive police departments are attempting to change the old school culture in which seeking behavioral health care makes someone “less of a cop.” As a result, under President Obama’s Justice Department, a document known as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing was drafted. It stressed the importance of conducting annual wellness checks for law enforcement.

There is now a general understanding by police staff that the stress of law enforcement is taking its toll – in divorces, domestic violence, increase in alcohol or substance abuse as well as depression and suicide. As agencies begin instituting annual wellness checks, develop police peer support teams, and acknowledge that utilizing behavioral health services will NOT negatively impact an officer’s career, *this is an opportunity for EA professionals to enter into a “new” market, so to speak.* However, to enter into this new market requires that EA professionals understand that working with police officers is unlike any other professional group they may have treated in the past.

If EA professionals do not know or appreciate the unique cultural issues of being a police officer their efforts in all probability will fail. Law enforcement already believes (correctly in my opinion) that society does not understand them nor appreciate the difficult job they do on a daily basis.

**EAR:** *Do you think flagrant racism plays a role in these incidents? And if it does, how can the EAP help reduce prejudice and racism?*

**JR:** My guess is that in some of these shooting incidents racism did indeed play a role. But let’s also be clear, the issue of structural racism exists in almost every aspect of our society, not just law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Structural racism impacts education, housing, finance, employment, religion, and health care.

It is my opinion, however, that training plays a much larger role than racism. How many departments have trained their officers in de-escalation methods? In Crisis Intervention Training? What other non-lethal tools do officers use? How often do they go to the firing range and requalify?

One of the most frightening and ill-conceived responses to these bad shooting incidents is the cry to “defund” the police. If I am correct that one answer to the problem involves more training opportunities, then now is **not**

the time to defund police departments. In my opinion, we should be *increasing* funding for training on use of force including more focus on de-escalation, diversity, implicit bias training, and in mental health issues.

**EAR:** *This is a two-part question: What other factors are leading to the number of police-related shootings we are seeing today? Again, how can the EAP assist?*

**JR:** My guess is all of my EA colleagues have heard the term “deaths of despair.” We know that since the pandemic began there has been an increase in divorce, domestic violence, drug overdoses, and suicides. We are also seeing an uptick in crime. Approximately 40% of Americans are one paycheck away from bankruptcy. These continue to be challenging times for all of us. Also, we have spent almost an entire year in either complete or semi-isolation. We are social animals and need social contacts. Many of us our stressed to the max.

In addition to the pandemic there are other issues that may increase shootings. For one thing, there seems to be much less respect for authority, especially police. It seems to me that our criminal justice system also plays a role here. There are some situations where people are not held accountable for their illegal behavior. When meaningful consequences for illegal behavior are lacking, then people will continue to break the law and act out.

I think EAPs can assist by making their presence known to the organizations they serve. It continues to trouble me to this day that so many employees within their organizations do NOT know that their company provides an Employee Assistance Program. It is incumbent on our field to make sure that the organizations we contract with are in fact “marketing” EA services to their employees.

EAPs can also help by taking the time to understand the police agencies in their communities and in better publicizing their services known.

**EAR:** *When a mass shooting or other mass casualty occurs, why is it so important for **everyone** involved to be debriefed by the EAP?*

**JR:** As these horrific mass casualty events continue to occur in our society, we need to find a better way to engage the EA and mental health field in response, *especially with law enforcement*. Many times, in my experience, some officers may not have an immediate response to the event. Or when asked by command staff how they are doing and if they want to meet with an EA professional, most of the time police will decline and say that they are “ok.” We know that strong cultural beliefs still exist that officers should “suck it up,” that the carnage they see is “what they signed up for.”

But we know that stress builds up over time. Denial is also a huge psychological defense that many people utilize. One of the protocols we use for major critical incidents is that attendance is mandatory, but participation is voluntary. In fact, when I respond to a major critical incident I will say, “*I know you are ordered to be here, but you do not need to talk.*” The reality is I have never done a debriefing where the majority of attendees do talk.

Some people may not have an immediate reaction because horrendous events may seem surreal. Others have learned how “keep their emotions in check” so they can continue to focus on the crime scene and do their job. One of the key things we do is offer education about *possible* reactions that law enforcement *may experience* over the next few days, weeks, and months.

The other benefit of involving everyone in a debriefing is to remind them that their job *is not just about them*. The work they do daily, let alone when responding to a major and horrific critical incident, also has the potential to impact their family. We always make sure that the officers we met with know that the EAP services are for their immediate family, too.

**EAR:** *What other advice would you have for EA professionals who provide services for law enforcement?*

**JR:** You need to be truly committed to working with this very deserving population. Law enforcement needs EA services today more than ever before. There is no question that working with police can be extremely challenging and frankly, at times frustrating. However, the award is well worth the effort. *Once officers commit to treatment, they almost always work hard to figure it out.*

EA professionals enter the field to help individuals and organizations. This is also true for law enforcement. By far the majority of police enter the profession to give back, protect, and serve their communities. They and their families *need* and *deserve* EAP services more than ever during these unprecedented and stressful times.