

# CALIFORNIA Sheriff

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# When Leaders Lead the Way...

▪ NANCY K. BOHL-PENROD, PH.D.  
▪ THE COUNSELING TEAM INTERNATIONAL (TCTI)

▪ KATHLEEN WELLBROCK, PH.D.  
▪ THE COUNSELING TEAM INTERNATIONAL (TCTI)

The overwhelming horror of such tragedies as the December 2, 2015 terrorist attack in San Bernardino, clearly pointed out the trend for public safety personnel leaders to recognize and meet the “wellness” needs of their personnel. The “John Wayne Syndrome” or to “suck it up” is not the way a leader leads any longer. We experienced this first-hand after this tragedy in all the public safety departments who responded, especially when it came to the San Bernardino Police Department, Redlands Police Department, San Bernardino County Probation Department and San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Department.

On December 2, 2015, after leaving their 6-month-old daughter with their family, two terrorists, (who had jointly pledged their allegiance to the Islamic state) went to a Christmas party held by San Bernardino County Environmental Health, a division of Public Health. One of the killers was a health inspector who attended the party with 70 other employees at the Inland Regional Center, a privately-owned building. He left the party and returned with his wife dressed in tactical gear and armed with assault rifles, and opened fire on the celebratory crowd of predominately co-workers. They killed 14 attendees (roughly 20%) and then left the scene in a rented 2015 black Ford Expedition. Luckily, they were spotted by good law men, and were killed before they could get back to the building and set off explosive devices by remote control. It is believed that their intent was to set off the devices, which would have killed many first responders. Twenty-three of our law enforcement personnel fired their weapons during an intense standoffs with the killers, who fired 150 of their own rounds at the police and deputies. At the end of the attack 21 civilians were injured at the party, 14 were killed and one police officer was injured. It is considered one of the biggest acts of terrorism in the United States since September 11, 2001.

At the time of this writing, the one year anniversary of this event is approaching. We will explain some of the great decisions our law enforcement leaders made in regards to taking care of the department members who responded to the scene, and also those who did not.

The law enforcement leaders involved in this incident were San Bernardino County Sheriff John McMahon, San Bernardino Police Chief Jarrod Burguan, Redlands Police Chief Mark Garcia, and San

Bernardino Probation Department Chief Michelle Scray Brown. They immediately started the process of getting their personnel professional help. One of the most important decisions they made was to acknowledge that this event could have impacted everyone at some level. They did not restrict the resources only to the first responders. Some of the different groups that got debriefings were from many other divisions, such as; the coroner’s office, dispatchers, clerical staff, detective divisions, CSI, fingerprint examiners and others. These leaders realized that you did not have to directly respond to the scene to have had an emotional or traumatic response.

The Counseling Team International set up our own command post to begin the process of setting up defusings, debriefings, one-on-ones and crisis management briefings (CMBs.) Our command post took phone calls from 12 different public safety agencies, asking us to respond to 18 different divisions. We were ready as a team and the departments knew it. They knew this because we have a relationship that has been nurtured and formed over many years. We give that credit to the leaders. We do not hide in our offices somewhere. The leaders encourage us to attend department staff meetings, briefings (no matter what time they are) and for us to go on ride-a-longs. We are also invited to go to communication centers, and the Sheriff has us teach new cadets at the academy and other various supervisor’s courses. This makes a huge difference in the acceptance and comfort level for their personnel. It shows they believe in counseling, which makes it easier for those they are leading to reach out.

Another great decision the leaders made is having a Peer Support Program and Chaplains Program available for their personnel. These



two programs work side by side with the Counseling Team and we refer to this as “the helping triad”. We know each other and on many occasions train together. When this event happened we deployed them to the various locations to work with us. Fortunately, there were no territorial issues, which can happen on occasion. It would not have gone as smoothly if these leaders did not believe in having all three parts of the triad available to their personnel.

With a large scale critical incident like this one, these leaders knew it was necessary to offer these services on a continued basis. It was not a simple situation where we could go in, help, pack up, leave, and then everyone would be alright with what they experienced. It was a truly horrendous incident. We think we do a good job, but we are not that good. When someone is deeply, emotionally impacted by an event like this terrorist attack, it takes more than a three-hour group or a one-hour session to help get people through it. There was a lot more work that needed to be done. Several of our Chiefs had one of us hang out at the department divisions for days, just walking around and being there if anyone wanted to talk. Many did. Instead of them calling and having to go to our office, we made ourselves available at their work site. It really worked out great. They liked the helping triad so much, we were asked to come back for several more days.

One of the ways these leaders got their personnel to keep going to counseling was to send out a department wide memo regarding the services that were available to them. When they wrote heartfelt communications, they also mentioned getting more help if they needed it (all confidential of course). It is not easy to reach out for help. In the public safety arena, it is even harder. However, this has changed over the years. The stigma of going to talk to someone about their feelings and reactions is decreasing. More and more law enforcement personnel openly discuss that they are seeking help. One of the reasons is the open sharing of supportive words from their leaders.

In addition to making “the helping triad” known to their depart-

ment and their personnel, these leaders also made it available and known to family members. None of us live in vacuums. What happens at home goes to work, and what happens at work goes home. Different levels of impact of course, but after this horrible terrorist attack, many family members of our law enforcement needed to talk about their reactions to their loved one being involved. Again, many of these leaders scheduled and offered a “Significant Other Survival” (SOS) class for their families. What a wonderful way to reach others and let them know they were also being thought of and were part of the law enforcement family. After all isn’t that what we tell them at the academy? This was putting actions behind the words.

When this incident is taught all over the country by many different people from many different departments, especially when our Chief from San Bernardino, and our Sheriff from San Bernardino give their class on “Lessons Learned”, they always talk about taking care of their people. They do not hide the fact that it was a priority for them to take care of the mental health of their employees. This alone has touched many teams like ours that do a lot of great work throughout the country.

Now that the one year anniversary is approaching, they continue to want to do the right thing. They continually reach out to find out best practices and ways to help their employees. We often encourage them to send memos acknowledging acts of bravery shown by their personnel and also to acknowledge the one year anniversary. There have been letters to families, short videos, and moments of silence. Everything is being considered. What a wonderful way to show support and to show that they are not forgotten, even one year later. No one is saying that everyone must be over it. We all move at different paces. Many law enforcement personnel have moved on and do not think about it all the time. Of course, the anniversary may trigger some reactions like most major events in your life do. For those still working to move on, a comforting thought is that their leaders support their need to talk to a professional and the leaders express this very openly.

**We want to thank Sheriff John McMahon (SBSD), Chief Jarrod Burguan (SBPD), Chief Mark Garcia (RPD), Chief Michelle Scray Brown (SB Probation Dept.), and all our other public safety chiefs. They truly showed strength in supporting others to reach out for help. This shows you are a leader leading the way! Be safe! ☆**