

# The Components of a Successful Behavioral Health & Wellness Program for Law Enforcement

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In the early 1980's, many agencies decided to look at the mental health of their employees. They provided counseling services and provided a few classes to those cadets at the academy who were starting out their careers. San Bernardino Sheriff's Department was one of them. Their program was limited to deputies who were involved in critical incidents, and depending on the incident, their families could get the help they needed too.

In the late 1980's, Peer support programs began to be developed, to help those officers with substance abuse problems. If an officer had a "drinking problem", they could go and talk to an officer who was in a "recovery" AA "program".



Although the above services were helpful more recently there is a new awareness of the need to expand these types of services and create a complete "Behavioral Health and Wellness Program" (BHWP) for Law Enforcement.

The Counseling Team International (TCTI) is an organization that provides these programs throughout California and for many Federal agencies. A comprehensive BHWP has many components. When deciding to develop a program here are what we have found impacts your personnel in a positive way.

Incorporate "The Helping Triad" into your departments culture. The helping triad consists of Peer Support, Chaplains, and Mental Health Professionals, who are Law Enforcement culturally competent.

Peer supporters break down the barriers that may exist with some officers. They build the trust necessary to help the employee that is reaching out for help. Those designated peer supporters can help recognize officers who are having personal and emotional problems, similar to an "early detection" program. They attend POST/STC certified training i.e. 3-days of Basic Peer Support, 2-days of Critical Incident response training. There is a selection process and criteria to nominate individuals as



potential peer supporters. There are certain characteristics that make good peer supporters. Another important component to the “Helping Triad” is Chaplains.

Chaplains, who are volunteers, are trained in counseling. Chaplains are religiously diverse, and their role is not to promote a particular type of religious doctrine. They frequently hang out at the department and go on ride-a-longs, that makes it easier for an employee to reach out. Their visibility builds trust. They offer a quiet, calming outlet for all members to vent and get validated.



*“A chaplain once told me, “My office is in a patrol car”*

TCTI’s Mental Health professionals have the diagnostic skills to help recognize if the officer’s problems are more serious than what is being observed. Their training specifically focuses on the Law Enforcement culture. They have received extensive training in crisis intervention and trauma. They are granted “legal privilege communication”, which protects MOST of what they talk about with a clinician (there are legal exceptions). This allows them the freedom to share, without the worry that it is going to get back to the department.

Family support offered to department personnel is paramount. It is more difficult for a Law Enforcement employee to manage the stressors of the job, if their own family members have no place to go to handle their stress. Providing the same Wellness Services to the family members impacts the officer and ultimately increases the well-being of the and department. Providing all of the programs to family members builds trust. They are grateful for truly being treated as part of the “Law Enforcement Family”.

Training is a key to reaching many employees struggling in silence. Suicide Prevention and Intervention training can prevent a tragedy. The more educated about depression and suicide, the more suicides we can prevent. TCTI has learned that training for all management levels, first line supervisors, peer supporters, and chaplains can make a difference. More recently, training for family members has been provided, because the signs of despair may be experienced by the employee’s family members first at home.

Resiliency training for all employees is a great way to help prevent problems in the future. It helps them learn how to manage their stress levels, learn about nutrition, exercise, meditation, mindfulness and how their bodies may react to the stressors of the job. This training teaches positive coping skills and helps them put into place the ability to bounce back from trauma, and adversity.

TCTI has been asked over the past 5 years to provide annual, or biennial mandatory counseling sessions to their “sworn” personnel. Departments are now putting it into a policy. It has been a huge success. At first there was “pushback” because there were officers that did not want to be there (of course), but for most of those that have attended a counseling session describe it as a “relief valve”. They were glad they attended. As a result of it being mandatory, many stated they felt the department cared about them. It is made clear to everyone, including their Associations/Unions, the sessions are NOT “fitness for duty” evaluations, but an opportunity for them to unload past calls, or present problems they may be having. It is considered “mental health prevention”.

TCTI also provides a 24/7/365 crisis intervention response team. When a critical incident happens, which has an immediate negative impact needs to be addressed immediately, with support from a mental health professional. Our on-call clinicians are ready to be deployed at anytime if needed.

Included in the crisis response, departments have available at all times two different hot lines. One is to be connected to a clinician, (1-800-222-9691) and the other is to get the information for the caller to talk to a peer supporter. (1-855-PEER-TLK). This service is 24/7/365. When an employee is ready to talk, it is important to have that available at that time.

Recently, TCTI has been approached to provide “remote counseling” services for those employees that either live in remote areas or have less time to attend a session with a clinician or have extremely long drives to one of our offices. Although we have 17 locations, it still may be difficult for an employee or family member to get there. We are in the process of setting up this service. There are guidelines we have to follow, and ethical requirements. Tele-therapy has been offered for years, with success, so we expect the same with on-line availability (skype). An initial assessment is done in person, and they have to qualify for these services before having the opportunity to be remotely helped.

In conclusion, it is important that all the above programs get the message out to department members and their families. Websites, intra-net, APP’s (Cordico Shield Customized Law Enforcement Wellness or TCTI’s Public Safety Peer Support/Supervisor Coach), posters and messages from the Chief or Sheriff, on-going briefing presentations/orientations, family days, trainings, newsletters, webinars and any other means of communication is key to the success of a comprehensive Behavioral Health and Wellness program.

Providing resources to your department personnel in every division, not just sworn, helps create a healthy department. Taking care of your personnel and their mental well-being is a sign of a good leader. After all, they are your most important asset.

If you are interested in having more information, please contact us at 1-800-222-9691.

Be safe,

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