

Officers' Physical and Mental Wellbeing

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Hello and welcome to *The Beat*. I'm your host Jennifer Donelan. Today's topic, Officer Safety and Wellness, and Mental Well-Being. Joining us about this critical topic today is Chief Hank Stawinski of the Prince George's County Police Department in Prince George's County Maryland. Chief, thanks for joining us.

Chief Hank Stawinski

00:35

Thank you, Jennifer.

Donelan

00:36

Absolutely. So, listen, I want to talk about, and hoping that you can sort of peel back the layers and take people inside what is just a devastating time for a department, and that is a line-of-duty death. And I know, sadly, that you have had to deal with this, and recently. What is the reality when you lose a member of your agency?

Stawinski

01:03

That phenomenon is unique in public safety. I won't say, law enforcement exclusively, because we work in an industry where we are not able to stop and say, "We're not opening tomorrow. We're going to send everybody home, so they can come to terms with this." The biggest challenge is addressing the needs of all the constituent members of your institution, sworn and civilian, as well as the community in this very traumatic time. But as that is unfolding, literally, you have to have officers out there answering calls for service, providing for the safety of the public, despite the fact that they know this person, they've worked alongside this person. You have to be responsive to the needs of the public, in terms of service provision, but, also, be open to the fact that they want to be a part of that grieving process.

If you're doing things well, the community will want to be part of the grieving process for the loss of a public safety officer. And finding that balance between maintaining operations, listening and providing services to the public, meeting the needs of the particular members of your institution, and then, ultimately, finding a way to help that particular family, the direct loved ones, of that lost officer come to terms with the tragedy and then set them on a road. Things will never be the same again, but finding a

way to take that moment and how their loved one is treated through this process can be defining, in terms of how they view that loss. If it's done as well as possible, then that family will understand the value their loved one had to the institution and that their sacrifice wasn't in vain. If that's done poorly, the hazard is that the family will feel that their loss was in vain.

And that is something that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. So, I'm always very cognizant when we find ourselves, not just in the instance of losing an officer, but in traumatic injury, serious injury. Trying to express the value of the individual to the institution, and to the public, and to that family, because I find that to be the most critical piece in defining how people will come out the other side of that. Whether officers will be reengaged and aggressive in their duties at the other side of this. Whether the community will continue to provide that support in the small matters, which are critical in the same way that these large incidents are important, in terms of their support. And then finally, and most importantly, that family and how they view what their loved ones is going through.

Donelan

04:31

How do you then deal with officers who are dealing with the stress, a post-traumatic stress of such an event? How do you get them healthy mentally? How do you talk about it? And especially in an environment where it still can be very stigmatized and people want to talk openly or they're afraid of losing their confidentiality or worried about the repercussions? I know that, as a chief, that must weigh on you on how to get your officers healthy after an event like that.

Stawinski

05:10

There are three ways. And I'm very fortunate, because I lead one of the most progressive and effective institutions in the nation. There's three ways, structurally, that we're able to accomplish that. The first is through crisis response teams. And we use those to great effect to support our officers who are dealing with crisis situations that they're not involved in. Right? Those are programs that are facing out to the public and a means of us supporting people in crisis that we're having to bring assistance to. But they can also be used for our officers in those critical times as an incident, such as we're describing is unfolding.

The next is peer support. And we have a robust peer support system. We provide training and that is highly effective. That informally begins at the scene of a crisis-critical incident, with people having conversations to the side. People aggregating in one place having a notion that, in an hour, we're all going to meet over here. Bringing coffee to a place and just making it available so that it spontaneously encourages conversation and interaction. And that proceeds through a more formalized process with squads, with districts, with all the various components, as we divide them up, and opportunities for people to share and talk.

Then, lastly, with our psychological services component, our trained professionals, who then have the opportunity to debrief one-on-one. To set up longer conversations, as necessary, or provide referrals.

So, those three things, and they all are interconnected with one another. None of them happen in a straight line and often times they overlap. And then another piece that is important, as I've seen our institution evolve, again, is the community's support. I can't express how much I appreciate the way the community has come to our support in these very trying times. When the young men and women who are not directly involved in this see the community stepping up in grief and with appreciation, they're encouraged in their work, because they feel valued.

Donelan

07:48

Absolutely. The support of the community is bar none. Talk to our listeners about programs that you have in place at the department, at your department, that are an effort to save your officers' lives. Talk to folks about Arrive Alive. What is that program? What is it all about?

Stawinski

08:10

In 1992, I was a student officer in the academy. And an officer by the name of Roger Peck Fleming was engaged in a vehicle pursuit on the Baltimore Washington Parkway. As a result of this, his vehicle struck a fixed object, became airborne, impacted a tree, and he was posthumously promoted, but Fleming was killed. 20 years later, Adrian Morris was killed in almost exactly the same set of circumstances. And, it was this event, in conjunction with another officer fatality in a motor vehicle that led us to create the Arrive Alive Program. It was a concerted effort between, then Chief Macaw, then Assistant Chief Davis, myself, and we decided to have what we refer to as the courageous conversation. What I know about the people that we've lost along the way is that all of them would have, if given the opportunity, said, "Don't let my example go without use. So, that describing the circumstances that led to my loss, we can prevent further loss." They would have wanted that.

And I say that because they do what public safety does every day, and they did that for the entirety of their careers. They responded to calls for service to help complete strangers under a variety of circumstances. And they sought, always, to protect the public and their peers. And so this is, without their physical presence, a way for them to continue to protect their peers. Arrive Alive is a multi-dimensional campaign, which involves a unique logo that we place on the dashboard of every one of our vehicles, a series of posters inside our facilities. We track how many collisions we've had and how many days since our last collision, in order to understand how frequently those things are happening. We broadcast messages on our radio throughout the 24-hour cycle. And those messages change about how far your vehicle will travel at 60 miles per hour, if you look down at a smart phone for one minute, or one second, or type on a computer keyboard, or change the radio, or whatever you may be doing.

Giving people different perspectives on how much time and reactionary time is lost by things you might be concerning yourself inside the vehicle. We emphasize the value of wearing a seatbelt. One of the cultural issues was, if I wear a seatbelt, and I get into a confrontation, it'll slow my ability to deploy tactically. There's a lively conversation going on in the room adjacent to us about that very topic. There's no reason that indicates that that's the case. Certainly, unbuckling your seatbelt and getting out of a car, something you can train for, in the same way that you train for deploying your weapon. But, at the end

of the day, the approach was to persuade. We are a mandatory body armor agency and have been for decades. You must wear it. We don't wear it because we expect to be in a shooting. We wear it on the unlucky event that we are and that one of those rounds might strike an officer in a vital area and cause significant injury or death.

That's why we wear the seatbelt. We don't expect you to be involved in a car crash, but in the even that you are, nothing's guaranteed, but it's far more likely to reduce injury and save life than not. I was always taught, and I've taught my daughter, that if you become separated from myself, or my wife, or my mom you are not to go to the gentleman in the nice suit. You're not to go to the lady in the pretty dress. You're not to go to the kiosk or the fast food circle. You go find a police officer. And you tell them, "My dad's a police officer and I need your help." What I know is that, absent a critical incident, none of us in law enforcement are going to do anything other than stop what we're doing and get that child where they need to be. And we can't afford for something as simple as putting on a seatbelt to lose those people that we rely upon. And if you're not prepared to do it for yourself, then do it for my daughter. Because I promise that I'll do it for yours, and your son, and your mom, and your dad.

Because when they need me, I'm going to do everything I can to be there for them. And I'm asking you to be there for my family in the same way.

Donelan

13:36

And that means stay alive. (Laugh).

Stawinski

13:39

Yes.

Donelan

13:39

Yep. All right, Chief. Chief Hank Stawinski, Prince George's County Police, thank you so much for joining us on *The Beat*. How can our listeners find out any more about your work, the Arrive Alive Program? What's a good email for them?

Stawinski

13:55

We could be reached at [police_custserv](mailto:police_custserv@co.pg.md.us), C-U-S-T-S-E-R-V, at co.pg.md.us.

Donelan

14:09

Great. Thank you. And thank you, again, so much for sharing about what is a very, very difficult topic for any law enforcement agency. A difficult period for any law enforcement agency to go through. We know that you lost Sergeant Ramziddin in late February. Continued condolences and support to you and yours.

Stawinski

14:31

It was a privilege to be here and I appreciate those kind words.

Donelan

14:34

Thank you, Chief. And thank you to our listeners, and to our law enforcement community, continue to please be safe out there. Thank you for joining us on *The Beat*.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

14:39

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

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