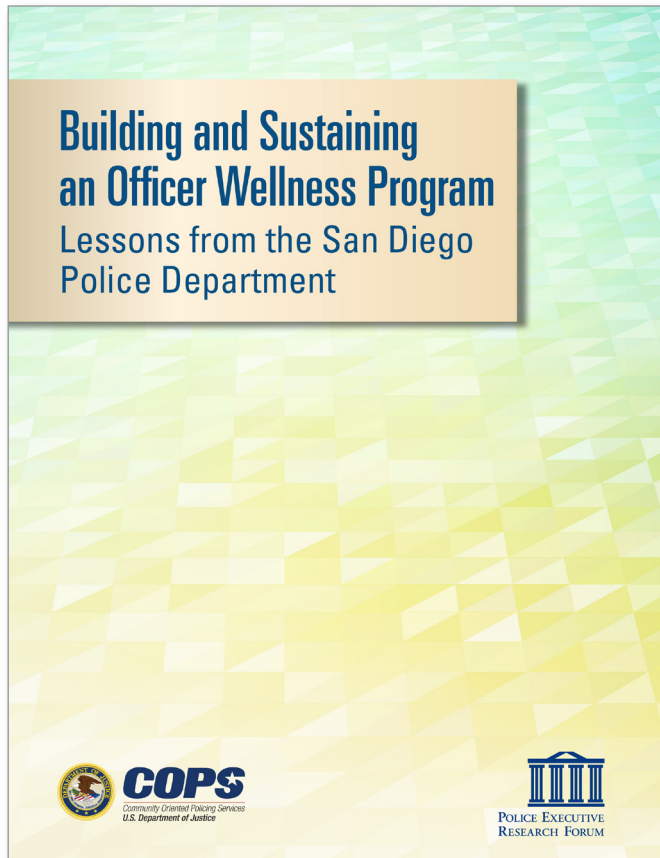
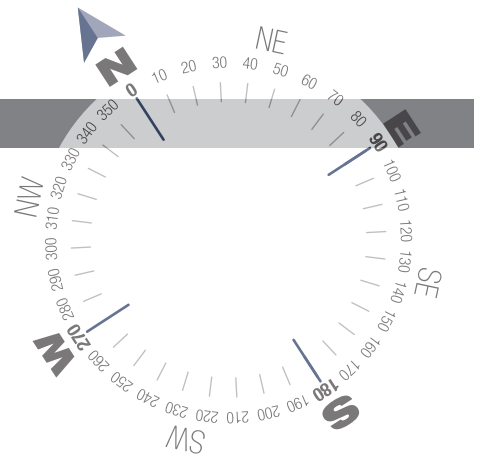


essentials for leaders

An ongoing executive series providing overviews of critical community policing issues



Building and Sustaining an Officer Wellness Program

Lessons from the San Diego Police Department

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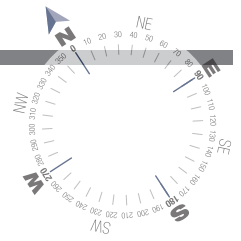
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Finally, credit is due to PERF staff members who conducted the site visits, interviewed practitioners, and helped write and edit this publication, including Director of Technical Assistance Jessica Toliver, Senior Research Associate Elizabeth Miller, Senior Research Assistants Madeline Sloan and Adam Kemerer, and Director of Communications Craig Fischer.

About the Essentials for Leaders Series

Law enforcement agencies around the country are recognizing the importance of monitoring and tending to employees' physical and mental health and wellness. The San Diego Police Department established and operates a dedicated unit with the goal of promoting a department-wide culture of wellness. Working toward this goal will also help the department better serve its community. The Police Executive Research Forum, working with the SDPD under a cooperative agreement from the COPS Office, examined the SDPD's wellness programming.

This research is more fully documented in *Building and Sustaining an Officer Wellness Program: Lessons from the San Diego Police Department*, along with lessons learned and resources, training, and recommendations that will be of interest to other local agencies that may be interested in setting up similar programs.

Overview

In 2011, the San Diego (California) Police Department (SDPD) created a free-standing Wellness Unit. It is dedicated to serving as a resource for department members in crisis, overseeing and coordinating the delivery of “help services” such as counseling and peer support to SDPD personnel, and developing wellness initiatives based upon department members’ needs.

At its most fundamental level, the Wellness Unit’s goal is to keep the SDPD healthy. Studies have shown that police officers’ risk of adverse job-related physical and mental health outcomes is higher than the general population’s,¹ and officer wellness has a direct impact on officers’ quality of life,² job performance, and interactions with community members.³ By promoting a culture of wellness in the department and providing the services and support that agency members need, the SDPD’s Wellness Unit helps to guard against these negative outcomes for individuals and the department.

The Purpose of This Report

In 2016, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) entered into a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) to examine the SDPD’s wellness programming. The goal of this case study was to identify recommendations and lessons that will help other agencies across the country create their own successful wellness initiatives.

This report documents the results of the PERF project. It outlines promising practices for other agencies to use in creating their own wellness initiatives that are tailored to their specific needs and resources. The report is divided into five sections:

1. Literature Review: Why Wellness Matters
2. The San Diego Police Department’s Wellness Unit
3. Help Resources: Providers and Programs
4. Training: Building a Culture of Wellness
5. Key Promising Practices

1. Hartley et al., “Health Disparities in Police Officers.”

2. Amendola et al., *The Shift Length Experiment*.

3. Fox et al., “Mental-Health Conditions;” Ranjaratnam et al., “Sleep Disorders, Health, and Safety in Police Officers;” Covey et al., “The Effects of Exposure to Traumatic Stressors;” Vila, Morrison, and Kenney, “Improving Shift Schedule and Work-Hour Policies.”

Literature Review: Why Wellness Matters

The Literature Review section provides an overview of the existing scholarship on officer safety and wellness, which demonstrates the critical importance of health to officers’ performance and quality of life as well as to police agencies’ organizational health as a whole.

While police work can take an emotional and physical toll on officers, many hesitate to get help because of a police agency culture that stigmatizes asking for help,⁴ a fear of negative employment outcomes (such as being put on desk duty),⁵ or because the cause of officers’ stress is their coworkers and supervisors.⁶ A method for overcoming these barriers to treatment is a clearly articulated confidentiality policy and the option to access services anonymously outside the department.⁷

The San Diego Police Department’s Wellness Unit

This section of the report details the creation of the Wellness Unit, its mission, the services it provides and the operational philosophy that has shaped everything from its staffing plan to the physical location of its office.

The mission of the Wellness Unit is to reduce factors that interfere with employee wellness by providing help resources, training, and intervention.”⁸ All of the SDPD’s help services—including its police chaplains, peer supporters, and psychological services—are administered by the Wellness Unit.

The Wellness Unit has a four-person staff comprising two sergeants, one officer, and one civilian. They are all assigned to the Wellness Unit full time and operate out of the Wellness Center, an office located in SDPD headquarters. This choice of location is intentional: It is meant to reduce the stigma associated with seeking wellness services and to “normalize” seeking help.

During its first year of operation, the Wellness Center was located off-site because of concerns that department members might be less likely to use it if they thought that their colleagues would see them. The SDPD moved the Wellness Center to headquarters to make wellness services more readily accessible for department members

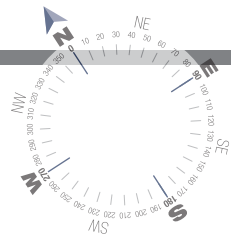
4. IACP, *Breaking the Silence*.

5. Fox et al., “Mental-Health Conditions.”

6. Gershon et al., “Mental, Physical, and Behavioral Outcomes.”

7. Levenson, O’Hara, and Clark, “The Badge of Life.”

8. SDPD, *Wellness Unit Operations Manual*, 3.



and to make it clear that wellness is an important and normal aspect of departmental operations. The Wellness Center was also purposefully designed as an inviting social space with a lounge area. Department members are encouraged to drop in regardless of whether they are seeking wellness services. According to retired Assistant Chief Sarah Creighton, the move to headquarters resulted in a dramatic increase in use.

These efforts to normalize wellness services and increase usage are aided by the Wellness Unit's clearly articulated confidentiality policy, which includes a description of the limited situations that Wellness Unit members are mandated to report.

Help Resources: Providers and Programs

The Help Resources section of this report describes the individual “help services” providers —namely, the police chaplains, peer supporters, and psychological services — that the Wellness Unit manages. These services include the following:

- **The SDPD's peer support program** offers general peer support to officers in need as well as specialized peer support for officers who have been involved in a shooting or in-custody death. Discussing problems with colleagues who have experienced similar situations can be therapeutic.
- **The SDPD's police chaplain program** includes 11 faith leaders who provide emotional and spiritual support to department members. They serve as a critical resource for department members who might be experiencing challenges in their lives but are hesitant to approach a psychologist or other help services provider.
- **Focus Psychological Services**, an independent organization contracted by the SDPD, provides counseling services to department members and their loved ones. Focus also participates in delivering wellness-related training to the SDPD, and it leads critical incident debriefings (which take the place of a fitness-for-duty exam at the SDPD) for the department.

The Wellness Unit also offers an **Alcohol/Substance Abuse Program**.

Training: Building a Culture of Wellness

The SDPD has created a training program aimed at establishing and sustaining a culture of wellness at all levels of the agency. The Wellness Unit reaches new officers early in their tenure. First, the unit provides Emotional Survival training in the academy, which emphasizes the need to manage stress, the unique challenges of being a police officer, and effective coping strategies.

Immediately after graduation from the academy, new officers complete a day-long Psychological Preparedness Training for New Officers. Known as Wellness Day, this training includes presentations from help services providers and from department members who have experienced trauma or a personal crisis and who sought wellness services.

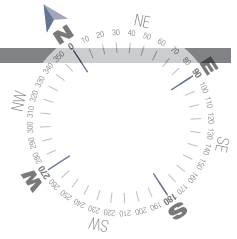
New officers are also required to complete a two-day Effective Interactions training at the end of their field training. Facilitated by the Wellness Unit, this training helps officers to understand the concept of emotional intelligence so they can be more effective in their jobs and have a better quality of life.

Key Promising Practices

Following are some of the promising practices provided in this report:

- **To create a culture of wellness and successful wellness programming, establish wellness-related training that engages new officers early and also reaches senior employees at important points in their careers.**
Promising practices include:
 - ♦ Developing a plan for reaching new officers immediately with wellness-related training, which may include the following activities:
 - Providing them with information about wellness services before they begin the academy;
 - Incorporating a wellness module into academy training; and
 - Delivering a wellness training class after the academy.

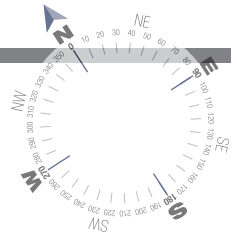
- ◆ Involving officers' loved ones in wellness training and awareness-building activities. For example, hosting a family wellness day after officers graduate from the academy to familiarize their loved ones with available wellness services and to normalize the use of wellness services.
- ◆ Including a wellness module in advanced officer training.
- ◆ Tying wellness to career advancement by making awareness of wellness issues a requirement for promotion—e.g., members of the department must read and be tested on Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement to be promoted to any supervisory position.
- **Include civilian department members in wellness services.** Civilians experience their own unique stressors while working in a police department and also need support. Promising practices include:
 - ◆ Recruiting civilian department members to participate in delivering wellness services.
 - ◆ Creating wellness programming (such as educational workshops) that are tailored specifically to the needs and concerns of civilian personnel.
- **Every police department is unique in its staff, the population it serves, and its resources.** As a result, wellness programs should be tailored to agencies' particular needs. Promising practices include:
 - ◆ Conducting a department-wide survey to ask employees what they need and what their primary wellness concerns are and using that information to guide the development of wellness programming and services.
 - ◆ Surveying the department after wellness services have been in place for a year or more in order to determine whether employees are aware of the services, whether they trust in the program, and whether they use the services. Modify your approach as needed based on results.
 - ◆ Updating training and educational programming so that it is responsive to new concerns and emerging issues among personnel.
- **Achieving acceptance and building trust takes time, and wellness programs succeed only if members of a department are invested in them.** In San Diego, the Wellness Unit has pursued a strategy of visibility and persistence, while maintaining its reputation for discretion. Promising practices include:
 - ◆ Locating your wellness office/center in headquarters or another high-visibility location to reduce any stigma that employees may feel about seeking help. In SDPD's experience, this has been an effective component of the department's strategy to increase utilization of wellness services and normalize asking for help.
 - ◆ Making the Wellness Unit visible on your organizational chart to demonstrate its importance.
 - ◆ Using officer roll calls to explain wellness services.
 - ◆ Developing materials to publicize the services and how to access them, including brochures, newsletters, posters, and online media such as the department's website and social media platforms.
- **Establish and publicize a clear confidentiality policy that describes wellness services providers' reporting requirements.** Confidentiality is one of officers' primary concerns with seeking wellness services and should therefore be taken into careful consideration when building a wellness program. Promising practices include:
 - ◆ Having a clear, written confidentiality policy, communicating it to department members, and adhering to it.
 - ◆ Ensuring that exceptions to confidentiality are understood, such as information indicating that an employee may be a danger to himself or herself or to others, or that domestic violence or child abuse may be occurring.
 - ◆ Being sure that employees understand the confidentiality rules that bind each category of help services providers, because some providers—such as clinicians—may be bound by more stringent confidentiality standards than police employees.



- **When looking for employees to provide wellness services, recruit for skills and personality, rather than rank. Specifically, look for the following characteristics:**
 - ♦ **Non-judgmental:** Wellness service providers should know how to make people feel cared for, and should understand that the role of a wellness team is to support others, not pass judgment on them.
 - ♦ **Compassionate:** Someone who is empathetic and cares for others.
 - ♦ **Experienced:** Someone who is familiar with the department and has a personal understanding of the stresses associated with working in a law enforcement agency.
 - ♦ **Proven legitimacy:** Someone whom members of the department already gravitate toward when they are seeking assistance, advice, or support.
 - ♦ **Trustworthy:** Someone who does not gossip or betray confidences.
 - ♦ **Demonstrates wellness:** Someone who attends to his or her own emotional and physical health, and models that for others.

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In 2016, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) entered into a cooperative agreement with the Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services to conduct a case study of the San Diego (California) Police Department’s wellness program. The goal of this case study was to identify recommendations and lessons that will help other law enforcement agencies across the country create their own successful wellness initiatives. This executive summary highlights the high-level overview of the PERF project *Building and Sustaining an Officer Wellness Program: Lessons from the San Diego Police Department* and outlines promising practices for other agencies to use in creating their own wellness initiatives that are tailored to their specific needs and resources.



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