

Life Aid Research Institute: Building Bridges and Improving Community Safety

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, everyone, I'm Jennifer Donelan with *The Beat*. Thank you so much for joining us. Our guest today is John Wordin. He's the founder of the Life Aid Research Institute. He's dedicated to improving mental and overall health of first responders and military veterans by using peer support, technology, and community activation, which we're going to get into in just a bit.

Today, we'll be discussing the Life Aid VOICE Project that convenes team players from law enforcement, community leaders, veteran and sports communities, and they do that to help build bridges and improve the health and safety of the communities where they live. Mr. Wordin will also talk about their new app that's called LifeScore. I can't wait to get into this. This is going to be a really interesting show. Welcome, Mr. Wordin, and thank you so much for joining us today.

John Wordin

01:04

Thanks for having me. Great to be here, Jennifer.

Donelan

01:06

Thank you. So, let's get right into it. What is Life Aid all about?

Wordin

01:10

Life Aid is a suicide prevention program for military veterans, first responders, and their families. And like you mentioned, it's all about peer support, technology, functional medicine, and community activation. And in particular with law enforcement, there's no national VA system for law enforcement so it's really up to each individual agency and jurisdiction to try to figure out how to help their officers. And so, we set up as a national organization a way to do that and provide valuable services like free brain mapping, for example, to first responders and particularly law enforcement.

Donelan

01:45

This is such a critical, critical issue right now, especially with law enforcement. And as you just explained, they don't have the support systems in place that currently exist for military veterans, but we know that we are basically in crisis right now. So, what is it exactly that you do in order to hit this particular issue?

Wordin

02:04

Well, like you mentioned, I mean, suicide right now—particularly among first responders and law enforcement—is probably at an all-time high. They don't track the numbers quite the same as the veterans community because, again, each individual agency is responsible. So, there's no way to track nationally, but my guess would be that the national average for law enforcement is probably higher than the military community. And so it's really important that we try to identify the actual PTSD, TBI, concussion, toxic exposure that the officers encounter on their daily routine of doing their service, and try to find the root cause of the injuries that cause things like depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, chronic pain, et cetera. And that's what we really try to do.

Donelan

02:46

And that's what I really want to get into the meat of because these aren't conversations that we've been having for years in law enforcement, right? You mentioned a few key words just now like TBI, et cetera, and the brain mapping. And I want to really sort of dig into that—because it's not a conversation that we've historically had in the law enforcement community—and really start taking away some of the confusion about these topics and making it more clear for folks. There's a myriad of different ways that we can attack this. There's a myriad of different things that we should be looking at and talking about. So, can you dig a little more into the issues that are behind suicide and the fact that there's something that we can actually do about it when you start talking about the tools you just mentioned?

Wordin

03:28

Yeah, so this is a great question. The biggest issue in law enforcement and military veteran community is the stigma, right? So, if you're a law enforcement officer, you don't want to come forward and say, "Hey, I need help. I'm having problems with PTSD or TBI and I might have some mental health concerns." Because it might affect your job status; it might affect your career status, and your promotability.

Donelan

03:50

Let me stop you there, John. What is TBI?

Wordin

03:52

Traumatic brain injury.

Donelan

03:53

Okay, keep going. Sorry to interrupt.

Wordin

03:55

That's okay. So how can you reach these officers and get help without it being within the chain of command? And that's what we've really started with the military with the Life Aid Research Institute, and what we've brought to law enforcement and first responders is a way to do that. And there's a lot of injury that happens as part of the daily routine of being a police officer, especially right now. I mean, all kinds of things thrown at you, shot at you, et cetera, and so you need to be able to get help without it jeopardizing...and having the privacy and security of your data in order to get the help without it jeopardizing or potentially jeopardizing your career.

And so, one of the things we came up with is the LifeScore app. And I know we'll get into that in a little bit, but the other part is we host these retreats throughout the year in different parts of the country. We actually have one coming up on June 21st, in Bend, Oregon. And at these retreats, we do free assessments for military veterans, first responders, and their families. And so, in Bend, we're actually going to do some new things. One of our staples is QEEG brain mapping, so you can actually see what's going on in the brain, what kind of injuries are there, what kind of conditions that are treatable almost universally, or can be improved. And it can help people sleep better, or feel better, or function better.

And then we're also going to be introducing the LifeScore app at the retreat. And then for the first time, we're going to be doing cognitive-function assessments so we can determine the degree of brain function and has it deteriorated, and so this would be a great way to get baseline scores that you can use to evaluate over time. And then we're working on another thing—we haven't got it quite confirmed yet, but we... and we actually have a meeting today on wearable technology and how we can use wearable technology to incorporate that data and be able to give the law enforcement an action plan. Here's what's actually going on, because information, actionable information, is vital to the success of the outcome. If you have bad information, you're going to have bad outcomes, because you're not going to solve the problem. So, if you can give someone really good actionable information, they can take that and improve their life.

Donelan

06:02

John, could you go into us and sort of explain it to our listeners about really the background behind your project? Is it all solely based on physical injury to the brain and the consequences thereof that can follow along that? Or is there any aspect of it that—you know, these days, just putting on the uniform and walking out your door and everything that comes with that can be depressing for some. Law

enforcement right now are facing a lot of issues in the community, and I know they're working around the clock to try and improve community relations, et cetera, but sometimes just even putting on the uniform can bring a lot of stress with it. So, is it all physical injury, or are there any mental health angles that you look at?

Wordin

06:44

Well, no, I mean, it's all connected. And that's why we describe ourselves as a peer-supported, whole-health, individual-performance-improvement program. And so, your mental health, your physical health, your emotional health—they're all sort of tied together. And there's two main programs that we've created that I think really should appeal to almost every law enforcement officer in the country. And that is the VOICE Project, which is Veterans Out Improving Communities Everyday, and how we can utilize the military ethos and call to service that veterans have, and almost all first responders have as well, to help improve communities and bring people together. And then it's the research institute and the programs that we do, including the LifeScore app, and how you can measure your overall health.

Donelan

07:30

And you just talked about that VOICE Project. So, let's go back and let's start with LifeScore app, and let's go through the different pieces of the program and really flesh them out and explain them. So, LifeScore app—what is it?

Wordin

07:43

It is a peer-supported, whole-health, individual-performance-improvement tool. And what we did is we looked at what is the driver of suicide. When you look at all the research that's out there, especially from the VA with their BHAP report—what is it that really causes suicide? Looking at it from the patient perspective, the family perspective, and the clinician perspective. And what you start to see is some common denominators, things like pain, worsening health status, hopelessness, decline in physical ability, sleep problems, or deterioration of physical health, medication concerns, mental health problems.

And so, what we did was we looked at those different categories. Peer support is the foundation of everything Life Aid does, so that has to be part of it. We've seen over the last 12 years how much a person's peer-support network really can keep that person in the game. So, then you look at things like food, fitness, nutrition, sleep, and state of mind, and how can you put a numerical score to those and come up with a comprehensive overall life score, just like your credit score. And you start off with the baseline, and then over time, over inputs, the score can change based on how you prove it. But the idea is to give the patient, the person, actionable information that they can use to improve their life and do it in a way that has unmatched security and privacy to protect your data so that you know, like, your boss doesn't find out about it. So, no one knows what your life score is except for you and whoever you decide to share it with. It's a pretty unique tool.

Donelan

09:23

Who can use the LifeScore app?

Wordin

09:25

Anyone. We actually just have the demo available now and it will debut in mid-summer 2021 and be available through any Android or iPhone. We're working on a pilot program right now with the Special Operations Command to do a pilot program with them. And then we have a few other pilot programs in the works with the VA and some other entities we're pretty excited about and we're looking for law enforcement to do the same with them.

Donelan

09:52

Okay, great. Now, what is the VOICE Project? Let's go back to that. You mentioned the veterans piece with the VOICE project and the town hall series, take us through that.

Wordin

10:01

Yeah. So the VOICE Project started during the COVID era. We started doing these virtual town halls as a way to keep guys engaged in trying to make sure that people didn't become too isolated with all the lockdowns and everything that was going on back in March. And in the conversations we have with the veterans and first responders, that's when the rioting and looting and protesting and all that stuff started going on. And there's one thing about veterans—they took an oath to serve and protect and defend the Constitution in the country and they don't like civil unrest, and they don't like people getting killed unnecessarily.

So, it was kind of a unique opportunity to see how veterans can partner, because a lot of veterans become law enforcement when they retire. So, how can we use the veteran mindset and ethos and all the things that they learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, and take the best lessons learned and bring them into their communities, which also gives them a chance to pay it forward and keeps them engaged so they don't become isolated. So, it kind of has a unique double-edged benefit for the veterans.

And so, we kicked it off, and we were able to get unbelievable guest speakers from military leaders, from Iraq and Afghanistan, to police chiefs, to celebrities, and sports figures. And we've been able to create some great content and talk about some of the issues that are important to everybody, really—leadership, accountability, empathy, trust, transparency, and equality, and how those life experiences and best practices can strengthen our communities.

Donelan

11:38

Let's talk about the audience for that, is the audience, is that geared towards law enforcement?

Wordin

11:43

I think it's law enforcement and it's the community, and that's what makes it unique. Because veterans have a way, you know, if you look at how veterans are revered in the community, there's always a level of respect that comes with veterans who have served our country. And it's not 100 percent like it used to be or should be, but it's still a vast majority. And if you take different constituencies—the business community, the faith community—and you start bringing together to what we call coalition building, and coalition politics versus identity politics, you can get a lot more things done and have discussions.

And we've had, like, we had an incident with some teenagers in Alabama with the Confederate flag and that stirred up a whole hornet's nest of issues. And we brought together the local law enforcement, the local faith community, veterans, and were able to have a town hall and have a discussion about what really is racism, or what is tackling some pretty tough conversations, and doing it in a way where people aren't yelling at each other. Because you know the old expression: "God gave you two ears, and one mouth, and you should use [them] proportionally." So, we tried to do some good things for the communities, and we've had some really good successes.

Donelan

12:56

So really, this, and this is where—you know, correct me if I'm wrong, or where I'm wrong—the LifeScore app really is tackling the suicide issue. The VOICE Project can tackle issues of major concern to a community, like you just mentioned, when you have a critical situation going on, a heated situation going on in your community. If I was in police leadership, what would I be looking into these two tools, because they do seem to be tackling different issues?

Wordin

13:21

They're different issues, but they're connected. So, the way I would look at it is the LifeScore app is for the law enforcement officer to be the best person he can be mentally, physically, and emotionally. And if that law enforcement officer is the best officer he can be when he goes out in the community, he's going to be able to react and address situations that come up in the daily order of service much better than if he was weak. Let's say the LifeScore is like a measurement of your foundation: The stronger your foundation, the stronger the house that's built on top of it; the weaker your foundation, the weaker the house is built on top of it. So why not have the strongest foundation possible so that you can withstand all the storms that are definitely coming your way, right? Because life is going to always be dealing you storms.

Donelan

14:06

Minute by minute, hour by hour, shift by shift. Absolutely, I can totally see what you're saying and how that is a benefit, a massive benefit, to the community in terms of interactions between police officers and members of the community. If you have strong, healthy officers who are on solid foundation, feeling good, they're in better position to be a more positive—

Wordin

14:26

Execute their jobs.

Donelan

14:26

Correct. Exactly. They're in a better position to execute their jobs. And then the VOICE Project—

Wordin

14:32

Brings together the communities which need that trust, especially trust and transparency. And you know, a lot of the trust in some communities at least has been eroded and how do you build that back? And then particularly reaching the young kids, right? The kids that are 15, 14-years-old, through 24, 25—you know, how can you build that relationship between law enforcement? In particular, that group? And so, one of the things that I want to get into later on is how can we use this content and create like 20-minute curriculum videos that we can show in schools all over the country. So that kids hear some of the data today—that kids are afraid of law enforcement, or there's some misrepresentations out there about law enforcement, and how can you correct that?

The best way to do that is get some famous celebrity guy to talk about a tough issue with law enforcement, and then show it to kids so that they know that, "Hey, law enforcement isn't the enemy." You know, if you're doing something wrong, then perhaps. But if you're, you know, going about your business, there should be some trust and relationship there between law enforcement. And, of course, law enforcement has a responsibility, since they're the ones with the badges and the guns, to be the leaders and have accountability. And all that mindset is present in the military community; when you raise your right hand and take your oath, you're under the Uniform Code of Military Conduct. So that's where the VOICE Project really has made some great strides in the town halls that we've had for the last year.

Donelan

16:00

And I love that idea of it being more than just lip service, but turning it into educational tools. What's your background? I probably should have started off this conversation with that, because the connection between law enforcement and the military. Do you have a military background?

Wordin

16:13

So, my story is: I played college football, and during the course of my college career I attended the United States Marine Corps Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia. I wanted to be a pilot and when I arrived to Quantico they put me in the infantry, which obviously was not exactly what I signed up for. So, it was an interesting relationship between me and the Marine Corps there for that six-week timeframe, but that was the extent of it.

And then my brother is a battalion chief with the LA City Fire Department. So, we interact a lot as a family with first responders and law enforcement throughout my adult life. And then, of course, when I started this program, I was retiring from a professional cycling career and I got a call from the VA about setting up a program for their Suicide Prevention Program at the Palo Alto VA. And then once I set that up, then from there, all kinds of crazy, great things have happened in my life. All the joint chiefs started coming out and looking at how wonderful the success was of helping guys that were either suicidal or had attempted suicide, and how much happier they were participating in this program. And then we ended up creating the Warrior Games.

And then Prince Harry came and visited one year, and then he goes, "Oh, this is a pretty good idea." And then he created the Invictus Game to make it more international. And we set up adaptive boards programs at all the military bases across the country, at all the different service branches. And, you know, we were servicing 10 or 20,000 injured veterans in active duty a year for many, many years, and then started learning more about technology and how the brain and brain health really affects overall mental and physical health and how looking at the brain can really help solve complex issues like depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, and how you can recognize and treat them.

And then we did a research program last year. It got kind of complicated because of COVID; doing in-person, human testing was kind of complicated when a lot of our clinics closed due to COVID, but we were able to push through and we saw some great results in terms of turning guys' lives around. And about 90 percent of the people that come into our program have attempted suicide at least once, so we have a pretty at-risk population to start with.

And keeping guys engaged in the community-activation piece with the VOICE Project was really... I have to hand it to the guys because, actually, the idea came from a law enforcement officer from the Minneapolis area and some of the veterans in a conversation we had on a town hall and we were off to the races. And we got General George Casey, the former chief of staff of the army, involved and pretty soon we had a who's who of America participating. It was awesome.

Donelan

18:52

I'm sitting here thinking to myself, we could spend another hour just talking about you because you've led an incredible, incredible life. It seems like you've had these amazing exposures and experiences and those things that have touched you, you've blended into sort of this final project and it doesn't sound like it's going to be your final project at all, not based on everything that you've been doing in your life. That is fascinating, absolutely fascinating. I'm still getting past college football player, wannabe pilot.

Wordin

19:20

Yeah, that was a particular time of my life. You know, I was like really into being a pilot and I thought it would be fun, and I thought I would be good at it.

Donelan

19:30

Yeah.

Wordin

19:30

I was certainly super competitive. The problem I had was that particularly the Marine Corps doesn't really like a six-foot-five, 260-pound pilot.

Donelan

19:39

Hmm, it's a challenge.

Wordin

19:41

And so, you don't fit in the cockpit. Well, if the recruiter would have told me that in the first place, I probably would have joined the Air Force. But—

Donelan

19:48

Well, you switch gears and life is about switching gears. And really that's what this is about. At the end of the day, John, is that ability and giving people the tools that they can use to switch gears. You know, if they're going down a path, if a community's heading down a path, that these are tools that you can use to sort of right the ship, right yourself, and get back on track it sounds like.

Wordin

20:08

Absolutely. I think there's certain fundamentals in life, particularly when you're serving a community or serving your country that are absolute. And if you can sort of identify those fundamentals and then reach out, and like I said, it's all about coalition building, and it can't be adversarial. It's easy to disagree with people; it's harder to agree and figure out where you agree and work out from there.

And like I said, we've had some really great successes working with LAPD, the sheriffs in Las Vegas, Detroit, Arlington, Texas, a number of places where we talked about things like civilian oversight of police departments and accountability and different things that officers can learn from the experiences that happened in Iraq and Afghanistan, because, believe me, the communities in Iraq and Afghanistan are 10 times or 100 times worse than even the worst place here in America.

And, for example, we had Command Sergeant Major David Clark, who helped set up the Afghan police force. To me, every police chief or every police training officer in America should be calling that guy and understanding how he set up and got the Afghan tribes—which all hate each other and would kill each other on sight—to work together to provide security force for their communities. I mean, it was nothing short of a miracle. And if he can do that in Afghanistan, imagine what he can do in Minneapolis, any of these other cities that are having so much unrest.

And, you know, obviously, it also takes political leadership and the way it works in America in the military is a little easier, because you just, you get an order, and you do it. But he's a great resource for training. And, you know, he was just on our last town hall in April and just a wealth of knowledge. And there's a lot of guys like that that served in Iraq and Afghanistan that we can learn from and our communities would be better for it.

Donelan

21:54

The fundamentals of communicating, of talking to one another—you're absolutely right. It's way easier to disagree than it is to agree, and getting people in the same room or getting people in that same dialogue to have those conversations, get past the disagreement, and start trying to go down that path of making a stronger community—it's fascinating and so needed. And it's just creating those opportunities, right? Because it's not rocket science; we have to talk to one another. And I think, in large part, many of us have forgotten to do that, and it sounds like the VOICE Project creates that opportunity to talk to one another.

You mentioned that peer support. You've mentioned it a few times. And I know that you explained to me that peer support is really the basis for much of it. When you're talking about peer support, when we're talking about law enforcement, are you talking about law enforcement supporting other law enforcement? Are you talking about identifying who it is in your world that can be best suited to offer that peer support? Are you talking about military veterans supporting law enforcement? Tell me more about the peer-support aspect.

Wordin

22:51

Yeah, it's the most important part of our program. And it's the part that we're the best at. I mean, if you could ask me, "What am I really good at?" I'm really good at getting people out of their comfort zone and getting them to understand how creating a peer-support network for yourself can vastly improve your life. And we did a program a year and a half ago with a police agency in Texas, and they were having a particular problem at the time with teenage shootings, gang-related shootings, traffic accidents, and their officers were really under a lot of stress.

A lot of, you know, you witness a lot of carnage as a police officer; people don't realize. And you take that home with you and your wife says, "Well, how was your day today?" Well, that police officer isn't about to go and say, "Well, you know, I just came out on this traffic accident and this 10-year-old boy, his head was decapitated," and the wife, you know, heard this or that. I mean, they're just not going to share that kind of information or talk about it with their spouse. And so, you need to talk about it to somebody.

And a lot of times they probably don't want to talk about it with someone they work with because, you know, they don't want that sort of chatter channel, if you will, or rumor channel going around and end up in the command where you get called in by your commander going, "Hey, so you have an issue." And you know, like the law enforcement officers are very proud. They try to do the best they can do, but everybody's human. And so, our retreats are great. I mean, the number one thing we do is try to connect people to one another, because sometimes the best peer-support person may not be someone you live with or work with, but it could be someone that you met through, who knows how, you know, someone else out there that sort of walked in your shoes.

And a lot of these officers are finding that, you know, these military guys, especially the kids—and I call them kids, but by now they're in their 20s and 30s—that had served in Iraq and Afghanistan were the enemy you couldn't identify a lot of times because they don't wear a uniform. And you'd have kids setting up roadside bombs or shooting rocket-propelled grenades at you. It's a lot of traumatic experiences. And so that peer support—and this was the part that I was the most proud that we built it into the app—is creating your own hub. And you can have a social circle, and you can have an inner circle.

And sometimes your inner circle isn't your family or people you work with; it's somebody that you met somewhere along the line. It could be a clinician, it could be anybody because different people connect, but it's someone you connect with. And everybody should have a go-to, or a couple of go-to people. And we actually set up as a tool... We use WhatsApp to connect people and create these peer-support networks. And it's encrypted technology. So, you know, everyone's on there. And it's amazing how when, as I call it, the bat signal goes out and you need help, people rally. And it's a great way to help people and it's just underutilized in a lot of police departments, the idea of setting up a peer-support network for their rank and file.

Donelan

25:48

Absolutely. Alright, so let's get down to the meat and potatoes of how people can get involved. So, if I'm a law enforcement, police leadership, I think that one of these tools, both of these tools—LifeScore app or the VOICE Project—would be [an] amazing tool for the community in which I serve. How do they get involved?

Wordin

26:06

The best way to reach me is through our website, lifeaidhope.org. That's L-I-F-E-A-I-D-H-O-P-E-dot-org. O-R-G, lifeaidhope.org.

Donelan

26:20

And do you have an email address that they could reach you? And is that for anyone, or is it just veterans or police officers?

Wordin

26:26

Yeah, anyone who's interested in reaching out to me and has any questions or comments or wants to participate in one of our upcoming retreats—we have retreats in different parts of the country throughout the year—you can reach me at info, I-N-F-O-@-no-vet-alone.org. That's N-O-V-E-T-A-L-O-N-E-dot-O-R-G, info@novetalone.org. And we'll get back to you and connect with you. That email address is also on the website on the contact us button, and they can get involved, they can see some of the work that we do and all the different areas, whether it's the research and the brain-health stuff, or the VOICE Project.

And soon we'll have a website for the app, but they can find out all kinds of information about our retreats. Any law enforcement, the retreats are free. The content, the brain mapping, all the services that we provide are free. And if you were interested in setting up a virtual town hall, or we even can do live town halls now, we'd be happy to look into trying to do that. Whenever we do a retreat in a major city, like we had an annual retreat that we do in Las Vegas, and we set up a town hall with the community and the Las Vegas Metro Police Department back in February. That was really cool.

Our next town hall, we're bringing together chaplains from the military and police departments from all over the country and talking about how faith leaders can help law enforcement build trust and transparency and build that coalition that is so vital to the success. And we're going to be working with the chief of chaplains for the United States Congress as well as the chaplain from the Detroit Police Department, and also Dr. Alveda King, Martin Luther King's niece, as among the guest speakers. And Detroit has a unique program with their chaplains that they use. They have probably the highest number of uniformed police officer chaplains in the country, and they've certainly done a great job.

I know that the chief there, Chief Craig, just retired, but we noticed when all the other cities were rioting and protesting and looting, Detroit didn't have any issues. And part of the reason was because of the coalition and the trust that had been built in that community between the law enforcement and all the different... whether it's the business community or the faith community, and even when the outside agitators tried to come in, the community told them to get out. We got this handled. And it's unique in the country, and so we're going to talk a lot about how the faith community can help law enforcement build trust within the community and the rank and file. And like I said, I mean, it'd be great to take this and make content that we can show in schools.

Donelan

29:01

John, you need to write a book because your life has been fascinating. This work is fascinating, and so I expect that we'll be hearing more about you and your projects in the future. I want to thank you so much for joining us on *The Beat*, and good luck to you and all of your efforts in the future.

Wordin

29:16

Thank you very much for having me. I really appreciate it. And I look forward to hopefully making our community stronger across the country.

Donelan

29:23

Absolutely. That's the goal. Thank you, John. And thank you, everyone, for joining us on this episode of *The Beat*.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

29:29

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

30:27

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