

Testimony to the President's Task Force on Officer Safety and Wellness
Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.)
Voices from the Field
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Concerns of Police Survivors is a 30 year old organization with the mission of "Rebuilding shattered lives of survivors and co-workers affected by line of duty deaths, through partnerships with law enforcement and the community." C.O.P.S. represents over 32,000 law enforcement family members and affected co-workers who lost a law enforcement officer in the line of duty. C.O.P.S. assists these families from the time directly following the death, by providing peer support and assistance in navigating the various benefits that may be available to them. We also provide long term services to these families—for as long as we are needed. C.O.P.S. has 48 Chapters representing survivors from across the country and is funded in part by a BJA grant. We enjoy the wide support of federal and local law enforcement agencies and the private corporate community. Some of the services we provide include scholarships for the surviving children and spouses of these officers, and peer-support programs and retreats to address grief issues. These services are provided for spouses, parents, children, fiancé's or significant others, siblings, adult children, extended family and affected co-workers. C.O.P.S. will also pay for counseling as needed for the children of officers killed in the line of duty. We have heard from many attendees that the peer support they receive has saved their lives. Co-Workers who attend the program talk about how for the first time they were receiving help from others that understood the trauma they had endured and they were able to open up and get the help that they needed. Children of officers who are killed in the line of duty talk about being around kids just like themselves and that they could just be "normal" again, when at Kids Camp.

C.O.P.S. also provides training to law enforcement through our signature Traumas in Law Enforcement Training where we spend time talking about line of duty death, but then also spend two days training officers on maintaining their mental health addressing everyday traumas experienced by

officers. While most of society only hears of the depraved, violent criminal activity that occurs every day in our country, our officers witness the crime and the lasting effects first hand. This training provides officers useful strategies for countering their own trauma they experience by responding to these calls. We train on how being injured on the job can have an impact on an officer and their family. We also train on the subject not often discussed in law enforcement, police suicide. Specifically we address the need to proactively maintain mental health and wellness throughout an officer's career to avoid what we see way too often, an officer taking their own life. While there does not seem to be universally agreed upon statistics used to capture how often this is happening, from our experience in training law enforcement, we can certainly say the number is shockingly high and mirrors or exceeds the number who die in the line of duty.

The voices we hear from the field of law enforcement survivors constantly repeat that the effects of each officer lost are felt forever. From the young children who grow up without a dad or mom, to the spouses whose life plans have been permanently altered and who may now face the reality of single parenthood, the effects are very real. From the parents who never recover from losing their son or daughter, to the brothers and sisters who feel compelled to stand in to help the parents, spouse and children, the recovery is slow and sometimes never achieved. To the co-workers who have faced their worst fears, yet feel compelled to remain strong by taking care of others before themselves, the suffering is sometimes silent, but is very real. The list goes on and on....even one officer lost in the line of duty results in a rippling effect of grief through a community, an agency, and a family.

On behalf of law enforcement survivors, we have four recommendations for this Task Force. **First, we recommend a nationwide effort to take care of the mental health needs of current law enforcement officers.** We ask our officers to witness and intervene in the most unspeakable acts of violence and dysfunction in our society. There should be as much time spent on maintaining the emotional well-being of our officers as is spent on tactical training. What good can officers do if they

know how to handle one dangerous situation, but can't mentally withstand going out there the next day to do it again? These support programs should be viewed by law enforcement administrators as critical and as a priority. Through trainings, such as the C.O.P.S. Traumas in Law Enforcement trainings, other peer support trainings, and employee assistance programs administered by counselors trained in public safety culture, progress can be made.

Second, we recommend a vest be provided to every law enforcement officer and strong language in policies regarding mandatory bullet resistant vest wear. There should also be policies governing officer's driving and realistic driver training. Every officer should have access to a vest. Lack of funds should never be a reason an officer doesn't have basic protection. During my experience as a police officer with the Columbia, Missouri Police Department, my co-worker was shot in the chest from point blank range with a shotgun, and her vest most certainly saved her life. I am glad our agency could afford body armor. Again, lack of funding should never be a reason an officer doesn't have basic protection. Nationwide, we lose too many officers whose decisions behind the wheel of their patrol car were not focused enough on the officer's own safety. Officers often drive quickly toward a call with the noble goal of saving a life and, sadly, sometimes trade their own life before they ever arrive. Policies governing driving and training about the reasons behind these policies should be a strong focus of police administrators. We recognize that officers have to respond quickly to emergencies, but these officers should also be making these decisions through an educated personal lens, with their own safety a factor to also be considered.

Third, we recommend stiff penalties for those who assault or kill a law enforcement officer. In a time where there is much attention to be gotten by those who commit crimes shocking the conscious, there is an almost perfect environment for a cop killer to use the media to gain attention. Because our nation's criminals often see prison as a stop gap between times of criminal behavior and freedom, the only way to combat this behavior is there should be no consideration of parole, when an

officer is killed. There should be heightened penalties for assaults on police. While many in our society see being assaulted as part of the law enforcement “job,” as a country we have to combat this belief by sending a strong message to those who make this choice. Heightened penalties is one way to accomplish this. A consideration of the safety of our nation’s officers must also be included a part of a larger culture of community safety and national security. When we, as citizens, accept the harm being done to our officers as part of the “job,” we add validity to the offender’s actions.

Fourth, we recommend a nation-wide effort to reestablish law enforcement as the noble profession that we all know it is. Over the past 6 months, our survivors and country’s citizens have watched as law enforcement officers in general have been stereotyped and crucified in the media and many of our communities. Police memorials have been vandalized, even as recent as this past week in Colorado. All of law enforcement, even our nation’s best and bravest officers, have been called brutal, unprofessional and uncaring, while the vast majority of our nation’s officers would never consider being anything but professional, upholding the sanctity of their oath as one of their key values in their role as a public safety officer. Officers have been second-guessed and scrutinized by those who have months to consider all the possible actions an officer could have taken when the officer only had seconds to consider his actions. All of our nation’s officers have been put into one category and considered as a whole, when law enforcement officers are asked to always consider individual circumstances when making their decisions. Officers are never to stereotype others even as they are being stereotyped now by their vocal critics. The consequences of the constant negative attention being given to law enforcement are far reaching. Our nation’s future police officers are watching, and during a time when the recruitment of quality officers is already an increasing challenge, we can expect even more challenges. Without an effort to increase the public value of law enforcement and an effort to appeal to the civic duty of those considering a law enforcement career, we could see communities forced to

hire those looking for a job rather than those seeking a professional law enforcement career—the results of which could have a negative effect on our communities and our officers' safety.

The law enforcement survivors represented by C.O.P.S., expressed a very strong need to combat the negative attention being paid to law enforcement and to convey the sense of support really felt by the sometimes silent majority of our citizens. Law enforcement is indeed a noble profession and there is honor in the fact that these families' loved ones died in protection of us all. Therefore, on January 9th of this year, we led a grass roots effort in partnership with all of the major law enforcement organizations, to show our support to our nation's officers as part of our first annual Law Enforcement Appreciation Day (L.E.A.D.). Much support was garnered in many forms, from community rallies and statewide resolutions to school children making cards for their local law enforcement officers. L.E.A.D. was just one way our organization could support our fourth recommendation to you—which is a nationwide effort to reestablish law enforcement as the noble profession that it is. When the law enforcement profession is consistently given a position of honor and integrity by society, there will be less community acceptance of harm being done to our officers. These positive societal pressures will help keep our officers safe.

Thank you for asking for the input from Concerns of Police Survivors in this Task Force. In closing, we would like all to remember that each officer we talk about during this very important work is much more than a statistic, but is a part of a larger family and is important to us all.