

**President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing**

**Office of Community Oriented Policing Services**

**U.S. Department of Justice**

**Testimony of David R. Orr**

**Submitted February 23, 2015**

Good Morning Commissioner Ramsey, Professor Robinson, and distinguished members of the President's Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing. I am honored and humbled by this opportunity to speak to you about the issue of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as it relates to those in my profession. I bring to you the perspective of a front line supervisor tasked with the duty of watching over those performing the job every day. The community that I serve, Norwalk Connecticut, is a 45 minute drive or a short train ride from New York City. Norwalk is a small and diverse working class city located on the coast of the Long Island Sound.

As a Union leader I represent and advocate for my membership in collective bargaining, labor rights, and discipline. However, I often find myself performing the duties of a peer counselor to my colleagues during stressful times in their professional or personal lives. This would include those stressful times following a critical incident at work where death has occurred. Occasionally, these incidents can be so severe that they burn a lasting impression into the mind of the most seasoned veteran cops. I'm talking about multiple casualty incidents, heinous murders, torturings, deaths of children, and any other real tragedy the details of which

you wouldn't want to talk about at the dinner table. As cops we all know that those outside of our profession love to hear a good war story. This is evidenced by the countless number of TV shows and movies that glorify cop life and culture. People love to hear the story of the car chase, the big arrest of the bank robber or the murderer, or the life that you saved, but nobody wants to hear the story told by the Newtown Officer who responded to Sandy Hook Elementary and entered the First Grade classroom to find an entire class full of six year old children murdered by a deranged young man with an assault rifle. Nobody wants to know about the scene inside of a home in Cheshire, CT, in 2007 where Jennifer Hawke-Petit and her daughters Michaela, 11, and Hayley, 17, were raped, doused with gasoline, tied down, and murdered. This is the part of our job that no one wants to hear about, and that's understandable. Unfortunately, the reality is that horrible tragedies will continue to happen, and police officers will continue to respond to them.

We as officers will continue to voluntarily insert our bodies and minds into these events in an effort to help. Most of us will emerge and find a way to cope with what we've experienced, but some will not. Some will be scarred so deeply that the course of their lives will change indefinitely. For these officers it is our duty to ensure that the necessary services and coverage are provided for the wounds inflicted on their minds, just as if those wounds had been inflicted on their bodies.

In the United States only 32 states currently provide adequate mental health coverage under worker's compensation. The State of Connecticut is one of the 18 remaining States that does not currently recognize a mental health injury, including PTSD, as a compensable injury under its workers compensation laws. The only exception to this is for medical benefits for

police officers and firefighters who, while in the line of duty, witness the death of one of their own.

After the incident at Sandy Hook Elementary, many of the officers who responded to the school and investigated the aftermath of that devastating tragedy suffered from intense PTSD. Had they suffered a physical injury, they would be covered under workers compensation, but since their injuries were mental in nature and those who died were not police officers, there is no coverage. Their claims under worker's comp were rejected. They were forced to go back to work or lose their jobs. Many did not get the mental health care that they needed, nor did they get sufficient time off from work to recover.

A police officer who is at work and suffering from PTSD raises serious public safety concerns. Police officers can encounter extremely stressful and dangerous situations in the course of their work. Officers who are suffering from PTSD can present a danger to themselves or to others, or they may be rendered ineffective in performing their essential work functions. Without worker's compensation coverage for work related PTSD and the protections that are offered under the workers compensation act, officers might be unwilling to admit that they have PTSD. This can have serious consequences for the officer both professionally and personally, and can present a significant civil liability for their employer.

In the weeks following Sandy Hook I, along with hundreds of other police officers from around the State of Connecticut, volunteered to work and cover shifts for the Newtown Police Department. We would travel to Newtown PD, attend their roll call, take a Newtown PD radio, and either respond to calls for service using a GPS system or roadmap, or we would man one of

the dozens of security or traffic posts that were setup throughout the town. We responded to help because we could see that our brother and sister officers in Newtown needed it. They were exhausted physically, and even more so emotionally.

So, I am now respectfully asking that you do the same for those officers who are suffering from job related PTSD, and that you deliver to the President in your report on March 2<sup>nd</sup> the message that I have tried to convey to you today. That PTSD is a real problem in policing, that it cannot be ignored, that it should be covered under worker's compensation in every State in this country, and that our first responders are deserving of that coverage. Thank you for your time this morning, and for allowing me to speak to you on this topic.