

**Testimony of Yousry “Yost” Zakhary  
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Before the Task Force on 21st Century Policing  
Listening Session: Officer Safety and Wellness  
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Commissioner Ramsey, Professor Robinson, Director Davis, and members of the Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing, thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Yost Zakhary and I am the director of the Woodway, Texas, Public Safety Department and the immediate past president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP).

I began my career as a law enforcement dispatcher with the City of Woodway, Texas, in 1979. I am still there today and am currently the chief and director of the Public Safety Department. One of my main duties as chief is to ensure the safety and well-being of my officers. This means making sure they have the proper training and equipment they need to do their job safely, accurately, and efficiently, so they can return home to their loved ones after their shift.

During my time as President of the IACP from 2013 to 2014, officer safety and wellness was one of my top priorities, and it has always been the IACP's main priority. It is the position of the organization that no injury to or death of a law enforcement professional is acceptable.

Being a law enforcement officer has always been a stressful and dangerous job, but currently the law enforcement community is up against even greater pressures, challenges, and violence. Police officers face and witness profound danger on a daily basis. We put our lives on the line every day to confront crime and violence in our communities. We do this because we took an oath to safeguard our fellow citizens. We believe in that oath and feel an allegiance to and pride for the citizens we protect and the communities we serve.

Each year, there are more than 50,000 assaults on law enforcement officers, which result in more than 14,000 officers being injured each year. This past year, 126 officers were killed in the line of duty. Firearms-related incidents were the leading cause of death among law enforcement officers in 2014. Firearms-related fatalities accounted for 50 deaths, increasing 56 percent from 2013, when 32 officers were killed.<sup>1</sup> Violent ambush-style attacks on law enforcement officers also increased. In 2014, 15 officers nationwide were killed in ambush assaults, matching 2012 for the highest total since 1995.

It is imperative that we provide the proper training and equipment to our officers to help prevent more fatalities and injuries from firearms and ambush attacks. Officer safety is an all-hands task; not only is it the responsibility of a chief, it is also the responsibility of the government, state, and local government leaders, and community members, to ensure the safety and well-being of its officers who have dedicated their lives to protecting their communities.

Sadly, and perhaps surprisingly to many, a number of American law enforcement officers do not have the proper equipment, like body armor, available to them on a routine basis or their equipment is not completely up to date. This is in part attributable to the shrinking budgets of state and local governments and their law enforcement agencies.

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<sup>1</sup> "Research Bulletin: Law Enforcement Officer Deaths: Preliminary 2014," National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, <http://www.nleomf.org/assets/pdfs/reports/Preliminary-2014-Officer-Fatalities-Report.pdf>, (accessed February 17, 2015).

Equipment like body armor or bulletproof vests are critically important to a police officer's survival and well-being. There's no denying it, vests save lives, so it is imperative that all law enforcement officers are outfitted with properly fitted bulletproof vests. The Bulletproof Vest Partnership (BVP) Grant Program is a critical resource that enables state and local law enforcement jurisdictions to purchase these lifesaving vests. It is imperative that this program continues to get reauthorized and receive adequate funding.

What many people don't realize is broad reaching effects from when an officer is killed or even wounded. Not only does the officer suffer, but so do the officer's family, friends and police colleagues. The death of a law enforcement officer has a shocking impact upon the agency and the community as a whole. The unique effects can range from reduced productivity and low morale among officers to public fearfulness and sorrow. There is also the potential for strained relations between the community and the law enforcement agency.

In addition to the human costs, there are financial and operational costs to consider. The U.S. Department of Justice – Bureau of Justice Assistance - Public Safety Officers Benefits Program, provides \$323,035 in death and education benefits to survivors of fallen law enforcement officers. The average cost of a bulletproof vest is \$800 to \$1,000. That's roughly 323 vests that could be purchased with money saved, if more departments had assistance in purchasing vests for their officers.

The loss of one officer in a small agency can have a crippling effect upon manpower and the agency's ability to deliver services, not to mention the devastating blow that it inevitably has on fellow officers, friends and colleagues. While larger agencies are less vulnerable to manpower disruptions, they too experience devastating emotional blows that can disrupt operations and services.

The death or injury of an officer creates a wide variety of unanticipated and very costly expenditures for the agency. Possible expenditures include medical bills; funeral expenses; workman's compensation and death benefit payments; increased insurance premiums; sick leave; retirement system costs; legal fees; civil judgments; replacement and retraining expenses; and overtime pay. Viewed solely in a financial light, the effects of an officer's death can have significant consequences.

Law enforcement executives understand that recent events have given rise to questions about the 1033 program and its value to law enforcement agencies and the communities we serve. For these reasons, the IACP is committed to working with the White House, the Department of Justice and all agencies involved in this important, and timely, review of the 1033 program.

In addition to having access to proper equipment, law enforcement officers need to be able to receive regular training to deal with the myriad of issues they encounter, including hostage situations, mental health calls for service, active shooter incidents, domestic violence incidents,

and many more. On that note, the IACP is in the process of developing policy guidelines for preventing and protecting against ambush attacks.

Vehicular accidents are another leading cause of law enforcement deaths. In 2014, killing 49 officers. Thirty-five officers died in automobile crashes, nine officers were struck and killed outside their vehicle, and five officers were killed in motorcycle crashes. Traffic-related fatalities increased 11 percent from 2013, when 44 officers were killed.<sup>2</sup> I have witnessed too many deaths of fellow officers for something as simple as not wearing their seatbelts. Crashes can be preventable—and that is why we need to ensure that our officers have proper training on vehicular pursuits, refrain from distracted driving, and wear their seatbelts. In addition, far too many law enforcement officers have been injured or killed outside of their vehicles while conducting traffic stops or investigating crashes. That is why law enforcement is working hard to educate the public about the Move Over initiative. When motorists see emergency vehicles, they need to slow down and move over.

Physical wellness is a huge part of officer safety. A fit officer will be able to serve his or her community better, as well as provide better support to his or her fellow officers. It is imperative that chiefs promote wellness within their departments and encourage their officers to get regular physical checks and exercise frequently. The IACP's Center for Officer Safety and Wellness can be a resource for law enforcement in this area. The Center promotes physical health and wellness. As part of the Reducing Officer Injuries initiative, IACP released the "Impact of Fitness and Weight on Injuries" fact sheet and the *Reducing Officer Injuries Final Report*, which highlight the importance of physical wellness. Recently, IACP also released two resources examining the importance of officer nutrition: a pocket guide for patrol officers providing healthy on-the-go meal options, and a fact sheet written for law enforcement leadership to encourage nutrition guidance and education as part of formal and informal departmental training.

Law enforcement officers are not immune to mental health issues. Our jobs often place us in the middle of highly traumatic situations, and this can cause a lot increased emotional stress and trauma for officers. While there are no definitive statistics on the number of law enforcement officers who take their own lives annually, estimates put that figure at roughly double the number of officers killed in the line of duty each year by felonious assaults or traffic-related injuries.

In a profession where strength, bravery, and resilience are revered, mental health issues and the threats of officer suicide are often topics few are willing to address or acknowledge openly and candidly. That is why the IACP, in conjunction with the COPS Office, held a National Symposium on Law Enforcement Officer Suicide and Mental Health. The result of the symposium, was the report *Breaking the Silence on Law Enforcement Suicides*. This report, included in the appendix, is designed to prevent and mitigate the destructive effects of

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<sup>2</sup> "Research Bulletin: Law Enforcement Officer Deaths: Preliminary 2014," National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, <http://www.nleomf.org/assets/pdfs/reports/Preliminary-2014-Officer-Fatalities-Report.pdf>, (accessed February 17, 2015).

emotional trauma, mental illness, and officer deaths by suicide on a police community; to successfully intervene when officers confront mental health crises, mental illness, or suicidal behavior; and to provide effective event response protocols when an officer dies by suicide in an agency. It is also intended to create a culture of change that normalizes mental health issues for law enforcement officers, so that seeking mental health support can be viewed as positively as an officer seeking help for a physical ailment.

Lastly, it is imperative that all departments provide guidance to their officers, especially the new recruits coming in. Not only do they need to be provided with the proper equipment and training, but they also need guidance in the areas of both physical and mental health. In addition, each department should be sure to clearly demonstrate that it has certain rules and procedures in place. To many officers, their department is like their family. They experience many difficult and challenging things with their fellow brothers and sisters, but in no way does that mean that a department will defend misconduct. All officers should be held accountable for their actions, and this means that every department must establish Internal Affairs policies to deal with potential misconduct. If misconduct occurs, the agency should already have measures in place to investigate and address such behavior. The intake process for filing complaints must be accommodating for the individual registering the complaint so they feel comfortable. In addition, the individual filing the complaint should be kept up to date on the status of his or her complaint. If an agency has a strong internal police disciplinary system in place that is well-designed and carried out by well-trained internal affairs investigators, it will send a strong ethical and professional message to all staff, both sworn and civilian.

The recent IACP report, *Building Trust Between the Police and the Citizens They Serve: An Internal Affairs Promising Practices Guide*, which was funded by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, stresses the value of best practice disciplinary systems to both the department and the community in helping to build a high degree of trust between citizens and police. As much as the community wants to see officers rewarded for excellence, they also want to see officers held strictly accountable for any misconduct—particularly serious misconduct.

It is important to note that internal Affairs investigations, however, should be but one component of a systemic approach to ethical conduct. If law enforcement executives hire the appropriate staff, deliver ethics training, establish an early intervention system, and properly supervise staff, all of which build trust within their communities, the Internal Affairs process may be necessary only in rare instances.

Again, thank you for convening this very important listening session and for the opportunity to express my views on officer safety and wellness. It is imperative that we provide the proper support for law enforcement officers. We put our lives on the line on a daily basis to protect our communities, and ensuring that we have the proper equipment, training, and support so that we can be both mentally and physically fit will make us even better at our jobs.

I welcome any questions from Task Force members.