

TAKING ITS TOLL.... PAYING THE PRICE

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Blue Line Magazine
September Issue, 2001

For the last dozen years Tom (not his real name) has served with a medium-sized Canadian urban police force. He has attended all the "usual" major law enforcement calls: home invasions, spousal assaults, suicides on Christmas Eve, robberies, traffic fatalities, crib deaths, and a myriad of routine criminal offences. He has worked in patrol, traffic, community policing, and now is back in patrol working shifts.

Like all law enforcement professionals, he has spent long nights on patrol, immediately followed by days sitting outside a criminal courtroom waiting to be cross-examined on one of his investigations. Citizens have yelled at Tom as he was writing them tickets and told him to go catch "real criminals". He has worked with some great supervisors, and many that were not so great. Tom's department has gone through a number of "flavour of the month" management strategies and strategic plans tied to vision statements he's not sure he fully understands, or supports.

Now, as he enters the mid-point of his career, Tom is starting to realize he has lost the passion he felt for policing in the early days of the job. His wife complains that he is moody and distant. He hasn't had a great nights sleep in what seems like months. That duty belt seems to be getting smaller and smaller. The night shift pizza doesn't sit well any more. There is an uncomfortable kink in his back that just won't go away.

Over the past few years there have been a few more citizen complaints made against Tom. This rarely happened in the early years. Tom's sergeant has told him that his productivity and quality of work is slipping.

Tom is somebody that all of us know. Many of us have walked in his shoes. In the unique world of law enforcement, people are exposed to a wide variety of unpredictable events and organizational stresses. Some are short-term events, while many are systemic. All of them take their toll.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

As Tom's example demonstrates, law enforcement professionals are exposed to two very different sources of stress - organizational (or systemic) job stress, and traumatic stress. Long-term exposure to systemic job stress results in a wide range of negative effects on individuals and the workplace. Exposure to traumatic stress also results in a characteristic set of distressing responses and symptoms. While both systemic stress and traumatic stress are each serious problems in their own right, when combined they greatly increase the risk for negative effects.

It is now clear that the effects of workplace stress and trauma are critical issues in law-enforcement. We know that the problem affects members, their families, the workplace, and the employer. We also know that the problem is increasing and that the personal and financial costs are escalating.

Consequences to the individual member may include a wide range of physical health problems including cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal problems, increased risk for cancer, and immune system problems. Depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and addictions are all outcomes of long-term high-level workplace stress. Unfortunately, long-term stress symptoms such as poor communication, withdrawal, aggression, mistrust and defensiveness often contribute to family breakdown and loss of the member's support network.

In terms of the organization, effects include decreased productivity, poor morale, increased staff conflict, absenteeism, increased overwork and overtime. Stressed members are also at risk to "cut corners" and engage in more hazardous practices.

Direct budget-related costs to the employer are also significant in terms of increased sick leave, increased long-term disability, higher rates of staff turnover, and increased costs of recruitment, training and orientation.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

The problem of workplace stress in law-enforcement is complex; therefore effective program interventions need to address a number of critical elements:

The organizational culture:

- The organization needs to recognize and accept the problem, and to then develop a serious commitment to address it
- Members need to normalize the problem of workplace stress and trauma effects and to accept that stress effects are common and that they affect all individuals, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, management level, etc

Management skills and attitudes:

- Managers need to be knowledgeable about workplace stress and trauma
- Managers need to understand the role of leadership style in either promoting workplace wellness or in increasing workplace stress

A workplace wellness program:

- The program needs to be accessible to all members, and should provide them with the background knowledge and the tools necessary to develop an effective personal wellness plan

- Because workplace stress is a pervasive long-term problem, effective programs should be sustainable and durably embedded in the workplace

With these principles in mind, the authors have developed a comprehensive Workplace Stress, Burnout and Trauma in Law Enforcement Program that includes both an employee wellness program as well as manager and supervisor training.

THE EMPLOYEE WELLNESS PROGRAM

The employee wellness program is based on the workbook, *The Road Back to Wellness: Stress, Burnout and Trauma in Law-Enforcement*. Drawing from the latest research and best clinical practices, the book is designed to meet the needs of members by providing a three-part program:

Section 1 introduces the issue of workplace systemic and traumatic stresses, and their effects on the individual's personal and professional life.

Section 2 provides a battery of 17 self-assessment tools that help individuals to determine: their current levels of risk for systemic and traumatic workplace stress factors; their levels of self-care; their current symptomatic profile.

Section 3 provides effective tools to help individuals develop their own personalized wellness plans

THE MANAGER AND SUPERVISORY TRAINING PROGRAM

Manager and supervisor training is based on the reference book, *The Manager's Guide to Stress Burnout and Trauma in Law Enforcement*. The training program provides managers with a solid theory base regarding the mechanisms and effects of workplace systemic and traumatic stress in law-enforcement. The theory and principles of management strategy are also covered with particular attention to their impact on worker stress. Managers are provided with assessment tools that help them to:

- Determine their own management style and its effect on subordinates
- Determine the impact of workplace stress on unit functioning

The final section provides tools and templates to assist managers to develop practical management plans for their teams.

Program delivery has been specifically designed to increase accessibility. Thus, both the employee wellness and the managers training programs are available as:

- Stand-alone programs for individual members or managers
- On-line web-based courses through the Police Academy at the Justice Institute of BC

- Facilitated on-site 2-day group programs. The employee wellness program can also be provided through a train-the-trainers model.

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, law enforcement professionals are exposed to a unique set of systemic and traumatic workplace stresses. There is now ample evidence that failure to deal with these issues leads to serious consequences for individual members, their families, the workplace environment and the employer. We cannot ignore the problem - it will not go away.

Building on recent research and changing attitudes within the field, we are now in a position to effectively address workplace stress and trauma in law enforcement - whether through our program or through other initiatives. Effective intervention requires both a shift in attitude toward the problem as well as a commitment of effort and funding. However, we need to remember that failure to attend to this issue will only lead to further escalations in the personal and financial costs to members and their organizations.