

## **Building and Maintaining a Peer Support Team**

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Agency endorsed Peer Support and Critical Incident Stress Management Teams are often overlooked until tragedy necessitates their existence and utilization. As a law enforcement leader, ask yourself if your agency is being as proactive as necessary in health, wellness, and response to tragedy? One such tragedy befell the Davis Police Department in the early portion of this year. A very young rising star, barely embarking upon her career, was assassinated while assisting motorists with a minor collision. When this occurred, our Peer Support Team was relatively new, having been formed and written into policy less than two years prior. Despite the infancy of our team, we were able to function as a cohesive unit, assisting, counseling, and guiding the agency, and its members, on the road to recovery. This was facilitated both by administrative support for our mission, and the drive and integrity of the department members who volunteered for the arduous task of becoming a Department Peer.

It is a well-known fact that first responders are exposed to high levels of stress, trauma, and risk for depression, anxiety, divorce, alcoholism, and negative health outcomes. I was recently told by a credible professional that a career as a first responder may reduce life expectancy by as much as seven to ten years. Peer Support can help remedy this problem.

In 2017, I had the honor of assisting with the implementation and personnel selection for a Peer Support Team to serve our agency. This undertaking established a new collateral unit and thus filled a void in our agency. Having spent the bulk of the last twenty years in a large, metropolitan agency, I was appreciative of the level of autonomy granted by the administration. Embarking upon this responsibility, I quickly learned a few key components necessary to establish an effective Peer Support Program.

### **Personnel Selection**

The most crucial component to a successful team is personnel selection. Individuals considered for such an assignment should be volunteers who are willing to sacrifice their personal time when the need arises. Personnel must be trustworthy and fully committed to maintaining confidentiality, absent a policy or law violation. A team that lacks credibility simply will not be utilized by agency personnel. We found great success selecting participants from a cross section of the agency and providing quality training recognized by California POST.

### **Clarification of Roles and Guidelines**

It is very important that members of peer support teams be provided with clear roles and guidelines. The IACP Police Psychological Services Section<sup>1</sup> maintains Peer Support Guidelines that serve as a roadmap for defining the roles of effective peer support teams and team members. Key issues to be aware of include privacy, confidentiality, the recent passage of AB-1117<sup>2</sup>, the standard of care, critical incidents, program logistics, role conflicts, training, and best practices for serving as a liaison with mental health professionals.

## Team Maintenance

Caring for those who care for others is paramount. Compassion fatigue, the lessening of compassion in response to secondary trauma, is real and has the capacity to debilitate personnel asked to participate in group or one-on-one debriefings. As the Team Coordinator following our last critical incident, I assisted with the critical incident debriefings process. Each debriefing was chaired by a licensed clinician, as well as one or two agency peers. Along with the traditional format and groupings, the last debriefing we conducted was for team members only. This session was chaired by the same clinician who attended the other meetings. The purpose was obvious: assemble as many team members as possible, and speak amongst a friendly audience, hoping to avert compassion fatigue. As a team, we have begun to weather the storm, and ten months later, our entire unit remains intact.

The senseless murder of one of our own this year was tragic and heartbreaking. Each of us has been told that absent our Peer Support Program, the agency would have been broken, possibly beyond repair. Thanks to firm support from our administration, allied agencies, family members, and each other, our department is beginning to heal, and return to a sense of normalcy. Utilize your most valuable asset: your people. Agency personnel already have an innate desire to help. Leverage that compassion and energy for the benefit of all who represent your department.

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<sup>1</sup> International Association of Chiefs of Police. Peer Support Guidelines. Retrieved from <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/Psych-PeerSupportGuidelines.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> California Legislative Information. Assembly Bill No. 1117. Retrieved from [https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201920200AB1117](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB1117)