

How to Vet Therapists for Your Police Department

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As a police chief, you may believe that you have the pieces in place to support officer wellness, yet police departments of all sizes throughout California have found that they lack sufficient access to culturally competent law enforcement therapists. This lack of quality care is unfair, untenable, and can contribute to disastrous outcomes. Last year, a survey of 8,000 officers revealed that police nationwide overwhelmingly report that stressful and traumatic experiences on the job have impacted their mental health, with 90% indicating law enforcement culture creates a barrier to seeking emotional help.

Nationwide research also reveals that the majority of officers who utilize their employee assistance programs (EAPs) find them to be unhelpful, and stories abound of officers contacting EAPs for help only to be provided with a list of unqualified therapists. Providing confidential access to culturally competent law enforcement therapists is a vital and common-sense strategy that addresses these shortcomings while strengthening officer wellness, resilience, morale, and long-term retention.

Cultural Competence

Vetting therapists to ensure they are culturally competent to work with law enforcement is critical. The good news is that cultural competence can often be improved over time when therapists participate in ride-alongs, pursue additional education, and seek appropriate supervision. When vetting a therapist's cultural competence to work with police, it is important to consider:

- Experience with law enforcement
- Attitudes towards law enforcement
- Familiarity with law enforcement culture
- Motivation to work with law enforcement
- Therapeutic skill working specifically with law enforcement
- Ability and willingness to support law enforcement in times of crisis

Therapist Quality

Research demonstrates that high-quality, experienced therapists generate significantly better results, with quicker resolution of problems and reduction of symptoms. In contrast, therapists with the poorest outcomes actually make their clients *worse* on average—not just occasionally, but in the majority of their cases. Therapist quality encompasses many basic issues (such as licensure status) in addition to:

- Empathy
- Judgment
- Practice history
- Professionalism
- Emotional stability
- Clinical assessment skills
- Use of empirically validated treatments

- Domains of professional competence and specialization
- Ability to quickly form trust-based therapeutic relationships

Availability and Responsiveness

The most culturally competent and high-quality therapists are of little value if unavailable when needed by law enforcement. Important factors to consider include:

- Timeliness returning phone calls for new referrals
- Openness to accepting new law enforcement referrals
- Timeliness returning phone calls for current and past clients
- Updating of voicemail when practice is full or therapist is unavailable
- Responsiveness to urgent requests

Confidentiality and Discretion

Concerns about privacy and confidentiality constitute major barriers to law enforcement seeking help during their times of need. Fortunately, state and federal laws provide extensive protection for healthcare client confidentiality. When vetting therapists for confidentiality, consider:

- Knowledge of laws governing client confidentiality
- Practices to ensure discretion and confidentiality
- Office layout and waiting room configuration
- Social media history and practices

High-Tech Therapist Solutions

Technology now allows officers to interact with therapists via HIPAA-encrypted video, which is an important consideration for officers in remote locations and also for departments that lack sufficient access to local police therapists. Many police departments are utilizing department-customized law enforcement wellness apps¹ that provide access to culturally competent, vetted law enforcement therapists, peer support, police chaplains, and a multitude of additional police wellness support resources. It is already the case that technology is playing a critical role in helping many police departments to ensure their officers have access to vetted therapists, and the use of technology to strengthen therapist access and officer wellness continues to grow.

Conclusion

Ensuring your police department has access to high-quality, culturally competent therapists should be a top priority. By leveraging the guidelines outlined in this article, coupled with assistance from trusted resources, we can make great strides towards making sure that those who serve and protect their communities have the emotional and personal support necessary to thrive throughout their careers.

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¹ Cordico Shield. Retrieved from www.cordico.com/shield