

Redding Police Department Peer Support Team

On July 23, 2018, a small wildfire was reported several miles west of the city of Redding. The fire spread rapidly, and by July 26, it entered the city of Redding proper, forcing the evacuation of more than 39,000 citizens and destroying hundreds of structures in its path. Every officer available responded and assisted with the evacuations. During the evacuations, officers frantically worked to clear gridlocked traffic and moved house-to-house evacuating residences, often with flames just feet away. During the evacuations, a “fire tornado” ripped through a subdivision, killing a Redding Firefighter. Despite the loss of a friend and a fellow first responder, and knowing their own homes and families were threatened, officers continued to work countless hours protecting the citizens of Redding. Within a week, the fire had burned over 229,000 acres, killed six citizens and two firefighters, and rated the sixth-most destructive fire in California history.

Second only to the citizens of Redding, our concerns were for our officers who had been working nonstop since the fire destroyed portions of Redding. Because of the strong Peer Support Program established in 1994, the Department was able to contact a counselor with the West Coast Post Trauma Retreat and request assistance. This counselor stayed at our facility in a recreational vehicle and spoke with officers, day or night, providing counseling to officers who worked the event. Additionally, a requested by our Peer Support Program for additional Chaplains from Sacramento County to work with our local Chaplains. They worked tirelessly providing anything from towels to prayers. After the fire, our primary goal was to repopulate neighborhoods after they were determined to be safe. The Chaplains worked alongside officers in these neighborhoods during the repopulating process, handing out stuffed animals to children to offer some comfort. They also provided referrals to various resources for clothing, food, and other services. Most importantly, Chaplains provided emotional and spiritual support to those who were coming back to nothing. As the months progressed and the city turned to rebuilding, Peer Support participated in critical incident stress debriefings and referred affected personnel to mental health professionals and to facilities for short- and long-term care.

For the six-month anniversary of the Carr Fire, the Redding Police Department Peer Support Team invited retired Captain Police Captain Dan Willis, author of Bulletproof Spirit, to speak not only to our Department but all first responders and their spouses. For the one-year anniversary of the Carr Fire, the Redding Police Department Peer Support Team invited Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, author of On Killing, to speak. This event was again open to all first responders and their spouses. Both presenters displayed a wealth of knowledge on the psychology of stress, stress management, and identifying Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), greatly assisting with the healing process and providing great prospective on how fragile life can be.

As evidenced above, in the aftermath of the Carr Fire, the Redding Police Department demonstrated an extremely proactive approach to ensure that Redding citizens and Redding Police Officers were offered every available resource to deal with a very traumatic natural disaster. This type of approach was extended to officers and their families for the stresses associated with law enforcement.

Over the past 25 years, our Peer Support program has changed significantly to stay current with today's work environment. It has grown from just several officers to 25 officers, including 3 supervisors and 1 program manager, all of whom are involved in the coordination of Peer Support Officers' endeavors within the Department. Peer Support Officers were assigned to those officers involved in critical incidents, stress-related issues, officers injured on and off duty, and officers who have personal issues requiring assistance and/or intervention.

Officers are carefully selected by the administration for this position based on their knowledge and experience, both on and off the job. It is also very important that they are well respected by their coworkers. They receive 24 hours of initial POST training, which prepares them for some of the situations they may encounter while assisting other officers and providing available resources. Peer Support Officers continue to receive the latest training throughout their tenure in the program, ensuring they are capable of addressing complicated issues in a methodical, responsible, and professional manner.

The Redding Police Department takes a proactive approach to innovative peer support, working closely with local psychologists. These psychologists work closely with the Peer Support Team and officers to make sure proper care and treatment are provided. For example, any person who is showing significant signs of PTSD is immediately referred to the West Coast Post-Traumatic Retreat (WCPR) for treatment where the goal is to provide a safe and confidential environment for healing, education, and support. This has proved to be an excellent resource providing officers with the support to regain control over their lives, and to develop a new perspective on stress and coping mechanisms.

The Redding Police Department prepares for, forecasts, and responds to incidents that affect the organization, as well as its officers. The Department accomplishes this by providing ongoing formal training that prepares the officers and the organization for significant events. This training does not "harden" an officer, but prepares them mentally and assists them in identifying behavior in themselves and their colleagues, which may require professional help at a later date. The Redding Police Department realizes that in order to be successful, officers need to be prepared physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Officers physically prepare themselves daily before the shift, working out in our CrossFit gym. Peer Support Officers are always available to speak with officers regarding personal issues, and our Chaplains are there for spiritual support.

The Peer Support Program could not function without the City of Redding Employee Assistance Program (EAP). This Program provides employees with six professional assessments per year, unlimited child/elder care referrals, legal/financial assistance, resources for any personal/community-related services, and multi-cultural and multilingual providers nationwide. The Redding Police Department also benefits from a well-established Chaplaincy Program, which consists of seven Chaplains. Our Chaplains collaborate with our Peer Support Program, providing emotional and spiritual support. Chaplains are trained in critical incident stress management and receive ongoing training throughout their tenure at the Redding Police Department.

For more than 24 years, I have watched the Redding Peer Support Program blossom into the type of program that helps men and women of the Redding Police Department face and overcome both

personal and professional obstacles. I have been one of those officers. It is my honor to now supervise the Peer Support Program that has had such a positive effect on so many lives. There is no doubt that every agency, and the communities they serve, would benefit from a peer support program.

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