

Spouses Academy: Cutting-Edge Peer Support

By Sergeant James Terry, Pittsburg Police Department

Law enforcement has come a long way in tactical and officer development training; over the last two decades most agencies have recognized the need to prepare our officers with a wide variety of skills needed to survive this career intact, both physically and emotionally.

Law enforcement involves a lifetime commitment to serving others. But, this determination to serve others, without the correct life balance, can result in neglect to your own well-being and to those you love. Agencies, and the leaders within them, have the responsibility to ensure our officers are taking care of themselves, and their families, and nurturing healthy relationships to thrive post retirement.

In 2014, the Pittsburg Police Department started a Peer Support Team which consisted of sworn and non-sworn personnel that were selected by their peers and supervisors. This core group of personnel, along with Clinical Psychologist Elizabeth Dansie (The Psychological Services Group), were provided with ample training and developed a protocol to respond to the wellness needs of the department. Over the last five years this team has been utilized frequently to respond to critical incidents and an array of other departmental needs. As a result, the department has greatly improved in the area of officer wellness.

Over time, it became apparent that our agency would benefit from expanding the scope of the program. There was a recognition that the information possessed by this small group of officers and non-sworn staff needed to be disseminated to all of the officers, rather than just those involved in critical incidents. We now have formal training for all our staff emphasizing how to balance work and home life. For example, the Peer Support Team, along with Elizabeth Dansie, was utilized via in-service training where all officers were exposed to critical incident trauma, suicide prevention, resiliency and other tenants of officer wellness. We have educated the officers and improved the culture of our agency and continue to emphasize personal and professional balance.

At this point, our agency had created a team of specially trained officers to respond to traumatic incidents. We extended this training to all of our officers and thus nurtured personal wellbeing skills agency wide. But what else could be done to create a culture of wellness? Our agency puts on a *Citizen's Academy* and a *Youth Academy* so why not a *Spouses Academy*?

A career in law enforcement has a momentous effect on our social lives. It causes us to neglect the very people we love the most: our children and our spouses. We learn about this in the police academy, we hear about it from our Peer Support Team members, but have we educated spouses of incoming or current officers on the potentially toxic effects of this career? Do our spouses know about "hypervigilance" and how it is paramount in keeping us alive at work, and that it is absolutely necessary for officer safety? After a long shift in a hypervigilant state, we return home and completely disengage and have trouble responding to normal conversations because our bodies are countering the hypervigilance we have been experiencing at work. Do our families truly understand that we may have dealt with some major catastrophe during our shift and in

comparison, our family's minor problem may seem insignificant? The Spouses Academy is nurturing a culture that prioritizes the loved ones and families of our officers. Our goal is to ensure that the officers in our department, who do such selfless and noble work, don't lose their families and identities in the process.

It became apparent that the success of the Spouses Academy would largely be dependent on the skill and credibility of the instructors. Asking your officers, without their presence, to provide unfettered access to their loved ones to discuss the pitfalls of a career in policing requires a great deal of trust. This type of trust comes from a sincere conviction that can only be earned through an unblemished record, mutual respect and camaraderie developed over time. The cadre for the academy attended departmental trainings and patrol team briefings and personally explained the intent and content of the academy and responded to any questions or concerns that officers had. From a department of 83 sworn peace officers, the academy ultimately was able to enroll 33 wives, husbands, girlfriends, fiancés and boyfriends.

The academy itself was divided into seven weekly two-hour sessions. The substance of each session was mostly independent; thus, attendance at each session was recommended, but missing one session was not detrimental to the entire experience. Several members of the Police Officers Association even volunteered to watch attendees' small children during the trainings. The sessions covered the following topics:

1. An introduction and overview of the police department. This session includes career paths, shift schedules, salary and benefit information, CALPERS retirements, the role of the union, etc. A simple visual explanation of the different teams and putting faces to names was very beneficial for the attendees.
2. Department Clinician Elizabeth Dansie provided two hours of insight drawn from her thirty years of experience providing counseling to emergency services personnel and their family members. This is the first time many spouses had ever been exposed to the reality of the challenges encountered by peace officers.
3. Critical incidents and their aftermath. Four of our officers who were involved in officer-involved shootings and/or a line of duty death spoke to the group about their short-term and long-term effects from the incidents. These were not tactical debriefings, but rather focused on how these incidents shaped their lives and the effect it had on their relationships with friends and family.
4. Use of force. An explanation of why and when force is used and the dynamics of decision making was discussed. The attendees had the opportunity to experience our use of force simulator, which gave a true sense of the dynamics of decision making on using lethal and non-lethal force.
5. Special Investigative Units. This session was more substantive, focusing on narcotics, human trafficking and gangs, with rich case studies and examples.

6. Self-defense and defensive tactics. This session facilitated a discussion of defensive tactics and the training that is done by the department, as well as a hands-on self-defense class for attendees. After six weeks, this was a fun way to end the academy and build camaraderie.
7. The final session of the academy was a range day, where attendees had the opportunity to shoot firearms and see the special tools and weapons that the S.W.A.T. team utilizes. The day wrapped up with a luncheon.

The ultimate goal of the Spouses Academy was to improve the culture of the department. An emphasis on officer wellness starts on day one and should continue through the duration of an officer's career and retirement. Improving the performance of our officers in both their professional performance and their personal lives sometimes requires an unconventional approach. The implementation of a Spouses Academy is an effective means to influence and directly deliver the family members of our officers the knowledge, skills and abilities to support our officers through a healthy career in law enforcement.



PPD Spouses Academy



Topics to be covered

- Response to Critical Incidents
- Assignments / Career Paths
- Benefits
- Peer Support Program
- Explaining Use of Force
- UOF Simulator
- Officer Involved Shootings
- Narcotics / Gangs / HT
- Defensive Tactics & Self Defense
- Range Day

Members of PPD / POA are putting on the first ever Pittsburg Police Officers Spouses academy. It will be an informative and educational process to prepare a significant other for the difficulties of being the spouse of a police officer. Save the following dates for your wife, husband, girlfriend, boyfriend or any significant other in your life.

Save These Dates

- Tuesday, September 10: 6:00p—8:00p**
- Tuesday, September 17: 6:00p—8:00p**
- Tuesday, September 24: 6:00p—8:00p**
- Tuesday, October 1: 6:00p—8:00p**
- Tuesday, October 8: 6:00p—8:00p**
- Tuesday, October 15: 6:00p—8:00p**
- Saturday, October 19: 9:00a—12:30p**



More information and enrollment instructions to follow. Contact James Terry or Kyle Baker with any questions. RSVP to follow.

