

LAW ENFORCEMENT PEER MEMBER SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Background

At the November 2018 CIRMA Law Enforcement Advisory Committee meeting, discussion ensued about the importance of implementing a Peer Support program. Psychologically, healthy police officers are far more likely to provide high-quality, professional services to the members of their communities. Police departments make a significant investment in selecting mentally and emotionally healthy individuals as part of their hiring process. Police Chiefs can protect and enhance that investment by various methods aimed at promoting wellness.

One effective strategy for stimulating a culture of wellness within a police department is the development and maintenance of a Peer Support program. Both large and small sized police departments would benefit from the training of their staff in peer support techniques.

The mission of a Peer Support program is to provide emotional, social and practical support to police personnel during times of personal or professional crisis. It may also offer peer-to-peer assistance in anticipating and addressing other potential personal challenges or difficulties.

The goal of peer support is to provide all public safety employees within police departments the opportunity to receive emotional and tangible peer support through times of personal or professional crisis, as well as to help anticipate and address potential difficulties. Ideally, Peer Support programs should be developed and implemented under the organizational structure of the department they serve. Peer Support programs that are integrated within police departments can lead to reductions in liability and other exposures faced by serving the community.

Recommendations

Guidelines have been developed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), which are intended to provide information and recommendations on forming and maintaining a peer support structure for sworn and non-sworn personnel in law enforcement agencies.

The guidelines are not meant to be a rigid protocol, but reflect the commonly accepted practices of the IACP Psychological Services Section members and the agencies they serve. Peer Support programs are designed to provide emotional support during and after times of professional and personal crisis to employees, by employees; consequently, there is a need to promote trust and ensure privacy. Preserving confidentiality of persons using the services of peer supporters is critical. Peer supporters must be able to convey trust and anonymity and assure confidentiality within the program guidelines to all personnel.

To assure colleagues using the program that the peer supporters will be able to ensure privacy, each department must provide a formal policy statement from the Chief of Police. The statement should include that the department believes that police personnel must be free to express themselves about any job-related or personal problems and that trust, anonymity, and privacy will be maintained. Privileged or not, examples of exceptions to confidentiality can include: making an immediate report of any information communicated by an employee that involves the commission of a crime, a serious violation of a departmental policy or procedure, a threat of violence toward a known third party, or suicidal intent. It is recommended that informed consent of agency members utilizing their Peer Support programs is emphasized in such matters. Knowledge of State and Federal law and decisions as to what is or is not done in a particular instance are ultimately the responsibility of each agency and its peer support personnel.

A licensed mental health professional should assist in developing a training program that provides information and scenarios for actual role-plays, an ongoing assessment process to determine skill sets, and continuing training to address ongoing needs of the program and the officers involved.