

LAW ENFORCEMENT HEALTH & WELLNESS

Supporting Officers Who Put Our Safety Above Their Own




Law enforcement officers face extreme physical and emotional stress, trauma, and long hours. These job-related experiences lead to high rates of mental health issues, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicide. Given the critical roles officers serve in promoting and maintaining public safety, understanding and addressing these issues is essential to ensure effective performance, retention, and their ability to support the communities they are sworn to serve.

83% of officers report mental health strugglesⁱ


The Impacts of Mental Health Challenges on Law Enforcement

Law enforcement officers face unique and significant mental health challenges due to the demands of their profession. These challenges often stem from repeated exposure to high-stress situations, trauma, and the pressures of upholding public safety under intense scrutiny.


STRESS & TRAUMA: Repeated exposure to violence, danger, and trauma defines much of law enforcement work, leading to frequent stress-related mental health disorders. On average, peace officers experience around **188 critical incidents** over their careersⁱ and **encounter roughly three traumatic events every six months.**ⁱⁱⁱ

 **6.8% of the general population report experiencing PTSD, 35% of police officers report experiencing PTSD**^{iv}

SUICIDE RATES: The suicide rate among law enforcement officers is notably higher than other professions. Many officers witness firsthand how trauma reshapes colleagues' personalities, with **roughly half reporting they know an officer who committed suicide.**^v

 **Suicide claims about three times as many officers as those killed in the line of duty.**^{vi}

BURNOUT & JOB-RELATED STRESS: The demands of long shifts, lack of adequate sleep, and emotional exhaustion all contribute to burnout, significantly impacting officers' physical and mental health. This can result in frequent absences^{vii} and high turnover^{viii}, further straining the already short-staffed^{ix} workforce and amplifying public safety risks. Burnout also increases the risk of serious health problems such as depression, anxiety, and even suicide.

 **Officers experiencing burnout have been shown to be 117% more likely to have suicidal thoughts than those without burnout.**^x



CURRENT STATEWIDE MENTAL HEALTH WELLNESS INITIATIVES

Recognizing the mental health challenges inherent to the law enforcement profession, organizations in California have developed innovative wellness programs to provide support. By prioritizing mental health, these programs aim to reduce stigma, improve resilience, and ensure officers are equipped to handle the demands of their profession while safeguarding their well-being.

California POST Commission Training Programs

The California POST (Peace Officer Standards and Training) program emphasizes wellness and resilience training, helping officers manage the stress and trauma associated with their roles, with specific trainings focused on: ^{xi}

Normalizing Common Mental Health Challenges:

Focuses on breaking down cultural stigma, normalizing conversations about mental health, understanding common issues, and identifying actionable methods for managing anxiety, depression and panic attacks.

Helping the Helpers in Emotional Survival:

Offers practical strategies to 'close the therapy gap' and maintain healthy relationships within this demanding career by leveraging the power of peer support and breaking through the stigma around seeking mental health assistance.

Strengthening Family & Support Systems:

Delves into the unique challenges that can create stress for the family members, partners, and friends who support officers and provides proactive measures they can take to bolster their relationships by building resiliency and trust.

Building Wellness & Resiliency:

Provides self-care strategies and stresses the importance of building skills to increase resilience through natural remedies like improved diet, meditation, focus training, breathwork, and more.

"POST offers a variety of resources and training programs to boost officer wellness and build resilience among law enforcement personnel – including through our Organizational Wellness Program. This program was developed by culturally competent wellness and resilience experts and is adaptive, contemporary, and practical in mentoring law enforcement agencies to develop their own organizational wellness programs that are specifically tailored to the unique needs of each department."

– Manny Alvarez, Executive Director, California Commission on Peace Officer Standards & Training (POST)

NAMI COPE Peer-Support Program

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) California worked closely with California POST to launch COPE, a resilience-building peer support program specifically designed for law enforcement. This program was modeled on the national NAMI Connection support group – a peer-led, 90-minute, confidential support group for those experiencing mental health challenges. ^{xii}

"With rising suicide rates for police officers and nearly 500 Californians killed in officer-involved shootings between 2016 and the present, the time is now to provide more support for law enforcement to protect their ranks and the general public. Studies show that stress impairs a person's ability to regulate emotions and behaviors, and we know that the situational stress that law enforcement agents face regularly can have devastating effects on mental health."

– Jessica Cruz, CEO, NAMI California ^{xiii}



BUILDING LOCAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

In addition to broader statewide training programs, there are also several local and in-house agency efforts that provide critical resources and support systems for officers.

In-House Agency Wellness Programs

Several larger agencies in California have developed in-house mental health initiatives to help their officers cope with the demands of the job, including:

San Diego Police Department Wellness Unit:^{xiv}

This unit has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services as a national model.^{xv} It was created after an SDPD survey showed that a majority of the 700+ respondents were concerned about their financial stability, personal relationships, and physical health. The program offers a full day of training for new officers centered around psychological preparedness to set realistic expectations about the emotional impact of police work.



After its first two years in operation, 70% of survey respondents reported feeling a decrease in the stigma associated with asking for help.

Stockton Police Department Organizational Wellness Unit:^{xvi}

This unit has three full-time staff members and centralizes resources to serve officers in the wake of critical incidents. This includes a quiet room for officers to decompress, a confidential room for counseling, a wellness network of psychologists and chaplains, as well as peer support workers made up of officers who have been trained to support their colleagues. It also provides support and education for officer's family and loved ones.



"When an officer goes through a critical incident so does their family. So, we're teaching families how to identify it, how to support their officer and, when you start getting impacted, how you can reach for services yourself. Healthy families mean healthy officers."

- Jesse Kenyon, Stockton PD Senior Chaplain & Unit Program Manager^{xvii}



PORAC Institute Courses

PORAC is deeply committed to providing members with the resources they need to support their own mental health and that of their fellow officers. Each year, PORAC offers a range of mental health-focused courses that are held across the state:^{xviii}

WELLNESS COORDINATOR TRAINING: This program, led by a culturally competent clinician and trainer, covers factors impacting emotional wellness, first responder suicide prevention, and practical strategies for evaluating and improving departmental wellness programs.

PEER SUPPORT: Teaches officers how to start a peer support team within their own departments – including how to fund and manage the program.

LINE OF DUTY DEATH: Topics covered in this course include how to make a notification, planning a Law Enforcement Memorial, makes participants aware of resources, benefits and support organizations available to officers during this challenging time, and more.

“The PORAC Institute offers robust training programs on a variety of topics, but we’re especially proud of our courses designed to support mental health. These trainings give our members the tools they need to cope with the stress they are put under every day in this difficult career – and perhaps, most importantly, lets them know that they are not alone.”

– Cathy Knappe, Training Coordinator, PORAC

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE: ADDRESSING THE STIGMA

Stigma remains a significant obstacle, with over 90% of officers reporting that it discourages them from seeking mental health support. This stigma, along with concerns about confidentiality, often prevents officers from accessing the care they need, which can take a toll on their well-being and job performance. To address these challenges and support officers’ mental health, PORAC recommends:

- **Expand mental health training and resilience programs** to better equip officers in managing stress and trauma.
- **Implement regular wellness check-ins** to proactively identify and address mental health concerns before they get more serious.
- **Increase peer support networks** to help reduce stigma and provide accessible support.
- **Provide confidential counseling services** that ensure officers can seek help privately.
- **Enhance access to PTSD treatment programs** tailored to the unique experiences of law enforcement officers.

Supporting the mental health of peace officers is crucial not only for their well-being but also for ensuring they can do their jobs effectively. By expanding wellness programs, increasing peer support networks, and reducing stigma, California can lead the way in promoting mental health in law enforcement and ensuring that officers have the resources they need to best serve their communities.

ⁱ What Cops Want in '24: <https://www.police1.com/what-cops-want/the-police-wellness-crisis-new-research-and-recommendations>

ⁱⁱ Chopko, B., Palmieri, P., & Adams, R. (2015). Critical Incident History Questionnaire Replication: Frequency and severity of trauma exposure among officers from small and midsize police agencies: CIHQ small and midsize police agencies. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 28*(2), 157–161

ⁱⁱⁱ Patterson, G. T. (2001). The relationship between demographic variables and exposure to traumatic incidents among police officers. *Australian Journal of Disaster & Trauma Studies*.

^{iv} Ruderman Foundation Whitepaper: https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/police-officers-and-firefighters-are-more-likely-to-die-by-suicide-than-in-line-of-duty/

^v Fleischmann, M.H., Strode, P., Broussard, B., & Compton, M.T. (2016). Law enforcement officers’ perceptions of and responses to traumatic events: A survey of officers completing Crisis Intervention Team training. *Policing and Society, 28*(2), 149–156. doi: 10.1080/10439463.2016.1234469

^{vi} Heyman, M. (2018). Study: Police Officers and Firefighters Are More Likely to Die by Suicide Than in Line of Duty. Retrieved on 11th September 2019 from https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/police-officers-and-firefighters-are-more-likely-to-die-by-suicidethan-in-line-of-duty/

^{vii} <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23334868/>

^{viii} Yun I, Hwang E, Lynch J (2015) Police stressors, job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover intention among South Korean police officers. *Asian Criminal 10*:23–41. 10.1007/s11417-015-9203-4

^{ix} <https://porac.org/wp-content/uploads/PORAC-Police-Staffing-Brief-2023-Updates.pdf>

^x Bishopp, S.A., & Boots, D.P. (2014). General strain theory, exposure to violence, and suicide ideation among police officers: A gendered approach. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 42*(6), 538–548. doi: 10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2014.09.007

^{xi} <https://catalog.post.ca.gov/Default.aspx>

^{xii} <https://namica.org/blog/new-nami-cope-mental-health-program-to-support-california-police-officers/>

^{xiii} <https://namica.org/blog/new-nami-cope-mental-health-program-to-support-california-police-officers/>

^{xiv} <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/SanDiegoOSW.pdf>

^{xv} <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/SanDiegoOSW.pdf>

^{xvi} <https://stocktonia.org/news/public-safety/2023/03/02/prioritizing-mental-health-stockton-pd-unveils-new-wellness-unit-for-officers/>

^{xvii} <https://stocktonia.org/news/public-safety/2023/03/02/prioritizing-mental-health-stockton-pd-unveils-new-wellness-unit-for-officers/>

^{xviii} <https://porac.org/members/porac-institute/courses/>