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SUBJECT: Mindfulness and Resiliency Training

Policing in America is one of the most stressful occupations because structural and operational stressors place an officer's physical and mental health at risk. Police officers are left to their own strategies on how to mitigate stress and anger due to cultural traditions that encourage maladaptive coping mechanisms (Bergman, Christopher, & Bowen, 2016). Police officers experience structural stressors in the form of internal politics, pending litigation, irregular shifts, and lack of opportunity in specialization or promotion. This type of administrative stress compounds tension that is related to actual policing in the field. To alleviate the stress, some officers employ poor techniques at coping such as avoidance and the use of alcohol (Bergman, Christopher, & Bowen, 2016). To address the issue, some law enforcement leaders have introduced mindfulness and resiliency training to counteract the harmful effects of stress. Chief Jennifer Tejada of the Emeryville, California Police Department explains that cultural norms in police work dictate a certain stoicism that does not promote being aware of one's thoughts and emotions. Studies have shown that a police officer's life span is reduced 7 to 10 years because of increased cardiovascular disease, depression, and anxiety due to stress (Tejada, Presentation 6.1: Spotlight Interview-Mindfulness and Policework, 2019).

Stress and anger are significant concerns for officers and effectively mitigating these issues are vital for the officer's physical and mental health. Officers utilizing avoidance and alcohol are

susceptible to increased rates of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse. Consequently, police officers are more likely to die by suicide than violence in the line of duty. Anger is a byproduct of stress; and it has been associated with depression, dysthymia, bipolar disorders, agoraphobia, panic disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Bergman, Christopher, & Bowen, 2016).

Police officers are not taught to calm the body down and regulate their emotions in their daily work because they have been trained that hypervigilance is a positive behavior. Nevertheless, the hypervigilant mind-set is unsustainable, and the body's stress response affects the ability to effectively interpret intelligence during a critical event and make sound decisions (Tejada & Goerling, *Mindful Policing-A New Approach to Officer Wellness and Safety Training and Education*, 2017). Traumatic events activate hormones including adrenaline and cortisol that increase the heart rate, blood circulation, and mobilization of fat and sugar to increase energy. Accordingly, recovering from the stress response syndrome requires time that is rarely available in modern policing (Tejada & Goerling, *Mindful Policing-A New Approach to Officer Wellness and Safety Training and Education*, 2017).

The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing advocates officer wellness and safety to include traditional peer support, employee assistance, and critical incident de-briefing programs. In addition to these practices, the profession should consider Mindfulness Based Resilience Training (MBRT) which encourages resilience through training in self-awareness, self-regulation, and compassion (Tejada & Goerling, *Mindful Policing-A New Approach to Officer Wellness and Safety Training and Education*, 2017). MBRT is a relatively new concept to law enforcement; nevertheless, it has been implemented by the U.S. Army Special Forces in the 1980s and the U.S.

Marine Corps in 2006. The Pacific University in Oregon conducted a study in conjunction with the Hillsboro Police Department and discovered promising results in reducing stress. The study found additional benefits to include improved emotional regulation, reduced anger, and abridged alcohol use. Research similarly demonstrated that MBRT builds individual resilience and increases one's capacity to navigate occupational stress and trauma (Tejada & Goerling, *Mindful Policing- A New Approach to Officer Wellness and Safety Training and Education*, 2017).

Chief Tejada explained that there is constant exposure to stress and trauma in police work, and resiliency is the ability to rebound from an event by returning to a normal breathing and heart rate; which in turn reduces the cortisol build-up. The cumulative effects of cortisol have severe health effects. Consequently, MBRT is concentrating on health, empathy, awareness, and self-compassion by exploring the relationship between stress and trauma (Tejada, *Mindful Leadership*, 2016).

Lt. Richard Goerling of the Mindful Badge Initiative believes that resilience training will cultivate an officer's ability to bounce back from stress. The techniques will likewise create downstream benefits to the community in the form of increased compassion toward community members. Additionally, preliminary data from the Pacific University study established that officers used less alcohol, felt less burned out and had fewer aggressive feelings (Yeoman, 2017).

The York Regional Police in Ontario, Canada have been learning Tai-Chi, journaling (diary of thoughts and feelings), and mindful leadership practices. Police officers in Baltimore are learning breathwork, chair yoga, and meditation in weekly drop-in sessions with the Holistic Life Foundation. The Menlo Park Police Department sent 29 officers to a three-day retreat that included meditation, breathing techniques, and the neuroscience of stress (Yeoman, 2017). In Tempe

Arizona, Police Chief Sylvia Moir sent two defensive-tactic instructors to a mindfulness retreat, and they subsequently integrated these concepts into department training. The U.S. Secret Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and police departments in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles have employed the services of Blue Courage (a professional coaching company) which incorporates elements of mindfulness into its training (Yeoman, 2017). Blue Courage offers courses in resilience that incorporate positive psychology, mindfulness, energy, and peak performance practices; one officer called the training life changing. Participants will learn the process of *pattern interruption* which is the exercise of *quieting the mind* by breaking the pattern of negative thoughts and emotions. The outcome is increased mindfulness, awareness, focus, and performance. Blue courage also offers a “train the trainer” course and classes in leadership and executive overview (Blue Courage, 2019).

The Redondo Beach Police Department and the citizens it serves can benefit from a Mindfulness-Based Resiliency Training program for first responders. Stress affects an officer’s physical health and mental wellbeing as officers are exposed to traumatic events and must mitigate volatile situations weekly, if not daily. Healthy and mentally strong officers are necessary for great community relationships and will promote a more effective police-public partnership.

References

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