

TRAUMATIC INCIDENTS: HELPING THE HELPERS

SUMMARY

Life is full of the unexpected, both good and bad. When an emergency happens, it is likely that the call for help will be answered by first responders, in many cases law enforcement officers. They will carry out their primary responsibilities of ensuring the safety of the public, maintaining order, and implementing investigative protocols. However, just as victims and witnesses of a traumatic event can feel emotional as well as physical effects, peace officers responding to traumatic situations may also experience emotional impacts.

The Grand Jury investigated what support is available to Sonoma County's law enforcement officers who deal with trauma, or "critical incidents," defined as those involving severe injury or death, sexual assault, or domestic violence. We found that across jurisdictions, training and support services are readily available to personnel dealing with incident-related stress. We also explored how officers interact with victims, families, and witnesses to help them with their support needs.

Law enforcement officers receive training on the emotional effects of trauma during academy instruction and field officer training. After a critical incident, the involved peace officers are supported by their departments through critical incident stress debriefings and peer support programs. Employee Assistance Program benefits are also available to provide confidential professional help. For the public who may be impacted by critical incidents, law enforcement officers can secure immediate response services and provide information regarding support available through community and nonprofit organizations.

When law enforcement responds to an emergency, it is reassuring to know that they are well prepared to be of assistance to both victims and bystanders. It is also important to know that law enforcement officers receive positive assistance when they are impacted by what they have seen, experienced, or investigated. Victims, bystanders, and first responders all need help coping with trauma. Making sure the needed resources are available is a net gain for everyone.

BACKGROUND

The Grand Jury received a complaint from a citizen detailing expectations of how law enforcement should react and behave when responding to a serious automobile accident. Investigating a separate complaint, the Grand Jury interviewed a police officer who commented on the emotional effects he experienced as the first responder at the scene of a young child's death. Recognizing that responding to traumatic events can have an emotional impact, the Grand Jury researched what resources are available to support peace officers who deal with critical incidents. We also looked at how officers interact with the public in these incidents, particularly in providing support services information.

APPROACH

The Grand Jury interviewed law enforcement and administrative personnel in the Rohnert Park Public Safety Department, Santa Rosa Police Department, Petaluma Police Department, and Sonoma County Sheriff's Office, administrative personnel from Santa Rosa Junior College Police Academy (Academy),

and representatives from West Coast Post Trauma Retreat, Law Enforcement Chaplaincy Services (Chaplaincy), Sonoma County Mental Health Department, Family Justice Center (FJC), YWCA, and Verity. We also reviewed documents from these entities and toured the Academy and FJC facilities.

DISCUSSION

Training and Support for First Responders

Training of all peace officers in California is administered by the State Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST). Mandatory training includes information on how to handle critical incidents. Through their initial training, law enforcement officers receive a basic overview of the effects these incidents have on first responders. They also learn how to interact with victims and members of the public.

Field officer training assists new peace officers in applying what they have learned in the academic environment to real-life situations. For example, an officer in training may be taken to the scene of a critical incident to observe how the officers in charge are handling the situation and to experience some of the effects from an observer's standpoint. The experience can help prepare the officer to cope as a first responder in these situations.

The mental health of law enforcement personnel is a priority in the law enforcement jurisdictions we interviewed. The emotional impacts of trauma can directly influence an officer's productivity, safety, and the safety of others. When a peace officer responds to a critical incident, department support protocols are initiated. Although some jurisdictional differences exist, the protocols are similar across all departments we investigated. Some events prompt a critical incident stress debriefing. Personnel involved in the critical incident, including dispatchers and support staff as well as first responders, meet to discuss the incident. The primary objective of this meeting is to allow these participants to discuss the details of the incident, to review the protocols employed, and to explore any emotional impact. Law enforcement administrators recognize that fellow officers are in the best position to understand the effects of dealing with critical incidents. Trained officers at all levels are available as members of a peer support team, to help officers who are experiencing the effects of trauma.

Employee Assistance Program benefits provide additional support to law enforcement. Management encourages officers to use the available support services when they have been involved in a critical incident. When additional assistance is required, management secures it to ensure that Employee Assistance Program benefits will continue to provide whatever resources officers may need. For example, the West Coast Post-Trauma Retreat, located in the North Bay, provides an advanced level of support for first responders who continue to experience the emotional impact of critical incidents even after using other resources. Interviewees spoke very highly of the benefits of this program.

Interactions with the Public

Providing information to victims about resources available to assist them in dealing with a traumatic situation is crucial. The Grand Jury interviewed some of the agencies that work with Sonoma County law enforcement in providing resources and support to people who have experienced traumatic

incidents. These included Chaplaincy, Sonoma County Department of Mental Health, FJC, YWCA, and Verity.

Law enforcement officers responding to a death can ask family members or others at the scene if they would like the support of their own spiritual advisor or a non-denominational chaplain. If Chaplaincy services are requested, a chaplain reports to the scene and assists law enforcement by engaging with the family members and witnesses. Peace officers can then continue their primary duties of securing the scene, maintaining public safety, and beginning their investigation.

The Department of Mental Health has developed a POST-certified course called Crisis Intervention Training. The course prepares law enforcement officers to better respond to critical incidents that involve mental health considerations. Officers learn how to address the special needs of victims, families, and witnesses in these situations. Over the past five years, more than 300 Sonoma County law enforcement personnel have gone through the training. The Department of Mental Health has also introduced a mobile support team to assist in law enforcement calls. Staffed by substance abuse and mental health professionals, the mobile support team provides on-call services for peace officers responding to mental health emergencies not involving weapons.

For victims of domestic violence or sexual abuse, the FJC provides comprehensive support services at a single location. Peace officers in all Sonoma County jurisdictions are encouraged to provide information about FJC services. The YWCA and Verity have representatives on site at the FJC, as do the Sheriff's Office and the Santa Rosa Police Department.

FINDINGS

With respect to the law enforcement jurisdictions we interviewed, the Grand Jury finds:

- F1. Law enforcement management recognizes the effects of critical incidents on first responders and provides resources to address those effects.
- F2. Peace officers receive appropriate training for coping with critical incidents in the form of POST instruction and field officer training.
- F3. Critical incident stress debriefings and peer support teams provide valuable in-house support for law enforcement personnel.
- F4. Employee Assistance Program benefits enable law enforcement officers to receive additional support as needed.
- F5. Law enforcement officers use the resources of Chaplaincy and the Department of Mental Health mobile support team as needed to address the requirements of victims, families, and witnesses.
- F6. Peace officers who have taken the Crisis Intervention Training course are better prepared to communicate with victims, families, and witnesses in critical incidents involving mental health issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

None.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- POST-approved Academy training modules and evaluation standards for relevant training domains
- Relevant portions of policy manuals and procedures, including those on critical incident stress debriefings, peer support programs, and Employee Assistance Programs, for the law enforcement jurisdictions interviewed
- Summary of Sonoma County Mental Health Services
- Family Justice Center Victim Advocacy Services Overview and statistics on client services
- Summary of services for YWCA Sonoma County - www.ywca.org
- Training materials for Verity - www.ourverity.org

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.