

Wellness Solutions for Law Enforcement

Situation: The rate of suicide, divorce and alcohol abuse among law enforcement officers is at pandemic proportions compared to other professions. Officers are exposed to hazardous conditions and uncommon events that have adverse effects on their physical and emotional health. They remain in extended periods of hyper vigilance, creating a biological rollercoaster that negatively impacts their ability to deal with stress and maintain healthy relationships. To be effective in their jobs, officers must exhibit “command presence” at a crime scene but many don’t know how to turn off that presence at home. When employees are able to fix a work-related problem, work stress decreases. However, officers experience frustration at their inability to affect anything other than a temporary fix; victims of domestic violence allow batterers back into their home, maltreated children are returned to abusive parents. Officers who are unable to handle their stress and frustration take it out on their families and themselves.

Recently several incidents in Door County involving law enforcement have been the focus of media attention. One report involved the dismissal of a deputy who refused a psychological evaluation; in another incident peers failed to ticket an officer driving under the influence of alcohol; three officers were involved in separate incidents of domestic violence. The media focuses on egregious cases, police administration does damage control, public perception of law enforcement suffers and officers experience increased alcohol abuse, personal violence and burnout.

Response: Family Living Educator, Pam Peterson worked with the Door County Sheriff and Angela Wiley, Ph.D., creator of *Everyday Wellness Solutions for Law Enforcement* a research-based curriculum that focuses on strategies to maintain emotional and physical wellness for law enforcement officers, to adapt the curriculum to meet local needs. Law enforcement identified shift issues and funding as barriers to officers’ participation in the program. Funding was addressed through a District Innovative grant.

Angela Wiley, Associate Professor at the University of Illinois and Michael Schlosser, Associate Police Training Specialist with the Police Training Institute presented a one day training at a retreat-type facility. The training focused on threats to and strategies for maintaining emotional wellness and strategies for attaining and preserving physical wellness.

Results: Only twelve deputies were able to attend the program but participants were able to understand the sources of stress, identify a personal approach to coping with stress and strategies for achieving physical wellness. Officers learned skills to manage their work and personal lives more effectively. Comments from participants included:

“The program came at a time when I’m making changes in my life style. It was a good motivator.”

“The exercise and food information were most helpful. Thanks for the gift.”

“The program reminded me that the stress of this position can be overwhelming if I let it get to me.”

Evidence: On a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent), one-third of the participants rated the program “good,” two-thirds rated it “excellent.” Ninety-two percent of participants agreed/strongly agreed that they plan to practice the strategies presented. All the deputies agreed/strongly agreed that they gained specific information, skills, or techniques that will help them in their personal life. All participants indicated they would recommend this training to other officers.

The officers who participated were “seasoned” veterans with a median of fourteen years of service. While all the officers found the program helpful, the follow comment summarizes an opinion expressed by several, *“I know that it helped us older guys but I think the younger deputies would benefit even more.”*