



**STATE OF WISCONSIN
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

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August 12, 2019

Honorable Members of the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention,

My name is Dana Vike, and I am a Supervisor at the Wisconsin Department of Justice in the Division of Law Enforcement Services, Bureau of Training and Standards. I would like to thank you for including me in this important discussion on suicide prevention, and in particular, suicide prevention as it relates to law enforcement officers.

For the first eight months of 2019, there have been at least 114 officer suicides in the United States, according to Blue H.E.L.P., a non-profit organization that tracks law enforcement suicides. This number represents suicides that have been reported. There are likely many more officer suicides that go unreported. It is estimated that twice as many law enforcement officers every year die by suicide than are killed in either traffic accidents or assaults.¹

Due in part to the stigma associated with suicide and the desire to protect survivors, little is known about the circumstances of law enforcement suicide or the actual number of officer suicides each year. Death by suicide can lead to a loss of survivor benefits or denial of funeral honors.²

While there are many unknowns about suicide and suicide as it relates to law enforcement officers, there are a number of known risk factors for suicide. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), some of the risks for the general population include, but are not limited to:

- Gender
- Age
- History of trauma

- Prolonged stress
- Access to firearms
- Recent tragedy or loss
- A serious or chronic medical illness
- Agitation and sleep deprivation³

All of the above risks are highly relevant to law enforcement.

As far as gender and age are concerned, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 87% of law enforcement officers are male with an average age of 30.² Men are 3.5 times more likely to commit suicide than women, and the rate of suicide is highest in middle-age white men.⁴

In regards to trauma, tragedy, and loss, law enforcement officers are repeatedly exposed to traumatic incidents increasing their risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and increasing their risk for suicide.⁵

In addition to an increased risk for developing PTSD, the pressures of the job also put officers at risk for high blood pressure, insomnia, increased levels of stress hormones, and heart problems, all of which increase their risk for suicide.⁶

Law enforcement officers have ready access to firearms, and the success rate for suicide by firearm is the highest of any suicide method (82.5% of suicides attempted with a firearm are successful).²

Many precautions are taken to ensure the physical safety of law enforcement officers. Most law enforcement agencies have policies requiring their officers wear bullet proof vests, and policies requiring their officers wear seat belts. Officers are given the tools and resources to protect their physical safety, but officer mental health and well-being which are also issues of officer safety, are often overlooked.

The law enforcement profession prides itself on bravery and heroism. Law enforcement officers are expected to run toward danger, not run away from it, and mental health concerns can be seen as a

weakness. This needs to change. "Perpetuating the culture of silence and denial around officers' mental health needs is unacceptable."¹

What is the Department of Justice Doing to Help?

The Department of Justice, through the Bureau of Training and Standards, develops the curriculum taught within the basic law enforcement officer training academies in Wisconsin. In an effort to enhance and ensure officer physical and mental wellbeing starting at the academy level, in 2016, the basic law enforcement curriculum was updated to include training on officer wellness and physical fitness.

In addition, a Physical Readiness requirement was added. Applicants must pass a Physical Readiness Test to be eligible to enter into the academy. Throughout the academy students take part in formal physical fitness training sessions (generally twice a week) as a class, and it is recommended they take part in physical fitness training on their own time at least three times a week. At the end of the academy, students complete the same Physical Readiness Test they took prior to the start of academy to determine if they meet the minimum levels of physical readiness necessary to perform the essential physical tasks of a Wisconsin law enforcement officer safely and effectively. The exit standards for the Physical Readiness Test are 10% higher than the entrance standards.

Academy students complete a four-hour block of training on Wellness and a four-hour block of training on Suicide Prevention. The training on wellness focuses on living a healthy lifestyle, stress management techniques, healthy choices in diet and exercise, alcohol and drug use, maintaining healthy relationships, and maintaining financial stability throughout an officers' career.

The training students receive on suicide prevention comes from a program called QPR which stands for Question, Persuade, Refer. QPR training focuses on identifying the signs and symptoms of someone in crisis; knowing how to ask someone if they are thinking about committing suicide; persuading a suicidal person to get help; and referring a suicidal person to resources that can help.

During the suicide prevention course, students also learn about the risk factors for suicide as they relate to law enforcement. They learn the clues or warning signs which indicate suicidal behavior may likely

happen if there is no intervention, and where to go for help (resources in Wisconsin: <https://www.preventsuicidewi.org/>) if they or someone they know is considering suicide.

In addition to the wellness training incorporated at the academy level, there are two members of the Bureau of Training and Standards who are certified QPR instructors. These two individuals provide QPR training sessions at conferences and law enforcement agencies around the state. They provide training for law enforcement officers, jail officers, secure juvenile detention officers, and dispatchers.

In April 2019, the Wisconsin Department of Justice funded a QPR train-the-trainer course to develop additional QPR instructors who can provide QPR training at the academy level and beyond.

Other initiatives include a wellness breakout session at instructor updates offered to law enforcement, jail, and secure juvenile detention instructors. Certified instructors are required to attend one instructor update within their three year certification period. The Bureau of Training and Standards provides approximately twelve instructor updates annually. A two and one-half hour breakout on wellness was offered during the fall 2018/spring 2019 instructor updates, and there will be another two and one-half hour breakout on wellness during the fall 2019/spring 2020 instructor updates.

Wellness training has been incorporated for all new chiefs, sheriffs, and jail administrators in a one week in-person orientation training program. Wellness is included in all DOJ-sponsored leadership training seminars and conferences for the law enforcement community. From mid-to-senior level executives, Wisconsin law enforcement leaders at every level are being exposed to the importance of officer wellness.

Another initiative sponsored by the Wisconsin Department of Justice is Peer Support Training for law enforcement. In June 2019, the DOJ sponsored its first three-day regional peer support team training event in La Crosse, Wisconsin. This training certifies attendees in one-on-one interviewing and QPR. A benefit of peer support programs is the volunteers understand the job of those they support.

In the summer and fall of 2018, the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) partnered with NBC New York to conduct a survey of its members to learn more about the stress that officers face on the job. One of the

key findings of their survey is that peer support is viewed as the most helpful of treatments by 73% of respondents.⁷

The purpose of peer support team training sponsored by the DOJ is to provide a core group of law enforcement peers who are trained to provide support, information, and employee assistance program referral to other law enforcement officers and their family members.

The Department of Justice would like to offer peer support training in four additional regions of the state to assist with the development of five regional peer support teams, as well as provide peer support training for the Wisconsin State Patrol and Department of Natural Resources.

Regional peer support programs are important to assist smaller agencies in the state that may be unable to support an in-house peer support program. There are 573 law enforcement employers in Wisconsin, and approximately 55% employ nine or fewer law enforcement officers.

What More is Needed?

Additional funding is needed to support officer wellness programs through the Wisconsin Department of Justice.

Legislative privacy protections are needed for officers who seek support through peer support programs. HIPAA, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, protects personal health information from public disclosure, and it applies to doctors, psychologists, clinics, pharmacies, etc., but it does not apply to peer support programs. Some states have started to enact legislation, so that officers can utilize peer support services without fear of disclosure of private health information.¹ Similar legislation could be considered for Wisconsin.

Thank You

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify today. If you have any future questions or comments, I may be reached at (608) 267-2781 or vikedg@doj.state.wi.us.

Sincerely,



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¹ IACP (International Association of Chiefs of Police). 2014. *IACP National Symposium on Law Enforcement Officer Suicide and Mental Health: Breaking the Silence on Law Enforcement Suicides*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

² Spence, Deborah L., Melissa Fox, Gilbert C. Moore, Sarah Estill, and Nazmia E.A. Comrie. 2019. *Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act: Report to Congress*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

³ National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Risk Factors for Suicide. <https://www.nami.org/learn-more/mental-health-conditions/related-conditions/risk-of-suicide> (accessed August 9, 2019).

⁴ American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Suicide Statistics. <https://afsp.org/about-suicide/suicide-statistics/> (accessed August 9, 2019).

⁵ Hartley, Tara A., Khachatur Sarkisian, John M. Violanti, Michael E. Andrew, and Cecil M. Burchfiel. *PTSD Symptoms Among Police Officers: Associations With Frequency, Recency, and Types of Traumatic Events*. *Int J Emerg Ment Health*. 2013; 15(4): 241-253. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4734407/> (accessed August 9, 2019).

⁶ University at Buffalo. 2008. *Impact of Stress on Police Officers' Physical and Mental Health*. ScienceDaily. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/09/080926105029.htm> (accessed August 9, 2019)

⁷ Fraternal Order of Police. Report on FOP/NBC Survey of Police Officer Mental Health and Behavioral Health. <https://fop.net/CmsDocument/Doc/OfficerWellnessSurvey.pdf> (accessed August 9, 2019).