

Recommendation

The Portland Committee on Community-Engaged Policing (PCCEP) supports the Portland Police Bureau's (PPB) efforts to develop a wellness program for its personnel. The implementation of such wellness programs has been shown to have significant beneficial results, including better public interactions, decrease in use of force incidents, budget and organizational improvements, and improved officer health and well-being. In addition, these direct benefits often lead to many indirect long-term benefits, including a higher quality officer pool and improved public support and trust.

PCCEP recommends that the Bureau continue its work to establish a comprehensive physical and mental wellness program based on current research in the field and best practices utilized in other law enforcement agencies.

Background

In December 2014, President Barack Obama created the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing to address issues of public trust and safety. The task force comprised a diverse group of professionals including civil rights leaders, researchers, community advocates, police executives, and police union leaders. This group recognized that which we as a society too often take for granted: The safety and well-being of our police officers are as important to community policing and public safety as are building community trust and confidence. The task force identified six pillars, areas of focus, for the group to address and use to build a set of recommendations for the field. Pillar #6 was designated "Officer Wellness and Safety."

Evidence suggests that policing provides unique sets of stressors that may place officers at particularly high risk for early deaths, heart attacks, and other health-related problems. Some of the common law enforcement stressors are job-related, while others may be associated with the negative consequences of shift work and the corresponding impact on sleep patterns and disorders, which are often twice as high among police officers compared to members of the general public. Police officers face a variety of health and safety risks on the job. Researchers confirm that police officers have an elevated risk for adverse mental and physical health outcomes relative to the general population.

Programs intended to promote health, wellness, and safety among police officers assume a variety of forms, focusing most often on issues like cardiovascular fitness, chronic disease prevention, alcohol and drug use and abuse, nutrition, weight management, musculoskeletal conditioning, injury prevention, safe driving, stress management, and resilience to trauma.

The implications of ignoring these issues are well known. Research indicates that when officers' physical and mental health issues go unmanaged, job performance decreases, decision-making abilities are impaired, and agency costs increase. Everyone has a stake in promoting police officers' wellness, because it has a direct impact on officers' abilities to effectively serve their communities.

In recognition of the critical role that officer wellness plays in police work, law enforcement agencies across the country have created programs aimed at preserving and promoting officers' physical and emotional health. These initiatives have been broadly referred to as officer safety and wellness programs. Many programs have been expanded to include family members, civilian employees, as well as sworn officers.

Impact on Officer Performance and Community Relationships

The negative impact of poor mental health extends far beyond an individual officer. Police departments are also affected, as poor mental health can result in increased agency costs and impaired decisionmaking.ⁱ High stress levels in officers can lead to absenteeism, increased use of workers' compensation and sick days, and increases in early retirement.ⁱⁱ Officers with mental health conditions report lower levels of productivity than their peers. This estimated productivity loss costs agencies \$4,000 per year for each officer affected.ⁱⁱⁱ

In addition to administrative costs, mental health concerns may also impact officers' communication skills. Officers with mental health conditions experience a lack of cooperation among coworkers^{iv} and report greater difficulty than their peers in interacting with community members.^v Job stress may also impair officers' decision-making abilities, particularly in use of force incidents. Officers with PTSD symptoms experience greater difficulty than officers without such symptoms in distinguishing important and unimportant factors in dangerous situations.^{vi} These issues pose serious concerns for officer safety, public safety, and overall agency performance.^{vii}

Sleep disorders are also a threat to officers' mental health.^{viii} Problems with sleep can contribute to decreased officer performance and poor police-community relations.^{ix} Officers suffering from sleep disorders report higher rates than officers with healthy sleep of serious administrative errors, falling asleep while driving, safety violations, and absenteeism.^x Sleep-deprived officers have greater difficulty assessing risks^{xi} and appropriately judging emotionally charged actions.^{xii} Fatigued officers may also be a hindrance to strengthening relationships with community members. Officers with sleep disorders are more apt to display unrestrained anger toward civilians and receive more community complaints than their well-rested counterparts.^{xiii} When exhausted, officers are unable to effectively communicate with community members and may even incite agitation among them.^{xiv}

Given the many occupational risks faced by police officers, occupational health researchers have concluded that "these civil servants are in need of workplace health and wellness programs that are tailored to their unique organizational and occupational needs."^{xv} Programs intended to promote health, wellness, and safety among police officers assume a variety of forms, focusing most often on issues like cardiovascular fitness, chronic disease prevention, alcohol and drug use and abuse, nutrition, weight management, musculoskeletal conditioning, injury prevention, safe driving, stress management, and resilience to trauma.

Recommended Practices

1. PCCEP recommends that PPB partner with researchers to determine effective scheduling practices as part of a holistic approach to officer wellness. This can help minimize the role that shift work can play in sleep disorders and associated physical and psychological ailments. PCCEP recognizes the challenge posed by current staffing to improving scheduling practices and urges the City Council to consider wellness factors when determining appropriate staffing levels in the context of the City's other priorities.
2. PCCEP recommends that PPB establish incentives and an education program promoting physical fitness, which can improve officer health outcomes and reduce costs for agencies.^{xvi} Physical fitness is associated with fewer sick days, lower rates of disability, and fewer injuries within departments,^{xvii} and researchers have noted that even marginal gains in fitness can yield substantial financial benefits because of the high costs of major incidents such as in-service heart attacks.^{xviii} As fitness is a necessary foundation for effective policing, we recommend that the fitness component be integrated into officers' schedules, consistent with existing practices at the Portland Fire Bureau (see [here](#)) and other police departments nationwide.
3. PCCEP recommends that PPB establish a training program aimed at reducing stress and promoting officer resilience. A psychophysiological intervention program, built on the trauma resilience model, has been shown to improve officers' use of force decision-making in a "shoot/don't shoot" exercise, which researchers hypothesize is the result of enhanced physiological control and situational awareness.^{xix} Mindfulness skills are also associated with promising wellness outcomes in officers.
4. PCCEP recommends that the PPB engage a range of communities regarding wellness practices, including tribal councils in the Portland-Metro region.

5. PCCEP recommends that the Bureau establish baseline metrics – both quantitative and qualitative – to evaluate the efficacy of the wellness program and ensure accountability moving forward.

Conclusion

Police officers are vulnerable to many physical and mental health concerns that threaten their wellbeing. Elected officials and law enforcement leaders should recognize the need to address these challenges and invest in the health and safety of department personnel. Wellness programs can improve officers' physical and emotional health, yielding positive outcomes for police officers, their families, and the communities they serve. PCCEP looks forward to working further with the PPB in gathering and providing community input during the development of an effective wellness program.

ⁱ Vila, *Tired Cops*; Rajaratnam et al., "Sleep Disorders;" Covey et al., "The Effects of Exposure to Traumatic Stressors."

ⁱⁱ Andersen et al., "Mental Preparedness;" Garner, "Police Stress."

ⁱⁱⁱ Fox et al., "Mental-Health Conditions."

^{iv} Gershon et al., "Mental, Physical, and Behavioral Outcomes."

^v Fox et al., "Mental-Health Conditions."

^{vi} Covey et al., "The Effects of Exposure to Traumatic Stressors."

^{vii} President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report*.

^{viii} Violanti, *Shifts, Extended Work Hours, and Fatigue*.

^{ix} Violanti, *Shifts, Extended Work Hours, and Fatigue*; Rajaratnam et al., "Sleep Disorders."

^x Rajaratnam et al., "Sleep Disorders."

^{xi} Vila et al., "Improving Shift Schedule and Work-Hour Policies."

^{xii} Violanti, *Shifts, Extended Work Hours, and Fatigue*.

^{xiii} Rajaratnam et al., "Sleep Disorders."

^{xiv} Stephens and Mantel, *OSW Group Meeting Summary*.

^{xv} Rachele, Heesch, and Washington, "Wellness Programs and Firefighters."

^{xvi} Boni, *Exercise and Physical Fitness*; Kuehl et al., "The Safety and Health Improvement: Enhancing Law Enforcement Departments Study;" Fiedler, *Officer Safety and Wellness*.

^{xvii} Fiedler, *Officer Safety and Wellness*.

^{xviii} Kuhns et al., *Health, Safety, and Wellness Program Case Studies*.

^{xix} Andersen et al., "Mental Preparedness."