



Physical Anthropology Section - 2013

142 Collaborations Between Clinical Mental Health and Police Wellness Units: A San Diego Police Department Project

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be made aware of the need to extend the support network by forging relationships with university-based mental health professionals with expertise in police psychology. At the same time, wellness unit staff must remain sensitive to the process of orienting new police officers. For example, what is not as well-known is that new police officers are probably more receptive to using department support resources early in their career as opposed to after they have been absorbed into the police culture. Attendees will also be briefed on the Peace Officer Standards of Training's (POST) psychological dimensions as an evidence-based anchoring base for mental health professionals to use while making the risk-assessment rating. A practice-relevant forensic case study is used to demonstrate how the POST psychological dimensions can be used in this risk-assessment process. It is hypothesized that attendees from this presentation will have a greater understanding of the forensic elements associated with use of the psychological dimensions of police officer functioning.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing knowledge of the enhanced performance of police officers who make use of the combined resources offered through the wellness unit.

Collaborations between qualified university-based clinical mental health professionals and police wellness units offer a reasonable approach to dealing with risks (e.g., death, PTSD, suicidal behavior) police officer psychological work. Police officers have the most stressful job of any occupation. Risk assessments in the context of police work refers to the identification and psychological weighing of potential factors that are expected to compromise judgment or increase concern about stress vulnerability that can fuel misconduct. Despite the obvious need for services and available department resources, wellness units must reflexively work to achieve delicate cultural balance. The balancing act is required for negotiating the meandering contours of a police culture. The police culture includes an instinctive tendency for a male-dominated culture to avoid any revelation of what they assess as a weakness, especially those highlighted by mental health. Second, police unions are extremely leery (i.e., anonymity, fears of department, retribution, or any potential police officer negative outcomes) of any department resource (e.g., EAPs, chaplains, or senior officer mentors) that brings their members under scrutiny where they might be perceived vulnerable for being singled out. Third, the wellness unit is saddled with an onerous task of finding creative ways to assist police officers who they know are struggling with a wide range of issues. Finally, department budget cutbacks have resulted in loss of critical professional staff with the requisite expertise in responding to the stress-based concerns present by police officers.

The complexity of these police wellness issues underscores the diversity of public safety challenges. Most of these challenges on the surface appear rather obvious as to what may be required to intervene. Yet, with considerably more understanding of the dynamics of police culture, it becomes clear that gaining access to assist must be done with a unique or tailored model for a specific police department. For example, law enforcement agencies have distinct cultures (e.g., U.S. Border Patrol versus Boston Police Department) that must be first properly assessed in order to gain access for intervention. The hallmark of this work must first demonstrate the feasibility of working with the male-dominated culture posed by an otherwise hard-to-reach police population. This process is expected to be aided by understanding the beliefs and behaviors necessary for developing appropriate risk prevention and intervention programs in a department. University clinical mental health faculty with experience in working with police and public safety can be quite productive in crafting such collaborations assuming 100% buy-in (i.e., top-down cultural change) by the chief or superintendent.

In the aftermath of a high profile police misconduct incident, once the incident details are disclosed, it becomes clear that there are matters that should have previously raised red flags for the department. Police suicides are also devastating to the morale of other officers. The financial costs to departments and municipalities for a police officer's improper action reinforce the need to reduce the law suit risks where negligent hire can erode public trust. Insurance rates are also expected to rise in the wake of such cases. There are three learning objectives associated with this presentation. First, attendees are made aware of the need to extend the support network by forging relationships with university-based mental health professionals with expertise in police psychology. At the same time, wellness unit staff must remain sensitive to the process of orienting new police officers. For example, what is not as well-known is that new police officers are probably more receptive to using department support resources earlier in their career as opposed to after they have been absorbed into the police culture. The second learning objective of the presentation uses the POST's psychological dimensions as an evidence-based anchoring base for mental health professionals to use while making the risk assessment rating. The author uses a practice-relevant forensic case study to demonstrate how the POST psychological dimensions can be used in this risk assessment process. This presentation articulates a model of collaboration between university-based clinical mental health and police departments. The authors hypothesize that attendees from this presentation will have a greater understanding of the forensic elements associated with the use of the psychological dimensions of police officer functioning. The community is expected to



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gain from the enhanced performance of police officers who make use of the combined resources offered through the wellness unit.

Collaborations, Mental Health, San Diego Police