

Policing with purpose: A journey to officer wellness and safety

By Shawn M. Reynolds



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The significance of holistic wellness in policing cannot be overstated. A holistic wellness program can save the life of a colleague or friend, salvage a career, save a marriage or keep a family together and, potentially, keep an agency out of the headlines. Holistic wellness can aid and assist officers in understanding that, while they have many built-in coping mechanisms, they may need help from an outside resource. An agency's wellness program can also help foster healthy and productive relationships with the communities it serves.

Law enforcement, for many reasons, is at a crossroads. Evolving societal expectations have altered the environment in which officers must accomplish their mission to protect and serve their communities. Budgets are tight and often include unfunded mandates. Yet officers continue to be adversely affected by repeated exposure to what comes from the daily routine of protecting through service, such as suspects, coronary artery disease, driving too fast, mental health issues and suicide. Law enforcement leaders and officers can no longer continue with business as usual. First, they must recognize that humans are more than just mental and physical beings; they are emotional and spiritual beings as well. Second, they must change the ways in which officers approach their

work duties and responsibilities. Third, the field must work to transcend the stigmas associated with mental well-being. Innovative police managers must purposefully address the complete individual and be prepared to take action and offer assistance when situations arise that require attention.

It is an agency's duty to hire, train and maintain the best police officers and agency employees possible, and we also want them to retire from the department in good mental, physical and emotional health. Taking care of our personnel and addressing internal wellness produces better community service to our citizens. Our commitment to holism at every phase of an employee's career has resulted in excellent results over the past several years: a reduction in crime, an increase in clearance rates and a reduction in domestic violence homicides. Maintaining this commitment requires creative innovations by police administrators and a willingness to ask some tough questions about the role, obligations and responsibilities of law enforcement officers to their communities and each other. Responses to these questions highlight the urgent need to bridge the gap between the requirements for becoming a sworn officer and vocational vitality. Today, the Olathe (KS) Police Department trains its personnel for vitality, not just survival.

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OLATHE'S JOURNEY

Tackling the numerous and complex issues involved with officer wellness and safety can seem daunting for any agency or administrator, but it is an undertaking that is necessary for all law enforcement agencies and organizations.

THE BESTOW INITIATIVE

The mission of the Olathe Police Department's wellness initiative is to provide the environment and tools to promote holistic wellness to all employees in support of a balanced life, both personally and professionally. Holistic wellness focuses on physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellness so that employees will be better prepared to more effectively process the health issues, stress and emotional trauma prevalent within their chosen profession.

The department recognizes that traditional training has primarily focused on the physical and mental, and can neglect the core of what makes us all human: our emotions and spirit. We recognize the importance of training employees in all four dimensions of wellness so we can move beyond the mindset of just surviving toward a life in which we can all thrive throughout our careers.

The BeSTOW initiative has identified the following four key phases in an employee's career: recruitment, training, retention and retirement. Initial and continued focus on holistic wellness as every employee progresses through these career phases is critical to maintaining a balanced and healthy life. Multiple programs, concepts and training topics exist within each of these career phases that can aid every employee in achieving holistic wellness. Below is a non-exhaustive list of examples of ways in which employees can maintain or improve their holistic health throughout their career.

Recruitment (pre-hire)

Recruiting employees who reflect the community that we serve, as well the standards we represent within our components of holistic wellness and law enforcement.

Training (post-hire through release)

- Selection of trainers
- Mentoring
- Seminars on health/financial investments

Retention (probationary period through retirement)

- Career development
- Shared workload
- Collateral duties
- Mental health debrief
- Meal breaks
- Teamwork
- Volunteering to establish relationships within the community
- Physical fitness testing
- Wellness clinic

Retirement (pre- and post-hire)

- Seminars on health, financial investments, emotional health, thriving, survival
- Retiree involvement — mentoring/continuing involvement

Each employee will ultimately determine how to best achieve his or her highest level of holistic wellness and is encouraged to use those aspects of the Wellness Philosophy that provide the support, assistance and resources that are most beneficial to him or her. It is understood that not every component will be applicable to each employee; however, the intent of the Wellness Philosophy is to serve the needs of a diverse work group.

The Olathe PD believes it is imperative to proactively prepare each employee to most effectively maintain his or her holistic wellness. Healthy employees provide the highest quality of service to the community, as well as to one another, their families, friends, etc. Working under this philosophy, the BeSTOW team will strive to provide the most beneficial, applicable and current means for each employee to achieve the highest possible level of holistic wellness.

Several years ago, the Olathe Police Department increased its focus on officer wellness. To that end, the agency worked with Feemster Linkins Consulting LLC to educate 12 volunteers for the new internal wellness-related assignments. The agency leaders understood that for a culture of wellness to take hold, it had to be developed from the ground up and not the top down. After a two-year study was completed, a holistic philosophy and plan were developed.

Olathe's wellness program is called the BeSTOW (Beyond Survival Toward Olathe Wellness) and is based on the FBI initiative of the same name.¹ In the past year the department's wellness team has provided training and education on retirement planning, stress management, nutrition, physical fitness, spirituality, alcohol and drug abuse and recovery, mental health, volunteering and emotional intelligence. Less traditional work experiences like chair massages and a movie night have also been incorporated. During the same time frame, the department implemented a mandatory physical fitness program that supplements an existing voluntary program, and the

city of Olathe initiated a wellness clinic and a patient-involved care program.

The BeSTOW initiative recognizes the importance of holistic wellness and the need to train employees to practice wellness throughout all stages of their career, from recruitment to retirement and beyond. A typical training session involves between eight and 25 attendees, requires one hour or less, and is voluntary.

CHALLENGES

The BeSTOW program's challenges have involved typical issues such as logistics and scheduling, training "wants" versus "needs," and learning how to deliver wellness education and training.

While change is the only constant in life, it can also provide the most challenges. If other agencies decide to undertake this important task as a voluntary initiative, they must be prepared for skeptics who think they are doing so for some unstated reason other than their concern for their employees. Leaders who take this journey should do so because they care about their employees and the quality of the services they provide. The way leaders embrace personnel who choose to

decline to participate in wellness and safety initiatives will be the measure of their success. The hope is that, with time, all law enforcement will engage in the dialogue, discover its benefits and devote themselves to its perpetuity. This is policing with purpose. ■

ENDNOTE

1. "Beyond Survival." *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 78, no. 5 (May 2009): <http://leb.fbi.gov/2009-pdfs/leb-may-2009> (accessed Jan. 22, 2015)

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