

# CNA Executive Session on Policing: Officer Safety and Wellness

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## Introduction

In the wake of recent police attacks and ambushes, and the concomitant concerns regarding police officer safety, CNA organized an Executive Session to examine what we know about officer safety and wellness, what is working well in this area, and what must be prioritized for the future. On February 24, 2017, CNA convened its seventh Executive Session on Policing: “Keeping Police Officers Safe and Well: Meeting New Challenges.”



Officer safety and wellness issues remain a pressing concern for law enforcement executives and personnel, policymakers, training providers, researchers, and communities. Incidents like the police ambushes in Las Vegas, NV, Dallas, TX, San Antonio, TX, Baton Rouge, LA, and Des Moines, IA have brought the topic of officer safety to the forefront of policing discussions.

During the Executive Session, CNA and its invited guest speakers discussed how approaches to officer safety and wellness have evolved over time, and the law enforcement community’s current understanding of these issues. The session included perspectives from researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and other justice stakeholders.

The following summary provides an overview of the discussion that took place during the session, organized by keynote speakers and panels. For more information on CNA’s Executive Sessions on Policing, please contact us at [smartjustice@cna.org](mailto:smartjustice@cna.org).

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## Officer Safety and Wellness: Perspectives from Darrel Stephens



CNA was honored to have **Darrel Stephens**, Executive Director of the Major Cities Chiefs Association, serve as the opening keynote speaker. He is an accomplished police executive with over 45 years of experience. His career began as a police officer in Kansas City, MO in 1968, and from 1999 to 2008 he served as Chief of Police for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC Police Department. With more than 26 years of experience as a police executive, and after having recently served on the DOJ Officer Safety and Wellness Group, Mr. Stephens provides extensive insight into officer safety and wellness issues and challenges.

During his address, Mr. Stephens reflected on his career and the progression of officer safety and wellness programs throughout his policing experience. He noted the increased interest in physical fitness early in his policing career, and the eventual adoption of standardized fitness tests for officers. He then reflected on his experience as Police Chief and the evolution of officer safety to include nutrition programs, fitness incentives, safe driving courses, and work-life balance.

Mr. Stephens went on to discuss a series of challenges in officer safety and wellness, and how agencies might help their officers and employees overcome them. He noted that keeping officers motivated in maintaining physical fitness must be done both at the officer and agency levels; agencies must make it easy for their officers to exercise by providing adequate exercise facilities. He also noted that departmental policies on physical fitness must be clear and that training must reinforce policies.

He added that agencies must reassess whether they are measuring wellness appropriately. He cited the example of fatigue, which is found to be a dangerous side effect of working on the street. Yet, many officers are working over 60 hours per week.

Mr. Stephens concluded that agencies must ensure that policies and training provide their officers with an adequate expectation of the physical and emotional effects of the job.

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# Officer Safety: Strategies and Research from the Field

The first panel focused on current officer safety and wellness strategies employed in the policing profession and in policing research. Panelists included Zoë Thorkildsen, a Research Analyst at CNA; Dr. Brandi Burque, a Psychologist with the San Antonio, TX Police Department (SAPD); and Chief Will Johnson, from the Arlington, TX Police Department.

## Summary and Key Takeaways

**Zoë Thorkildsen** leads and supports research and technical assistance projects in criminal justice, and in emergency management and preparedness. She has expertise in criminal justice and policing, program evaluation, public administration and policy, and research design and analysis. Her panel presentation, “Violence Targeting Law Enforcement: Assaults, Ambushes, & Felonious Fatalities,” focused on recent CNA research related to officer safety. She organized her presentation along the following three questions: What do we know about violence targeting officers? What have we learned about ambushes of officers? What are the open issues and next steps?



## Zoë Thorkildsen -Key Takeaways

- Although data shows that there is a decline in police ambushes since the 1990s, there has been a slight uptick over the last few years, especially in the seriousness of assaults against police officers, which is causing concern within the law enforcement community. Ms. Thorkildsen noted the difficulties in quantifying officer ambushes, which introduces difficulties in the translation of the data due to the some incident reports not being initially categorized as an ambush.

- Findings from [\*Ambushes of Police: environment, incident dynamics, and the aftermath of surprise attacks against law enforcement\*](#), a report from CNA and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office), showed that although not causal, in-car cameras were associated with fewer ambushes. Body-worn cameras were found to lower the rate of assaults, and higher levels of officer education correlated to fewer assaults, perhaps due to increased conflict-resolution skills.
- Findings from the [\*Las Vegas After-Action Assessment: Lessons Learned from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department's Ambush Incident\*](#), a CNA and COPS Office report, showed the importance of training and the ability of officers to “fall back” on their training during a rapidly moving critical incident. Ms. Thorkildsen noted that although there are no empirical data to show that assigning two-person patrols after a critical incident would further protect an officer, having such protocols provides officers a greater sense of safety.
- Continued research about police ambushes is needed, and agencies should conduct assessments after critical incidents and share their findings with the larger law enforcement community.

**Dr. Brandi Burque** has worked with local and federal law enforcement and military personnel since 2005. In her current position as a San Antonio Police Department (SAPD) Psychologist, she provides individual, marital, and family therapy for police officers and their families. She also provides consultation services to the SAPD Hostage Negotiation Team and Crisis Intervention Team, and training and education at the SAPD Academy. Dr. Burque’s presentation focused on SAPD’s Performance and Recovery Optimization (PRO) training.



## Dr. Brandi Burque Key Takeaways

- PRO is not just a stress-management tool. Stress management often has a stigma within the law enforcement community, and in order for such training to be sustained within an agency, it must be built and sustained by the officers.
- PRO is primarily a performance-based model, focusing on training officers to do the best in everything they do. Dr. Burque noted that officer health and wellness is not about “bouncing back”; it is about how people learn to perform optimally.
- An area of the brain, the amygdala, shuts down when a person is under extreme stress and causes fine motor skills to deteriorate. Understanding this, agencies must make their academies stress-appropriate so that officers

know what to do and learn the skills to enable them to act appropriately when fine motor skills are compromised.

- Symptoms from stress on the job should not be stigmatized as post-traumatic stress disorder. Agencies and leaders must understand that a spike in stress after a critical incident is often temporary and not indicative of a disorder. Agencies must invest in “checking in” with officers periodically after a critical incident to ensure their overall wellness.

**Chief Will Johnson** started his law enforcement career in 1994 and rose through the ranks before being promoted as the Arlington Police Department’s 15<sup>th</sup> Police Chief in March 2013. Chief Johnson has 19 years of law enforcement experience that includes field operations, investigations, homeland security, special events, and administration. His presentation focused on the officer safety and wellness strategies he employs within his department.



## Chief Will Johnson Key Takeaways

- Agencies should promote safety and wellness at every level. Every officer should have individual tactical first aid kits and ballistic vests. Agencies should also adopt policies that require officers to wear seat belts and bulletproof vests and should provide training to raise awareness of the consequences of failure to do so.
- Chief Johnson takes every opportunity he has when speaking to the public to acknowledge what officers are worried about (e.g., ambushes and attacks) and the importance of the wellbeing and mental health of officers. It is important to have a support system to alleviate pressures from work, parenting, and finances; and agencies need to make sure that they have the opportunity to help and intervene at the earliest moment to ensure maximized assistance.
- Procedural justice provides the framework for officer safety and wellness to occur. Chief Johnson stated that his officers are only able to embody procedural justice in the community if they are experiencing internal procedural justice from management.
- Today’s officer is better prepared and equipped than ever before, and an effective training system is crucial. Training should be inclusive of all outside factors, including stress management.
- Positive community engagement reflects the amount of support for American police. The majority of people value officer visibility within their communities, and previous positive interactions will counteract people’s negative experiences. Chief Johnson noted that we can never lose site of the humanity of the law enforcement officer; if we are not supporting and

advocating community engagement, then we are missing an opportunity for officers to gain healthy experiences.

- Chief Johnson briefly noted the findings from the Pew Survey, [Behind the Badge](#). According to the survey findings, officers overwhelmingly felt that their job was more difficult than last year, and few believed that the community understood the demands of their job. Chief Johnson stated that these findings reinforce the need for more-effective communication between police and the communities they serve.

## Looking Forward: Addressing the Need for Enhanced Officer Safety

The second panel focused on the need to further enhance officer safety and wellness strategies employed in the policing profession and in policing research. Panelists included Jim Baker, Director of Law Enforcement Operations and Support, International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP); Dr. James Coldren, Managing Director of Justice Programs at CNA; and Dr. Geoffrey Alpert, Professor at the University of South Carolina.

**Jim Baker** served with the Vermont State Police for over 30 years, rising to the rank of Colonel. He also served as Executive Support Specialist for the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Initiative within the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). He was appointed Chief of Police in Rutland, VT in August 2012 and received a Gubernatorial Appointment to the Vermont Criminal Justice and Substance Abuse Cabinet in October 2014. Mr. Baker's presentation focused on the future of officer safety and wellness, including how agencies can actively engage their officers in larger conversations about this topic.



### Jim Baker Key Takeaways

- IACP recognizes that this is a crucial time to concentrate on officer safety and overall wellness. This led IACP President, Chief Donald De Lucca to organize a task force to conduct focus groups of police executives to discuss violence within communities and its impact on policing.
- The law enforcement community is not paying enough attention to the psychological effects violence has on officer safety and wellness. Mr. Baker recounted his experience in policing and recalled several occasions in which agencies did not support employees appropriately.
- The rate of police suicides is increasing (and it far exceeds the rate at which police officers are killed by the public), yet there is limited data due to a lack of formal tracking of these figures and related research on officer mental health.

- Procedural justice and officer wellness go hand-in-hand. Mr. Baker noted that how police perceive they are treated within the department is how they will treat community members on the street. Procedural justice goes a long way, explained Mr. Baker, and ensuring the overall wellness of an officer can improve the interactions they have with citizens.
- Police executives should demonstrate that policing is a noble profession and advocate a holistic recruiting approach to becoming an officer. Related support systems need to be in place at each level within an organization. It is important for police officers to be held accountable but also feel supported.

**Dr. James Coldren** has more than 35 years of experience in research; program and policy evaluation; policy development; advocacy; development, coordination, and delivery of TTA; and justice system reform. He structured his presentation around two topics: 1) how to think broadly about defining officer safety and wellness; and 2) how to promote officer safety and wellness through procedural justice.



## Dr. James Coldren Key Takeaways

- The law enforcement community should go beyond promoting physical fitness for officers and extend its focus on wellness to include helping officers improve their coping mechanisms, encouraging officers to assist one another, and encouraging community partnership and engagement.
- The U.S. Department of Justice supports important TTA initiatives (e.g., the BJA [VALOR Initiative](#)) that encourage officer wellness and resilience. In addition, BJA's [Smart Policing Initiative](#) combines police operations and street intelligence data, which is quickly collected, analyzed, and packaged for the patrol officer. It helps solve crime-related issues and gives real-time information that promotes safety for officers.
- Improving officer readiness for and behavior in crucial situations can take different forms, including training, investigation techniques, and recruitment strategies. The pathway in improving policing should also include improving internal procedural justice.
- In 2015, Northwestern University conducted a [study](#) of police officers in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to examine officer compliance and endorsement of use of force policies. The study found that officer behavior was contingent on perceptions of internal fairness and the likelihood of officers obeying supervisors, and that officers' endorsement of democratic policing stemmed from their perception of whether they were being treated fairly.

**Professor Geoffrey Alpert** has been conducting research on high-risk police activities for more than 25 years and has published more than 100 journal articles and 15 books. His presentation focused on his research on procedural justice and related outcome measures.



## Professor Geoffrey Alpert-Key Takeaways

- Dr. Albert and his team conducted a study in Seattle testing internal departmental procedural justice, giving one group of officers a cognitive debrief and the other a regular brief before their patrols. The study found that officers were more likely to impart what they learned if they received a cognitive debrief.
- Agencies should proactively review encounters and uses of force to identify lessons learned and areas where procedural justice can benefit. This can be done with the use of technology, such as body-worn cameras, which can serve as a visual aid for training.
- Outcome measures are learned from past incidences. Some agencies are beginning to use early warning or intervention systems for more than use of force and citizen complaints (e.g., sick leave) in order to interrupt a pattern or assist an officer who may be troubled.
- Understanding the climate and culture of the rank-and-file is important, as it can help demonstrate why officers comply with policies, as well as how agencies can ensure a higher compliance rate.

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## Officer Safety and Wellness: Perspectives from James “CHIPS” Stewart



James “CHIPS” Stewart, Public Safety Director at CNA, provided the closing keynote presentation. He has 40 years of progressive law enforcement experience from his dual professional and research background. Mr. Stewart is a nationally recognized expert in criminal justice assessment, capabilities evaluation, critical incident reconstruction and analysis, use of force analysis, and technology applications.

Mr. Stewart began his address by explaining that policing is designed as a public service, and officers often respond to high-risk situations and encounter tragedy as part of their job duties. He noted that this can have an effect on an officer’s wellness and urged police leaders to ensure that they have strong, fault-free support systems in place, and that they provide officers a safe space to decompress. He also noted that there are numerous lessons learned, documented by research, that outline how agencies can and should support their officers after a critical incident.

Mr. Stewart concluded by acknowledging that further work and research needs to be done on progressive approaches to officer safety and wellness, with greater focus on the evaluation of the success and impact of these approaches. Officer safety and wellness is extremely important if communities are to thrive, and the partnerships between law enforcement agencies and researchers are essential to the success of these initiatives.

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## Conclusion

Recent ambushes of police have catapulted the topic of officer safety and wellness into the forefront of discussion and interest in the law enforcement field. Panelists at CNA’s Executive Session on Policing, “Keeping Police Officers Safe and Well: Meeting New Challenges,” noted the importance of enhancing officer safety and wellness beyond seat belt and fitness requirements, incorporating wellness and stress-management skills into all aspects of training; augmenting wellness and peer support programs, and destigmatizing the impacts of the job on officer mental health.

The panelists presented various ways in which agencies and research partners can continue to enhance officer safety and wellness—such as SAPD’s Performance and Recovery Optimization training, strategies to enrich dialogue and relationships between police and the community, and increased research and data on police ambushes—that can prepare officers for their job duties, enhance police-community relations, and achieve a greater understanding of the factors that may impact ambushes of police.



CNA encourages agencies to assess ways in which they, too, can enhance their officer safety and wellness programs. As our panelists noted, ensuring officer safety and wellness is not only beneficial to the officer, but to the agency and the community as well. This is why it is important that police leaders, stakeholders, and researchers continue to encourage and facilitate further discussion and research on this topic.

To review CNA’s work on police ambushes and other related topics, please visit our [website](#). Questions, comments, and suggestions for future Executive Session topics can be directed to [smartjustice@cna.org](mailto:smartjustice@cna.org).

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# CNA

This report was written by CNA's Safety and Security (SAS) division.

SAS's work helps improve decision-making during crisis operations and fosters innovative answers to challenges in the areas of first response; emergency management; public health and agriculture; homeland security; risk-management policy development and operations; and response and recovery capabilities at a national level.





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