Health and wellness are paramount for law enforcement. Many agencies continue to face staffing shortages leading to long shift schedules; officer fatigue and burnout; residual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; and stress from the public's increased awareness and scrutiny.[i] As a result, law enforcement officers experience higher rates of suicide, depression, substance use disorders, and cardiac arrest compared to the general population.[ii] Health and wellness are also specifically important for police trainees. Throughout the onboarding process, from academy to field training to patrol, trainees are expected to quickly acclimate to the internal and external functions and associated stressors of the policing profession.

To this end, as part of the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)-funded initiative *Using Analytics to Improve Officer Safety*, CNA's Center for Justice Research and Innovation produced this bulletin to support law enforcement agencies in recognizing and combating health and wellness challenges trainees may face. This bulletin also provides information that can guide resource allocation and the development of practices to promote trainee health and wellness.

Visit CNA's Officer Safety and Wellness page to learn more about this initiative.

METHODS

This draws on data collected from law enforcement officer interviews conducted as part of (1) the BJA-funded *Using Analytics to Improve Officer Safety* initiative, (2) the CNA-funded *Field Training Programs in Law Enforcement* project; and (3) a review of academic literature, US Department of Justice technical research reports, and institutional reports.

CHALLENGES AND PROMISING STRATEGIES

DURING RECRUITMENT AND IN ACADEMY

AGENCY-LEVEL

CHALLENGE

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Trainees may join the policing profession with a different expectation than what they encounter (e.g., believing work in the field entails primarily tactical operations, whereas initial assignments more commonly involve tasks such as traffic enforcement and patrol).[iii] These trainees can become frustrated upon receiving initial assignments that do not meet their hopes and expectations.[iv] Agencies determine initial assignments for several reasons, including understanding the importance of community policing and building relationships and legitimacy with the trainees' areas of patrol.[v] However, the trainees' unmet expectations can cause stress, breaching what research refers to as a "psychological contract" with their organization.[vi]

STRATEGY

RECRUITMENT AND ONBOARDING VIDEOS

To mitigate the confusion and frustration trainees may face upon being tasked with different responsibilities than anticipated, agencies should establish clear expectations during the recruitment and onboarding process, such as through the use of videos accurately depicting job responsibilities.[vii] Recruitment videos often focus on tactical operations[viii] as opposed to the administrative, patrol, and community policing work more commonly associated with a law enforcement career. Creating recruitment materials that stress the importance of community policing can help to manage trainees' expectations of their job responsibilities and build legitimacy with the community.[ix] Agencies can look to the Los Angeles Police Department's video blog as one example of a realistic depiction.[x]

AGENCY-LEVEL

CHALLENGE

ADJUSTING TO STRESS

A trainee may be unprepared to face the stressful environment to which experienced officers are accustomed. Thornton and Herndon (2016) found that newer officers who had not experienced a critical incident had less ability to emotionally regulate than officers who had experienced critical incidents.[xi] Ensuring that officers are well equipped to adjust to and manage their stress is important; unmitigated stress can have detrimental effects on behaviors toward themselves and the communities they serve. As noted by Blumberg et al. (2020), "A trauma-informed approach recognizes that officers who experience the negative impacts of the moral risks of policing are more likely to act in ways that hurt themselves and others."[xii] Some officers interviewed explained that they were negatively affected by on-scene events that reminded them of their home life and therefore were hesitant to use force or effectuate a mandatory arrest. As trainees adjust to new job responsibilities, challenging scenarios will inevitably arise; agencies should consider how best to help trainees learn to navigate these situations without overloading their acute or cumulative stress levels.

STRATEGY

EMPOWER TRAINEES TO USE AGENCY WELLNESS RESOURCES

Recognizing the increased levels of stress trainees face while acclimating to their new profession, agencies can empower them to use available wellness resources. To do so, agencies should address the barriers officers face to seeking help. Common barriers to officers seeking mental health help noted in the research include cultural and internalized stigmas associated with seeking help,[xiii] an inability to identify signs of needing to seek help,[xiv] being unsure of where to go to receive help,[xiv] a reduced amount of sleep,[xv] and not feeling "in control" of one's job.[xvi] Copenhaver and Tewksbury (2018) found that when an officer received an extra hour of sleep, they were 28.4 percent more likely to get help, and when an officer felt "in control of their job," they were 101.6 percent more likely. Agencies can address these barriers by discussing the importance of mental health early and often, training officers to recognize the signs of distress in themselves and their fellow officers, marketing their wellness resources and placing them in easily accessible locations, and remaining cognizant of the effects of shift schedules and disrupted sleep on officer health and wellness.

DURING FIELD TRAINING

AGENCY-LEVEL

CHALLENGE
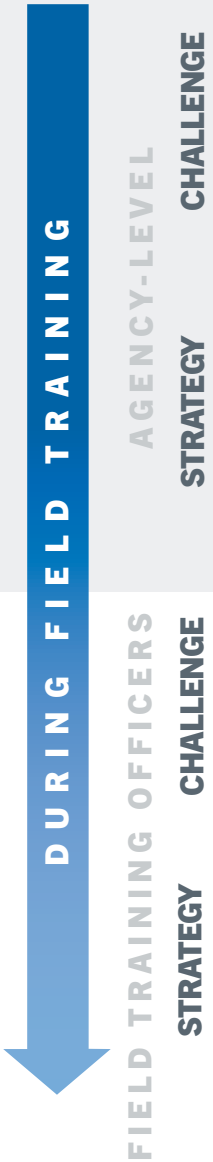
ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

Organizational stress can negatively affect police performance.[xvii] Although starting any new job can be overwhelming, trainees may experience added frustration when facing procedural barriers to learning their new role. Identified barriers in training may include administrative and/or technical roadblocks (e.g., inoperative login to a database, the inability to access their daily observation report, etc.) and being required to remain in a training phase past the time limit due to delayed completion of paperwork and evaluations.[xviii]

STRATEGY

FEEDBACK LOOPS

Agencies should strive to create an environment in their organization that allows feedback from all ranks. Providing feedback can be especially intimidating for trainees because of the ranking structure and strict adherence to chain of command.[xix] To remain aware of and address the procedural stressors that trainees face in a timely manner, it is beneficial for agencies to create methods for leadership to receive ongoing feedback from trainees. Anonymous feedback mechanisms, such as suggestion boxes and 360-degree feedback are potential methods agencies can adopt to help convey trainee concerns directly to leadership.[xx] Learn about 360-degree feedback from the Office of Personnel Management.

FIELD TRAINING OFFICERS

CHALLENGE

TRAINEE RELATIONSHIP WITH FIELD TRAINING OFFICER

The relationship between a trainee and a field training officer (FTO) has the potential to be a lifelong mentorship. However, personality conflicts and contrasts in teaching and learning styles can arise and hinder this relationship.[xxi] Furthermore, some female officers interviewed experienced gender discrimination from their male FTOs and subsequently felt unprepared and inadequately trained for their job.

STRATEGY

PROVIDING TRAINEE FEEDBACK

Providing constructive feedback to trainees is critical for their development. It is an important skill for FTOs as leaders and enhances the FTO-trainee relationship. However, providing helpful, effective feedback may not be an innate skill for FTOs. Agencies should provide FTOs with skills-based training to learn how to give real-time feedback in an effective manner. Feedback is also critical to ensuring that the FTO program is meeting trainee needs. Trainees reported higher satisfaction during their FTO process when they had clear expectations, when they were given the opportunity to learn and the ability to ask questions, and when trainers remained engaged.[xxii]

CONCLUSION

Agencies have a critical role in supporting their members' health and wellness throughout their careers. During the recruitment process and in the academy, agencies can support their recruits and trainees by providing them with realistic expectations of what their work and schedules will look like. Helping new agency members adjust to new life stressors by encouraging the use of services available to them is also something an agency can do to support their members' wellness. As members begin field training, it is important for agencies to create opportunities for feedback in the event that unnecessary procedural barriers arise. In addition, organizational stress is shown to be of equal or greater effect or influence to agency members than the operational stressors they experience; therefore, agencies should reduce these organizational stressors as much as possible. Finally, as law enforcement trainees are working with their FTO, conflicts may arise due to personality clashes, or more egregious scenarios, such as those including discrimination. Creating an environment in which feedback is encouraged can help to support the wellness of trainees as they enter their career in law enforcement.

TO LEARN MORE

This bulletin is part of a larger VALOR-funded initiative focused on analytic approaches to police officer health and wellness. To learn more about the VALOR initiative, visit https://bja.ojp.gov/program/valor/overview.

For more of CNA's work related to officer safety and wellness, please see the following publications:
- The Use of Predictive Analytics in Policing
- Predictive Analytics Bulletin
- Law Enforcement Officer Safety: Risks, Recommendations and Examples from the Field
- Law Enforcement Officer Safety Risks and Recommendations Bulletin
- Guidance on the Collection and Use of Officer Injury Data Bulletin
- Wellness Peer Listening Session: Key Takeaways

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ABOUT CNA

CNA is a nonprofit research and analysis organization dedicated to the safety and security of the nation. It operates the Institute for Public Research—which serves civilian government agencies—and the Center for Naval Analyses, the Department of the Navy's federally funded research and development center (FFRDC). CNA is dedicated to developing actionable solutions to complex problems of national importance. With nearly 700 scientists, analysts, and professional staff, CNA takes a real-world approach to gathering data, working side-by-side with operators and decision-makers around the world. CNA's research portfolio includes global security and great power competition, homeland security, emergency management, criminal justice, public health, data management, systems analysis, naval operations, and fleet and operational readiness.

For more information, please contact:

Jessica Dockstader
Associate Research Analyst
DOCKSTADERJ@cna.org

Dr. Brittany Cunningham
Project Director
CUNNINGHAMB@cna.org