



WELLNESS PEER LISTENING SESSION: KEY TAKEAWAYS



CNA's Center for Justice Research and Innovation, through the Bureau of Justice Assistance's (BJA's) VALOR Initiative, is working with 11 law enforcement agencies across the US to understand current efforts to promote law enforcement personnel wellness, explore critical gaps in evidence-based research, and provide targeted national resources and tools to support wellness behaviors among sworn and non-sworn agency members. As part of this effort, CNA hosted a virtual Wellness Peer Listening Session with several of the participating project agencies on April 27, 2023. The purpose of the listening session was to allow attendees the opportunity to discuss their experiences with employee wellness and provide their thoughts on where the field should focus its efforts in the future.

The listening session was facilitated by CNA Senior Advisor and retired Public Safety Director Geoffrey Smith. Director (ret.) Smith asked participants questions about (1) the desired outcomes of their agencies' wellness initiatives, (2) the aspects of the wellness initiatives that are and are not working well, (3) how agencies garner officer support for their wellness initiatives, (4) how agencies are working to reduce the stigma around seeking wellness services, (5) how the agencies' wellness initiatives have evolved over the last five years, (6) the kinds of additional support that the agencies would benefit from to improve wellness efforts, and (7) what the agencies foresee as wellness challenges for their employees in the coming years.

Nearly 20 participants representing 8 project agencies attended the listening session. These participants' official roles varied, ranging from sworn executive command staff to civilian wellness coordinators. Staff from the CNA project team and BJA policy advisors also attended the listening session.

In this resource, we highlight the key takeaways from the listening session. Each takeaway includes supporting context or examples provided by participants.

The desired outcomes of wellness initiatives vary across agencies, but one common goal is to build a culture of resilience.

Participating agencies indicated that the desired outcomes of their wellness initiatives are to increase life expectancy, create positive coping skills, build a culture of resilience, increase access to behavioral health resources, reduce the stigma associated with seeking wellness services, and prevent officer suicides. Although desired outcomes varied across agencies, multiple agencies mentioned building a culture of resilience as one of their primary desired outcomes.

Informing recruits about available wellness services and their importance early in the academy helps engrain a culture of acceptance.

One department explained that its wellness staff meets with every recruit one-on-one starting the first day of the academy. Similarly, another department mentioned that its wellness team teaches at the academy, which provides them a good opportunity to make initial contact with recruits.

Officers may be more comfortable engaging in peer support programs as opposed to external services because they have shared experiences and language with their peers.

Several participating agencies indicated that their peer support programs are one of the most successful components of their wellness programs. One department estimated that 70 percent of officers within the department prefer to speak with the peer support program rather than an external provider.

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Departments must be intentional in assigning personnel to oversee the administration of wellness services. These personnel need to be able to show empathy and garner trust. Having a program champion or “point person” can help in building trust.

Several participating agencies stressed the importance of choosing the most appropriate personnel to oversee the administration of wellness services. They emphasized that agencies must be intentional in assigning personnel to these positions. These positions should be assigned to individuals who are genuinely dedicated to the wellness of employees and who are able to show empathy. One wellness coordinator described that he does not want employees to see his role as a Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm job. His wellness team provides department members with their personal phone numbers so that they are always accessible. One employee seeking support told him, “You were the first person I called because I knew you would answer the phone.”

Officers sharing their personal experiences using wellness services can help reduce the stigma associated with seeking support and foster an environment of acceptance.

One department explained that the “biggest gamechanger” for them in terms of garnering support for wellness services was having several highly respected officers within the department participate in videos in which they discussed various wellness issues. These videos were subsequently shared with department personnel. Another department produced a video in which an officer talked about his personal struggles with alcohol and opioid abuse and encouraged other officers to take advantage of available wellness services. The department made viewing the video mandatory for all personnel.

The provision of wellness services requires follow-up and follow-through. Going beyond the initial conversation is crucial.

One department expressed the importance of following up with employees after initial conversations so that they know they will be supported throughout the process. Maintaining the relationship demonstrates that the agency genuinely cares about employees’ well-being.

Support for wellness services from executive staff, command staff, and front-line supervisors is essential for embedding a culture of wellness within the department.

One department described that it uses a “top-down approach” to introduce its wellness services to employees. The department intentionally first introduced executive staff to a new wellness application being rolled out in the department and then moved to command staff and front-line supervisors before focusing on the broader employee population. The wellness coordinator explained that the theory behind this approach is, “If my supervisor is using this, I should be using it too.”

Departments should internally assess the barriers that may hinder employee willingness to use wellness services. The ability to maintain confidentiality is key to encouraging the use of wellness services.

One wellness coordinator explained that in some departments there may be barriers to employee use of wellness services. For example, employees may fear retribution for seeking help or there may not be a strong system in place for maintaining the confidentiality of those who seek support services. The wellness coordinator explained that employees are focused on self-preservation and protecting their careers, which may make them hesitant to reach out for services if there is a fear of retribution. He emphasized that his department does not treat seeking help in a punitive manner and that there is a strong system in place for maintaining confidentiality. Confidentiality is especially important for addressing employee concerns about career longevity. His department is ultimately striving to create a “psychologically safe space” where employees feel comfortable asking for help.

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Extending the availability of wellness services to employee family members can help encourage the use of services by employees and can help address personal issues that may be affecting an employee's on-the-job performance.

Several agencies mentioned that they have extended or are working to extend wellness services to employee family members. These agencies understand that employee well-being affects home life as well. The belief is that extending services to family members can further improve employee wellness by helping address home issues and providing additional incentive to seek wellness services.

Inadequate staffing or the departure of key personnel can limit the effectiveness, consistency, and sustainability of a department's wellness initiatives.

Several agencies stressed that the limited staffing of their wellness teams is a challenge and affects the breadth of services that they can offer. For example, one department explained that the number of wellness staff is inadequate for the size of the department. Another department described that it was not prepared for the unexpected departures of the psychologist and the officer who led a resilience class. The department has been left "scrambling to fix things" and does not yet know how it is going to continue providing the services it offered before the key personnel departed.

There are generational differences in receptivity to types of wellness services.

Several agencies expressed that they see generational differences in receptivity to wellness services. One department highlighted that newer officers appear to be more receptive to the department's resilience class. More tenured officers did not want to be in the class and were not active participants. However, more tenured officers tended to be more positive about the resilience class when discussing it in a one-on-one setting. One participant, who identified as being a more tenured officer, explained that when he first joined his department, "It was accepted that you are going to lose a part of your soul." However, he said that the department is moving past this sentiment and that seeking support is becoming more culturally acceptable.

Words matter. Departments need to be intentional in the language used to talk about and promote employee wellness.

One wellness coordinator stressed that being intentional in word choice and language used to talk about employee wellness can help in reducing the stigma. This wellness coordinator provided examples of language that he uses, such as "post-traumatic stress injury"¹ instead of post-traumatic stress disorder. He also emphasized the importance of using language such as "died by suicide" instead of "committed suicide." The wellness coordinator explained that in law enforcement, the word "committed" has a negative connotation and is associated with committing a crime.

Departments can use different entry points to get employees thinking about and engaging in wellness services.

One department described the many ways it works to introduce employees to wellness services outside of formal trainings or informational sessions. For example, the department uses therapy dogs and yoga as additional ways to get employees thinking about their wellness.

¹ This is specific language the wellness coordinator uses. The rationale is that the alternative term will help reduce the stigma associated with seeking services for post-traumatic stress. While debates around the efficacy of using post-traumatic stress injury versus post-traumatic stress disorder continue, a recent study found that renaming post-traumatic stress 'disorder' to 'injury' would reduce stigma associated with the term. See more: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10257468/>

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Anti-police sentiments over the last several years have made internal wellness services more important.

One wellness coordinator explained that recent anti-police sentiments have illuminated the importance of internal wellness services. He described that during this time, employees have relied on one another for support. Another wellness coordinator explained that his department is trying to overcome the “moral dilemma that officers are experiencing.” He said that officers do not feel as proud or respected as they once were.

Departments desire training and technical assistance to help them understand what is and is not working with their wellness initiatives.

Several departments indicated that training and technical assistance would be helpful for evaluating the effectiveness of their wellness initiatives. One department mentioned that it would be beneficial to have wellness staff from a department experiencing success come speak with their own department leadership on the benefits of investing in employee wellness.

TO LEARN MORE

This resource 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 publications below:

- [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](#)

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For more information please contact:

Ben Carleton
Deputy Project Director
CARLETONB@cna.org

Dr. Brittany Cunningham
Project Director
CUNNINGHAMB@cna.org

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