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Building Resiliency: A Protective Leadership Strategy for Increasing Performance

[John M. Violanti, PhD, New York State Police \(Ret.\), Research Professor, State University at Buffalo, New York, and Deborah J. Campbell, Colonel \(Ret.\), New York State Police, Consultant/Instructor, IACP](#)



“The strongest factor related to unit resilience is officer leadership....
Good leaders make a very big difference under high-stress conditions.”¹
—Paul Bliese, Colonel, U.S. Army

There is no doubt that law enforcement is a stressful occupation. The need to adjust and adapt to changing circumstances is continuous in law enforcement, and the ability to make a split-second judgment is critical to avoid unnecessary harm to the public, to coworkers, and to oneself. Police officers are exposed to physical harm, shift work, long work hours, victims of violence, and tragic events. In the wake of tragedies such as the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting, the Orlando night club murders, the murder of five police officers in Dallas, the stabbing death of a London police officer, and other acts of violence and terrorism, it is important to address how to reduce the deleterious psychological aftermath on law enforcement officers who must deal with these tragedies.

Given the difficult demands of their jobs, officers must remain ready to perform well despite high levels of stress. It is therefore important for law enforcement leaders to utilize proactive measures for their personnel. An integral part of maintaining and even improving performance under stressful circumstances is increasing the resiliency of officers.

What Is Resilience?

Originally, “[t]he term ‘resilience’ has its roots in materials science, where it is defined as ‘the ability of a material to absorb and release energy within an elastic range.’”² The idea has moved over to psychology, where resilience is considered as the ability to adapt successfully in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, or significant threat.³

There are three primary skills encompassed by resilience that help officers adapt to stress:

- *Recovery* is the ability to rebound from a negative impact of stress and quickly regain equilibrium.
- *Sustainability* is the ability to not be disrupted by stressors and to stay engaged in work, family, and social life.
- *Growth* refers to the possibility that, as a result of stressful experiences, officers learn to better adapt to future stress.⁴

CBP National Resiliency Task Force

With more than 60,000 employees, over 45,000 of whom are law enforcement personnel, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is one of the world's largest law enforcement organizations and is charged with keeping terrorists and their weapons out of the United States while facilitating lawful international travel and trade. The stressors facing those in this complex and challenging environment are many, including the fact that CBP officers and agents experience more assaults than those in any other U.S. law enforcement agency.*

As in many other law enforcement agencies, CBP personnel face additional stress factors due to their law enforcement mission. These stressors contribute to overall stress, anxiety, and other emotional considerations. Coupled with common personal pressures, such as financial, marital, or family difficulties, this additional stress creates a dynamic where people are at a higher risk of significant health issues. Since 2007, 88 CBP officers and agents have committed suicide, including 10 within the past year.†

The leadership at CBP recognizes that the health and well-being of its workforce is vital to its success as an organization and to the creation of a healthy and productive work environment. Recently, Acting Commissioner Kevin McAleenan tasked Assistant Commissioner Linda Jacksta and Deputy Executive Assistant Commissioner John Wagner with enhancing and developing a robust resiliency program, which resulted in the creation of the CBP National Resiliency Task Force (NRTF)—a grassroots prevention and intervention plan based on workforce input.

National Resiliency Task Force (NRTF)

"Building a Resilient Culture – One Person at a Time"



NRTF Mission

To promote the highest levels of employee resilience, to increase confidence and trust in the Agency through early recognition of potential problems, and to provide effective support options for any resiliency problems identified.

Phases Task Force Teams Awareness

- 5 Stress & Anxiety
- 4 Marriage & Family Issues
- 3 Substance Abuse
- 2 Domestic Violence
- 1 Suicide Prevention

TEAM 1
Data Analysis

- Benchmark best practices of law enforcement entities with current early warning systems.
- Develop and conduct CBP integrated training specific to suicide and domestic violence.

TEAM 2
Field Resources

- Conduct Resiliency Benchmarking to identify and address resiliency capability gaps and improve employee support program effectiveness.
- Develop Communications Strategy and execute to promote resiliency.
- Standardize and integrate employee support basic training curriculum and policies.

TEAM 3
Policy & Procedures

- Identify and address gaps in policies relating to supporting the well-being of CBP employees.

TEAM 4
EAP Assessments

- Assess services provided by CBP's Employee Assistance Program (EAP).



SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS

- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Acting anxious or agitated
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated

EAP: Counselors are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at (800) 755-7002

NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)



The NRTF, currently lead by Chief Patrol Agent Austin Skero, bolsters CBP's efforts in the area of building resilience by focusing on at-risk employees and addressing critical issues facing the workforce, such as suicide, domestic violence, substance abuse, marital or family issues, and stress and anxiety.

The task force is currently targeting suicide prevention through the efforts of four working groups:

- »Data Analysis
- »Field Resources
- »Policy & Procedures
- »Employee Assistance Program Assessment

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Members assigned to these working groups have correlated data from past suicides to better understand the scope and nature of this phenomenon in CBP, with the hope that safeguards can be put in place to recognize signs and symptoms of severe stress and anxiety before it's too late to prevent such tragedies.

this task force said,

Assistant Commissioner Linda Jacksta, who oversees

We are committed to the overall well-being of our workforce, and we must increase our emphasis on resilience to help employees recognize problems and empower them and encourage them to seek help early on. This is why we are working to build a permanent resiliency program with long-term sustainability.‡

Notes:

*U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), "CBP Use of Force Statistics," March 13, 2017.

†Linda Jacksta (assistant commissioner, CBP) and Austin Skero (executive director, CBP), interview, 2017.

‡Ibid.

What Can Leaders Do to Increase Resilience?

Leadership is critical for building individual and organizational resilience. Leaders who are resilient are crucial in creating a culture of resilience in an organization.⁵ There are three important areas of focus for leaders seeking to effectively increase resilience: (1) foster commitment to the department, (2) allow personnel some sense of control over their work, and (3) provide a challenging work environment.⁶ Table 1 describes the “dos and don’ts” of these three points. According to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), there are several additional ways to help foster a resilient personnel, including the following:⁷

- **Develop a “human-centered culture.”** Promote respect and encourage active worker participation, input, and involvement throughout the agency. A human-centered culture is built on trust, not on the fear of punishment.
- **Demonstrate leadership.** It is critical that leaders demonstrate a commitment to worker health and safety, reflected in both their words and actions.
- **Engage mid-level management.** Supervisors and managers at all levels (e.g., sergeants, lieutenants, captains) should be involved in promoting wellness programs, including those that promote resiliency. Active involvement of first-line supervisors is the key to integrating, motivating, and communicating with officers.
- **Be consistent.** Officers’ and staff’s willingness to engage in resiliency programs may depend on perceptions of whether the work environment is truly supportive of these programs or activities.
- **Promote employee participation.** Ensure that officers are engaged to identify relevant issues and are active contributors to solutions.
- **Adjust the program as needed.** If the approach doesn’t work, adjust it until it does.
- **Communicate strategically.** Leaders should communicate early and often—providing updates to leadership and patrols. Consistent, targeted, effective communication is essential to a program’s success.

Table 1: Focus Areas for Increasing Resilience

COMMITMENT TO THE DEPARTMENT

How to Build Commitment

- Support officers' attempts to express their own ideas; use their skills and talents to get tasks accomplished
- Give recognition, awards, praise for accomplishments
- Plan teamwork & cohesion building activities
- Provide meaningful tasks where progress is visible
- Support individual development
- Be fair; do not show favoritism
- Spend time with your officers
- Share hardships with your officers
- Provide information about what you are doing and why

How to Destroy Commitment

- Do not look for feedback or input
- Criticize and denigrate initiative
- Be self-absorbed and self-promoting
- Live apart and take special privileges for yourself
- Be unfair or stingy with rewards, recognition, or benefits
- Avoid direct interactions with your people
- Provide information to only a limited few
- Show favoritism
- Show no interest in officers' individual aspirations
- Impose undue travel and local contact restrictions

PROVIDING A SENSE OF CONTROL

How to Build Control

- Provide tasks that are challenging but within officers' capabilities to achieve
- Establish graduated training programs: crawl—walk—run
- Provide resources and time needed to accomplish goals
- Set achievable standards
- Build on success; seek short-term wins to build on

How to Destroy Control

- Give too many tasks for available time
- Give too difficult tasks for officers' skill levels
- Criticize and punish for failure
- Do not listen to feedback
- Do not provide needed resources

PROMOTING CHALLENGES

How to Build Challenges

- Always emphasize value of change for learning
- Incorporate surprises and variation into schedules
- Model enjoyment, fun in variety

How to Destroy Challenges

- Avoid change or surprises at all cost
- Never take a risk
- Restrict innovation and experimentation by requiring

- Be willing to change the plan to meet changing circumstances
- Treat failures as opportunities to learn

- rules and permission for everything
- Never change the schedule
- Blame others for mistakes and failure
- Denigrate others for failure

How Will I Know If My Program Is Working?

Certain results can be used to determine if a program is working.

- *Turnover*—Has the number of officers staying with the department or leaving changed?
- *Sick Leave*—Has the use of sick leave decreased since the program was started?
- *Workers' Compensation*—Have workers' compensation claims gone down?
- *Accidents and Injuries*—Have on-the-job accidents and injuries (including line-of-duty deaths) decreased?
- *Employee Assistance Program*—Is it effective? Are officers using it?
- *Atmosphere*—Is there a healthy work environment where people feel safe enough to approach leaders with issues and concerns—and feel energized enough to be fulfilled at work? One way to track this could be through an officer survey that asks about their work and perceptions of leadership.

In sum, one of the best ways to increase resilience is to let officers know that they matter—that the agency cares about them. This is essential because law enforcement officers are called upon repeatedly to deal with increasingly complex and threatening incidents in their work. Caring is best demonstrated through effective leadership and an ability to communicate with members at all levels of the organization—through actions, not just words. In the long term, a resilient officer has a far better potential for positive outcomes and performance in this difficult and stressful occupation. ♦

Notes:

Women Leaders in Policing: Building Resiliency Across Genders

Research has shown that it can be more challenging to build resiliency if individuals do not feel a bond with their peers and has verified the importance of building strong, supportive social networks.* Within law enforcement agencies, this can be an obstacle for female officers since women remain underrepresented within the law enforcement profession. Having the opportunity to share concerns and experiences in a safe environment with others who might be experiencing similar issues can contribute to the confidence, optimism, and the sense of empowerment necessary to build resiliency.

In 2013, the IACP launched a training initiative called the Women's Leadership Institute (WLI), which offers participants the opportunity to meet and network with women in a safe environment where they learn leadership skills, focus on strategies to build their resilience, and develop goals and plans for their own success within their agencies. To date, more than 1,400 women holding both sworn and support positions within law enforcement agencies have attended this one-week training course, which has taken place in the United States, Nepal, Canada, and South Africa and included participants from more than 20 countries, with extremely positive results.†

Retired NYSP Colonel Deborah Campbell serves as an instructor for the WLI program and says,

the amazing thing about this training program is the transformation we see from Sunday night when we open the program to Friday afternoon when they graduate and depart. It is very empowering for the women who leave the Institute with more confidence in their abilities to succeed (both at work and in their home lives) and a new support system that they can rely on as they move forward.‡

Notes:

*Shelley E. Taylor, et al., "Biobehavioral Responses to Stress in Females: Tend-and-Befriend, Not Fight-or-Flight," *Psychological Review* 107, no. 3 (2000), 411–429.

[†]Karen Offringa (Education, IACP), email, March 24, 2017.

[‡]Deborah J. Campbell (retired NYSP colonel and WLI instructor), interview, March 24, 2017.

¹Paul Bliese, “Leadership Effectiveness and Resilience,” in *Building a Resilient Workforce: Opportunities for the Department of Homeland Security: Workshop Summary* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2012), 78.

²Updesh Kumar, ed., *The Routledge Inter-national Handbook of Psychosocial Resilience* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 355.

³Sarah R. Horn, Dennis Charney, and Adriana Feder, “Understanding Resilience: New Approaches for Preventing and Treating PTSD,” *Experimental Neurology* 284 (2014): 119–132.

⁴John Reich et al., “Resilience Science and Practice: Current Status and Future Directions,” in *Continuity versus Creative Response to Challenge*, eds. Marek J. Celinski and Kathryn M. Gow (New York, NY: Nova, 2011), 33–50.

⁵George S. Everly, “Resilient Leadership: Building an Organizational Culture of Resilience” (presentation to the IOM Committee on DHS Workforce Resilience: Meeting 1, Washington, DC, December 13–14, 2012).

⁶Paul Bartone (National Defense University), personal communication, used with permission, March 7, 2017.

⁷The complete set of guidelines can be found on the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) website. NIOSH, “Total Worker Health.”

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44 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 200, Alexandria, VA USA 22314 | 703.836.6767 or 1.800.THE IACP