

# Chapter 11

## Health and Wellness Programming: The Added Contribution of an Ethical Mindset

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### ABSTRACT

*The health and wellbeing of our police community has rightfully become a top priority to ensure the viability of this critically important workforce. This chapter defines officer wellbeing, identifies stressors inherent in policing, and explores the impact of stress upon police officers. The potential contributions of an ethical mindset to officer wellbeing are considered, including the concept of the officer as Ethical Protector. Important elements of health and wellness programs are reviewed, with an emphasis on developing resources that support police officers' physical, mental, emotional, and social wellbeing. Police agencies are encouraged to draw from model programs and national guidelines to develop sustainable, cost-effective health and wellness programs. Such efforts are likely to fit local needs, foster positive community relations, and support police officer resiliency.*

### INTRODUCTION

During the past several years there have been a number of major symposiums, initiatives, and program development efforts focused on improving the health and wellness of police officers. Notable examples include the International Association of Chiefs of Police's (IACP) 2012 creation of the Center for Officer Safety and Wellness (IACP, 2012) and a 2013 national symposium dedicated to law enforcement officer suicide and mental health issues. In 2014, President Barack Obama signed an executive order that established the President's Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing (COPS Office, 2015). One of the six focal

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## ***Health and Wellness Programming***

areas identified by the Task Force was dedicated entirely to officer safety and wellness, and included a comprehensive set of recommendations. It is clear that supporting police officer wellness has emerged as a national priority and police psychologists are ideally positioned to make important contributions to this effort. This chapter first defines wellness and identifies the myriad of factors that lead to stress in police officers. It also highlights the essential importance of an individual's ethical standpoint, which cannot be overlooked when creating a comprehensive program aimed at inoculating police personnel against the on- and off-duty stressors in their lives. Finally, a comprehensive list of programming elements is provided from which agencies can draw when creating their own health and wellness programs.

### **WELLNESS DEFINED**

While relatively recent national consideration has been given to addressing the health and wellness of police officers in the United States, comprehensive occupational health and safety programs have been established in Canada and the United Kingdom within police departments for a number of years (Sanberg, Brito, Luna, & McFadden, 2010). These national programs, such as the United Kingdom's 2004 Strategy for a Healthy Police Service, aim to promote the highest level of physical, mental, and social wellbeing in employees; prevent health departures caused by working conditions; prevent illness and injury in the workplace; and place employees in positions for which they are physically and psychologically suited. Specifically with regard to psychological health, the Mental Health Commission of Canada created a national initiative that governs psychological health and safety in the workplace (Canadian Standards Association, 2013). This Standard posits that every workplace has control, responsibility, and influence over certain factors that psychologically impact their employees. National initiatives such as these have led to specific health and wellbeing programs that employers implement to improve lifestyle choices and physical health as a means of preventing chronic illness. Other countries have likewise developed programs that target organizational and environment practices to improve overall employee health (Australian Government, 2010).

The phrase "workplace wellness" has been defined by Berry, Mirabito, and Baun (2010) as "an organized, employer sponsored program that is designed to support employees as they adopt sustainable behaviors that reduce health risks, improve quality of life, enhance personal effectiveness, and benefit the organization's financial position" (p. 106). According to Mattke (2013), the success of wellness programming is dependent on effective communication, employee participation, leadership engagement, use of existing resources, and continuous evaluation of the program. A comprehensive approach, therefore, requires more than just a focus on improvement to emotional and physical health. Employee engagement, satisfaction, and pride become relevant to good health as well as employee effectiveness (World Economic Forum in Partnership with Right Management, 2010). When considering wellness in policing, the primary goals should include increasing resilience and improving mental and physical health in response to stress and adversity through the development of strong ethical principles, physical health, and emotional strength. Although each officer brings different coping capabilities to the policing position, adaptive coping and resiliency skills can be taught, practiced, and learned for the benefit of all officers. These health improvements will in turn benefit the organizations and communities that officers serve.

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