

# Chapter 12

## Peer Support in Public Safety Organizations

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### ABSTRACT

*Peer supporters are a vital resource for members of the public safety community. Peers are often the first to notice when colleagues are exhibiting symptoms of psychological distress. Due to the cultural norms and the personality traits of those drawn to this career field, many public safety officers prefer to confide in peers rather than to obtain the assistance of mental health professionals. Further, peer supporters can give public safety officers the reassurance and support they need to enlist the services of mental health professionals. This chapter reviews the development and application of peer support teams, addresses issues in selecting peer support team members and developing a program, reviews team organization options and training needs, and addresses common challenges.*

### INTRODUCTION

Peer support is a vital resource for members of the public safety community that emerged in many major law enforcement agencies in the 1980s (Reese, 1995). Leaders of the Boston (MA) Police Department, Washington State Patrol, Los Angeles (CA) Police Department (LAPD), and San Bernardino County (CA) Sheriff's Department were among those who early on recognized the importance of having a formal peer support program. Today, those four peer support programs, and many others, are thriving and continue to make a difference in the lives of officers who need help. In this chapter, the authors review the development and application of peer support teams, as well as address issues in selecting peer support team members and developing a viable program. Peer supporters are those individuals that work for a law enforcement agency in any capacity and attend peer support training to become members of the peer support team (see section on Training Peer Supporters). In addition, this chapter reviews team organization options and training needs, and addresses common challenges.

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## **THE IMPACT OF PEER SUPPORT**

In 2015, the Baltimore (MD) Police Department arrested an African American male, Freddie Gray. While transporting him, he suffered massive spinal injuries that lead to his death in the hospital. There were on-going protests after his funeral, which turned into the Baltimore riots. In the wake of the Baltimore disturbances, police officers there faced intense scrutiny and pressure as they watched their actions and motives being questioned by everyone from social media bloggers to television pundits (Laughland & Swaine, 2015). The criticism surrounding the city's police did not abate after the flames were extinguished or the debris cleared from the streets. Citizens also criticized the police officers for intentionally using aggressive driving to rough up African American suspects while in transit in departmental vans.

After indictments were handed down against six Baltimore police officers surrounding the in-custody death of Freddie Gray, some Baltimore police officers felt abandoned by their leaders and feared the possibility of criminal prosecution (Baldwin & Ford, 2015). During this tumultuous time, when trusting someone could have dire consequences if confidences were broken, Baltimore police officers received support from members of the New York (NY) Police Department peer support team, who have often faced their own tremendous public scrutiny and pressure. The peer supporters from New York Police Department (NYPD) watched their fellow officers in Baltimore struggle and it did not take long for them to provide help to their colleagues. Ten members of the NYPD peer support team provided what few others could — understanding from a trusted and respected source (Celona & Fredericks, 2015).

Peer supporters are a vital resource because peers are often the first to notice when colleagues are exhibiting symptoms of psychological distress (Everly, 2015). Due to the cultural norms and the personality traits of those drawn to police work, the authors' experiences as police psychologists for over two decades lead us to conclude that many public safety officers are more likely to confide in peers than to obtain the assistance of mental health professionals. Unlike mental health professionals, peer supporters have the potential for instant credibility and are in a unique position to provide colleagues with a much-needed sense of normalcy after a critical incident. A critical incident refers to an event that is outside the normal range of experiences and, many times, can challenge a first responder's ability to cope (Everly, 2015). Contact with peer supporters may give public safety personnel the reassurance, support, and encouragement they need to enlist the services of mental health professionals. For example, after the San Bernardino terrorist attack of December 2, 2015, the first author received 45 calls from police officers who had previously been supported by peer support team members. Because of this earlier contact, these officers likely felt more comfortable reaching out to their mental health providers.

Several members of the Washington State Patrol's (WSP) peer support team and the second author traveled to New York City following the tragic events of 9/11 to support members of the NYPD and the New York City Fire Department (FDNY). As we walked around the impacted area, the WSP peers would approach NYPD or FDNY personnel with a WSP shoulder patch in their left hand and offer a handshake with their right hand, saying, "Hi! We're troopers with WSP, and we're here for a week to offer our support. Would you like one of our patches?" This simple, but highly straightforward approach seemed to result in expressions of gratitude and statements about how only other officers could understand what they had been through.

Peer supporters may be an invaluable resource when officers are depressed or suicidal. Peer supporters are trained to identify behaviors associated with suicidality and to begin the intervention process that may then result in a referral to the next higher level of care, such as a mental health professional, chaplain, or crisis intervention service (Kamena, Gentz, Hays, Bohl-Penrod, & Greene, 2011). Peer sup-

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