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Police Urged To Change Culture To Prevent Suicide

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August 10, 2011 | By MICHAEL WALSH, michwalsh@courant.com, The Hartford Courant

NEW BRITAIN — As Janice McCarthy stood and spoke in front of a parking lot surveillance video that captured the last hours of her husband's life, her argument about the need to change the culture of police work became clear.

"What you experience on a daily basis is cumulative stress," McCarthy, who lost her husband, Paul McCarthy, a Massachusetts state trooper, to suicide five years ago, told about 225 law enforcement professionals who attended a suicide prevention conference at Central Connecticut State University Wednesday.



Janice McCarthy speaks about her husband Paul's July 2006 suicide... (Tanner Curtis, Hartford Courant)

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The conference was in response to four documented police-officer suicides in Connecticut in the past few months.

In April, Rocky Hill Sgt. Leonard Kulas was found dead in his cruiser with a self-inflicted gunshot wound at a cemetery. Then in May, New Britain Capt. Matthew Tuttle killed himself at his home in Middletown.

Two Connecticut police officers killed themselves in June. Southbury Officer Anton Tchorzyk Jr. shot himself in his home in Watertown and Groton Lt. Thomas Forbes killed himself inside the police department where he worked.

The goal of the symposium, "Training the Mind," wasn't to find out why these four killed themselves, but to try to prevent similar incidents.

McCarthy made it clear that to prevent police officer suicides, depression can no longer be seen as a sign of weakness inside the department

"Don't deny the fact that you're human," said McCarthy. "Yes, you're cops. But you're human."

In 1993, a man driving a stolen bus hit Officer McCarthy's police cruiser, leaving him with a number of traumatic injuries. She said the accident, coupled with numerous other incidents after his recovery and his inability to cope with the trauma, led to his suicide.

"He recovered physically, but emotionally he was going down," McCarthy told the room full of police officers. "He had a fixation with the accident."

John Violanti, a former New York state trooper and now professor at SUNY Buffalo, said that law enforcement culture often sees suicide as the result of weakness, selfishness or taking the easy way out of a problem.

"We've got to change this police culture" to one that shows an understanding of officers' feelings, Violanti said.

According to Violanti, one way to do that is by offering more peer support programs inside police departments.

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"You've got to listen in a certain way," Violanti said. "There's a whole structure to listening."

Sgt. Troy Anderson of the Connecticut State Police was on hand to encourage the creation of more in-house peer support programs. Anderson is the coordinator of a program called State Troopers Offering Peer Support.

When he asked the officers how many had in house-peer support programs, not many raised their hands.

"That culture needs a shift," said Lt. Jeff Nixon of the Waterford Police Department.

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