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7/15/2009

Many mental health experts try to help police

Ex-officers, widow among those running support groups

By Jason A. Kahl
Reading Eagle

When a police officer is killed in the line of duty, he often is hailed as a hero and praised for "paying the ultimate price."

But when the stress of the job leads an officer to commit suicide, there is little talk of the death.

Yet John M. Violanti, a retired New York trooper, says an officer is eight times more likely to commit suicide than to be killed in the line of duty.

Since retiring from police work, Violanti has devoted his life to studying the stress and trauma of the job, trying to bring attention to the potential damage to a police officer's mental health.

He stressed the importance of intervention and the need for departments to offer assistance to officers beginning to suffer post-traumatic stress disorder and other job-related health issues.

"Being a police officer for 23 years, I was exposed to a lot and knew officers who committed suicide and had terrible domestic troubles," Violanti said. "I wanted to make police and others aware that you can go out and find help."

Violanti has conducted a number of studies on the impact of stress on police officers' physical and mental health.

He said one of the most important things officers need is a break from their job and quality time with their friends and family outside of work.

"It's important to tell officers when they leave the job, they have to leave the job," Violanti said. "A lot become 24-hour officers, and that's a big mistake. They need to disconnect and pull the plug."

Group promotes wellness

Andrew F. O'Hara, a 24-year veteran of the California Highway Patrol, heads Badge of Life in Sacramento, which aims to reduce law enforcement suicides and support surviving relatives.

The group offers training for departments in suicide

Click on picture to enlarge.

Courtesy of the University of Buffalo
 John M. Violanti

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John M. Violanti

Associate professor, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, University of Buffalo, New York.

23-year veteran of the New York State Police.

An expert in police psychology and health risks of law enforcement.

Research has focused on a number of topics, including assessment of psychological and biological indicators of workplace police stress; line-of-duty deaths; survivor responses and departmental policies; and the epidemiology of police suicide.

He has also conducted studies that show that cell phone users in vehicles face increased accident risk, and the use of radar guns by police enhances cancer risks.

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prevention and promotes mental health awareness programs for officers.

His advice is quality rest, and a balanced diet and exercise to offset stress. Most importantly, his group urges officers to visit a therapist at least once a year to monitor stress and trauma levels and overall coping techniques.

O'Hara compares police work to being in a war zone.

He said he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and contemplated suicide after years of police work.

"It was years and years of crap that caught up with me," he said. "I sank into depression and was on the floor ready to shoot myself when my wife saved me by coming home."

He said it was a lengthy recovery to get back to normal, but he got together with some other retired officers who had similar problems and they started their organization.

Web sites for help

[John M. Violanti](#)

[Badge of Life](#)

[Survivors of Law Enforcement Suicide](#)

- Reading School District
- 6. Deaths of parents, brother overwhelm single mother from Marion Township
- 7. Drivers in critical condition after car, pickup collide in Richmond Township
- 8. Main stable burns at equestrian center in Oley
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- 10. Ex-Wilson worker stole \$92,000, made false terror accusations, U.S. says



"Our group is in the education category," O'Hara said.

Help for the grieving

Teresa Tate, who has written two books with Violanti about police suicide, has firsthand experience with the tragic problem: Her husband killed himself in 1989 after years as an officer in Virginia.

"I thought I was the only widow of suicide," Tate said.

Over time she met other widows of suicide and she started writing articles. In 1995, she started a support group, Survivors of Law Enforcement Suicide.

She prints a newsletter and started a Web site to keep survivors in touch.

"For survivors of a suicide, there's generally no support," Tate said. "With our group, they can reach others and find help and support that way."

"We try to get them started with local support groups and with our Web site, they can connect with several hundred survivors online."

"When your husband is killed in the line of duty, the survivors get federal, state and local benefits. With suicide, you may get life insurance but lose health care benefits, and there is no monthly pension."

"It's not fair."

Beyond the Badge

- Beyond the badge: The private toll of public service
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- Many mental health experts try to help police (**Current article**)
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My personal opinion is that mental health should be a benefit that is afforded all officers and their families. If you want to help reduce the stress, divorce rate, etc. this is something ALL officers should have included in

their benefits. These men and women see the worst of people, very rarely the best. After time this will take a toll on the human psyche. If we care as a city, county and nation this is one more way to support the heroic job these men and women volunteer to do every day they are on the job.

COMMENT BY CAT AT 7/16/2009 1:52:34 PM

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