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Posted on Thu, Jun. 15, 2006

## Seminar lifts veil on police suicide

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Associated Press

Squeeze stress toys -- shaped like the American eagle and emblazoned with the seal of the U.S. attorney's office -- greeted the police officers Wednesday as they took their seats. A therapy dog named Stillman roamed the aisles wearing a jacket urging attendees to pet him.

The tranquil setting is a world away from the chaotic environment those officers often deal with on the streets, where confronting human misery and anger is all just part of the job. For two days, the 200 police officers gathered in Wichita will talk about a subject that has long been taboo among their ranks: an epidemic of suicide in law enforcement.

"It is a topic that needs to come out of the closet," said Steve Nevil, law enforcement coordinator for the U.S. attorney's office in Wichita. "Police officers are probably the worst at asking for help."

John Violanti, a veteran of the New York State Police and research professor of social and preventative medicine at the University at Buffalo in upstate New York, asked the group how many had known an officer in their agency that had committed suicide. Most in the room raised their hand.

That response, he assured them, was typical in police seminars across the nation.

"We develop emotional baggage, and we carry it for the rest of our careers," Nevil said. "We don't live as long after retirement.... We have to witness grief and tragedy and deal with the situation."

The police suicide rate is 17 for every 100,000 officers, he said. That compares to a nationwide suicide rate among the general population of 10.6 suicides for every 100,000 persons.

Police officers are eight times more likely to die by suicide than by homicide, and they are three times more likely to die by suicide than from accidental causes, said Dell Hackett, president of the Law Enforcement Wellness Association.

But even those higher suicide rates may not reflect the true extent of the problem because as many as 20 percent of police suicides are probably underreported -- classified as accidental deaths by fellow officers seeking to protect the name and benefits of the fallen officer's family, Violanti said.

Police are exposed to more human misery and death than other professions, he said, and they often must deal with a negative public image and at times investigations into their actions.

"We see a lot more of this stuff, and it builds on you -- it accumulates.... We all have a threshold, a coping point," Violanti said.

Untreated depression, relationship problems and easy access to firearms ranked among the suicide factors, Hackett said, calling suicide a "virtual epidemic" among law enforcement.

Much of the seminar was aimed at recognizing the signs that a fellow officer was contemplating suicide: risk-taking behavior on the job, crying, agitation and giving away possessions.

It also taught officers lifesaving skills they can take back to their own agencies, such as knowing the questions to ask and persuading an officer to get help. Their message: Suicide can be prevented.

"The ghosts will always be with you," Violanti told the officers. "You know there are things in your career you will never forget."

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