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Retired officers reach out to colleagues

Gloria Beverage



Courtesy

Andy O'Hara, founder of Badge of Life, is a retired California Highway Patrol officer.



When a police officer is killed in the line of duty, he is often hailed as a hero who "paid the ultimate price."

And yet, officers who end their own lives are not given the same recognition. In fact, their families are often shunned.

Dr. John M. Violanti, a researcher and a 23-year veteran of the New York State police, pointed out in a recent article that approximately 140 officers nationwide committed suicide in 2008. The number may actually be higher since many suicides go unreported, especially if the officer is on active duty.

Now an associate professor at the University of Buffalo, New York, Violanti has conducted a number of studies on the impact of stress on police officers' physical and mental health.

He has concluded "police officers continue to experience the 'residual' of trauma after separating from police service. A study into the deaths of 4,000 police officers showed retired officers have an extraordinarily high suicide rate – ten times that of the normal population and higher than that for active police officers."

Colfax resident Randy Keenan, who retired from the Alameda Police Department in 2001, believes he has found a way to help officers cope with the daily stress and inevitable trauma.

During his 29-year law enforcement career, Keenan said, he experienced "a lot of ups and downs."

The low points are the ones that stand out in his memory, though. He remembers the exact date he was shot and his friend and fellow officer was killed. And he remembers the incident 10 years later when he was forced to critically injure a man trying to ram another officer

with a vehicle.

When he retired and left the Bay area – moving to Colfax in 2002 – Keenan sought out volunteer opportunities in an effort to start anew. He joined Kiwanis and volunteered as a docent at the Towe Museum in Old Sacramento.

But a newspaper article about Badge for Life changed Keenan's direction. He had found an organization that addressed a desperate need – one he understood firsthand, he explained.

Founded by Andy O'Hara, a 24-year veteran of the California Highway Patrol living in Citrus Heights, the non-profit, charitable organization is a group of retired and working officers, clinicians and researchers working together to ensure the "psychological survival" of law enforcement officers.

The program provides law enforcement agencies with free educational resources and materials on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It also proposes training officers to deal with trauma head-on, before it happens, through annual, voluntary "mental health checks" with counselors outside of the department.

O'Hara retired as a sergeant from the California Highway Patrol in March 1993. He said he formed the non-profit organization in January 2008 "as a result of my breakdown and near suicide."

During his own recovery, O'Hara studied masses of research and books. He realized many programs had been developed to "train the trainer." And yet, he concluded, there was a simple solution that was being overlooked.

He reasoned that officers get regular physical check-ups, so an annual, voluntary "mental health" check would be equally as valuable. Through Badge of Life, retired officers like O'Hara and Keenan, who was recently named to the board of directors, have started reaching out to law enforcement agencies throughout the U.S. and Canada.

The goal of the program is to expose law enforcement recruits to mental health check-ups at the beginning of their careers and continue them until they retire from the force.

At the same time, O'Hara hopes that veteran officers would be open to getting regular mental health check-ups.

Currently, the program is presented at the Sacramento County Sheriff's Academy, the Sacramento Police Department and the California Highway Patrol.

A proposal was recently submitted to Placer County Sheriff Ed Bonner, O'Hara added.

"We peddle hope," O'Hara said. "We are convinced that were enough academies and departments to initiate this free program, police suicides could be reduced by 75 percent in 10 years and other employee problems reduced as well."

For more information, visit badgeoflife.com.

Out of Darkness Community Walk

What: A 3.5-mile walk

When: Check in at 8:30 a.m.; walk from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Where: State Capitol in downtown Sacramento

Registration deadline: Sept. 18. Call Michele Murphy at (530) 346-6343.

Purpose: Pledges collected by walkers will benefit the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, to fund research, education, survivor and awareness programs – both to prevent suicide and to assist those affected by suicide.

Good to know: badgeoflife.com

Keywords

Badge of Life, Randy Keenan, Andy O'Hara

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