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Badge and Balance

By Gary M. Bush, Senior Director of Law Enforcement Relations for Backing the Badge

I was a patrol Sergeant having a relatively quiet, routine shift on a Tuesday. Then I heard the radio transmission that no law enforcement officer EVER wants to hear;

Dispatcher: Attention District 2 units, special attention any units in the area of I-75. BOLO for a Signal 33 (shooting) occurred at I-275 and Floribraska in the Tampa area. Two LEOs were Signal 33. Suspect is armed and dangerous. Suspect is a white male, 5’10”, 175 pounds, shoulder length blonde hair, light eyes, wearing a white shirt, blue shorts, armed with an unknown type of handgun. Suspect had handcuffs on right wrist. Suspect last seen heading westbound on Floribraska in a white Ford Ranger delivery truck with initials Alpha Papa Delta on the sides. Tag is Whiskey Zulu Mike Seven Two Quebec. Tampa authorities are setting up roadblocks around the area of I-75 and Floribraska. 10-75 (end of BOLO) at 1440 hours.

By the end of this shift, there would be three murdered law enforcement officers, one murdered 4 year old boy, a 35 mile running gun battle on an interstate, two law enforcement officers and several civilians injured as a result of gunfire, several car crashes, a civilian taken hostage and a considerable amount of property damage. After a six hour standoff, the incident ended with the safe release of the hostage and the death of the suspect by his own hand.

Of course, this incident was critiqued for weeks afterwards by police administrators and investigators as far as the pursuit and actions taken by the officers involved. It was determined that the officers involved acted properly and there were no official repercussions.

Many of you reading this article may have had something similar happen to you. Sadly, incidents similar to this and other traumatic events happen to law enforcement officers daily around the country. From the first time you put on the uniform, badge, and gun, you realize that incidents such as this can happen. What were the officers involved thinking as this event unfolded? I didn’t know what they were thinking until I talked with them later, but I can certainly tell you what I was thinking.

Between monitoring and participating in the pursuit, getting into position, and trying not to get shot myself, I had my hands full. Despite all of that, I don't mind saying, I was scared to death. But training does take over. At the time of the pursuit, we only knew that two officers had been shot. It wasn't until much later that we learned that those two officers had been killed, a third officer had been killed, as well as a child. This was 1998. No CISM or Peer Support was offered to us.

Fast forward to today. Many law enforcement agencies now realize the very real threat that is caused by officer PTSD, stress from traumatic events or cumulative events. They realize some of the consequences of these events which can be divorce, alcoholism, and most tragic of all, suicide. As a law enforcement officer of over three decades, this is unacceptable. In my travels around the country speaking to various law enforcement groups, I hear story after story from cops about these issues and they are real issues, whether some people want to talk about them or not. The profession is brutal enough on our officers just with the types of people they have to deal with on the streets on a day to day basis. But what can we do?

My colleague, Dr. Alison Brown says, "As an employee assistance professional since 1984, I have worked with numerous persons who encountered traumatic events – and they all have several things in common;

- 1) Until they talk with others – they truly thought their experience was unique, and that others might think they were 'crazy' or they, themselves entertained the thought that they might be going crazy.
- 2) Talking about the traumatic experience is often uncomfortable, painful and 'embarrassing' due to the various ways it may impact a person.
- 3) An assumption is made that unless the other person was there – in the same 'trenches' they couldn't understand.
- 4) Disturbing images related to the traumatic event may pop up in their thoughts or dreams.
- 5) People wonder if they should have or could have done more or done things differently.
- 6) They may believe that 'normal' people don't experience fallout from encountering a traumatic event...therefore...they aren't normal.
- 7) Law enforcement professionals are suspicious by nature, and very, very particular regarding persons they choose/allow to provide them with any type of support.

As people are impacted by a traumatic event, or by several traumatic events, and as LEOs may experience routinely, developing an effective wellness routine to offset stress and trauma is essential. For example, using a Peer Support team to debrief from stressful or traumatic events is a key part of an effective wellness routine. If your department/county doesn't have a Peer Support team, consider getting appropriate training to develop one. LEOs are most comfortable talking to other LEOs, and peer support is invaluable to assist people to move forward in a healthy manner.

Making information available to officers and their family members is critical to supporting LEOs across the span of their career. Flyers or cards about ways to contact Peer Support need to be in places where all officers have easy and private access to them. Contacting Peer Support needs to become just as important, and yet as routine as cleaning and maintaining weapons! Considering how essential it is to stay grounded as an LEO, Peer Support Teams are relatively easy to put in place. Training is readily available and may be structured to specifically focus on LEOs.

One size, or one answer will never fit all – but making a variety of options to support and encourage wellness for LEOs, and their family members, is a great start to acknowledge and appreciate the sacrifices made by LEOs and their loved ones.”

Gary Bush is the Senior Director of Law Enforcement Relations and Co-Founder of Backing the Badge, a division of ENCOMPASS, LLC. Gary is a former law enforcement officer of over 30 years in Florida, He can be reached at gmbush@encompass.us.com.

Alison Brown, Ph.D. is the President and Co-Founder of Backing the Badge, a division of ENCOMPASS, LLC. Based out of Michigan and Florida, Backing the Badge provides strategic support to law enforcement professionals. Services are designed by law enforcement professionals. Information, training and resources assist LEOs and their family members to address a variety of issues ranging from budget and financial, relationships, parenting and ways to prevent and managing stress. She can be reached at abrown@encompass.us.com.

For more information, please visit www.backingthebadge.com.