



Changing Organizational Culture: A Commitment to Wellness

The San Diego Police Department (SDPD) is comprised of nearly 2,500 employees - approximately 1800 sworn officers and 700 civilians - who are tasked with meeting the needs of over 1.3 million citizens, along with the needs of hundreds of thousands of tourists and commuters who enjoy and work in the City of San Diego annually. The Police Executive Research Forum in their [review](#) noted, “The San Diego Police Department (SDPD) has had a national reputation as a forward thinking, progressive, well-run agency. In fact, the SDPD was best known within the policing profession as the department that made problem-oriented policing a leading strategy that helped reduce violent crime rates by 50 percent nationwide.” Internally, SDPD officers often complained the department committed substantial resources to effectively develop the partnerships essential for successful outcomes in community and problem-oriented policing, while not investing in the needs of its own officers. This became painfully clear to the San Diego Police Department as it began to seek answers to its rash of highly publicized criminal misconduct cases involving sworn officers.

In 2011, the San Diego Police Department began critically looking at causes, contributing factors, and anything else that could explain why its officers had engaged in conduct that violated the [community’s trust](#). The officers had been hired only after a careful background investigation and comprehensive psychological screening. For all intents and purposes, they had entered law enforcement seemingly possessing strong moral character and the best of intentions. **After looking comprehensively at all of the investigations, as well as the individuals and their history, it became clear significant personal or professional interferences preceded the criminal acts and should have been noticed by coworkers and direct supervisors.** Some officers were going through a divorce, battling substance abuse, having interpersonal issues in their workplace, and most were having financial issues as a result of pay cuts. For years, the department informally offered progressive employee resources. Police chaplains, police psychologists, peer support, and ”stress management” training were offered every few years





when required “perishable skills” refreshment did not consume discretionary training time. The passive nature by which these resources were provided was no longer serving the department. Like most police agencies, several variables significantly changed the climate in the department including; pay cuts, pension reform, reduction of available staff, and an unprecedented attrition rate which saw the loss of nearly 1,400 officers over a 10 year period. The necessity to “do more with less” and a sense of public devaluation took a serious toll on officers. Ultimately, the coping skills of some officers were being challenged and leadership was ill-equipped to recognize and/or address the issues. SDPD decided to focus internally by looking at ways to enact the changes needed that were within the department’s control. With very little direction and few models to follow at the time, SDPD’s Wellness Unit was born.

On the first day, without the benefit of furniture, computers, phones, or an articulated mission, the two-member Unit was awakened by the call that a detective and her daughter had been killed by their mentally ill son/brother who fatally stabbed both. The Unit’s first task was to assemble help resources department-wide to shocked co-workers and traumatized department members tasked with investigating the murder. Unfortunately, the incident was the first in a series of five officer deaths within the next few weeks. The second deadly incident was the suicide of an officer who weeks earlier had been arrested for DUI and hit and run. His was a highly publicized case and for obvious reasons, the officer felt shame, embarrassment, and hopelessness. These were followed by the completely unprovoked attack of a uniformed patrol officer stopped at a traffic light. He was fatally shot in the head while waiting at the intersection. Two additional officer deaths were the result of motor vehicle accidents, one of which occurred within city limits. Both were discovered or investigated by the officers’ co-workers. The necessity for the Wellness Unit couldn’t have been more critical, or their priority more immediately dictated.

Among many services readily identified through the series of tragedies, was the necessity for the Unit to immediately rally debriefing and intervention resources for all employees





impacted by significant critical incidents. These include officer deaths or other spontaneous events in which employees would benefit from a variety of help resources. Rather than waiting for a request by management, usually an afterthought once the crisis is under control, the Unit began deployment of these resources immediately and automatically. Because of the frequency of callouts in such a short period of time, the chaplains, psychologists and peer supporters became very adept at recognizing which resource(s) best suited the situation. They also learned to defer to one another based on the impacted employees' request, recognizing the most helpful resource varies depending on each officer's wishes and beliefs. A protracted search for the suspect who shot the officer at the stoplight spanned several blocks. Police chaplains and psychologists were escorted to officers at their posts rather than waiting for the officers to finish their task and return to the station. This non-traditional deployment remains a tool for incidents where officers may benefit from an immediate intervention but cannot leave the scene.

Additionally, the Unit learned that all the resources needed to train together, with a singular mission, and have a greater understanding of what each resource had to offer. All help resources had previously fallen under different divisions and were managed individually. Their capabilities were unknown or widely misunderstood. These help resources were brought under one command structure with the expectation that management, coordination, and training be based on an overarching mission. The nuances which remained were only in regard to professional licensing and the level of confidentiality provided by law.

After the string of officer deaths ended, the Unit's initial step was to create and administer a "needs assessment" survey to all sworn and civilian employees, as well as department volunteers. The goal of the survey was to determine the Unit's priorities. The Unit saw their role as being an instrument for reducing or removing interferences to employee wellness, both personal and professional. Its members recognized the lack of clear delineation between work and home due to technology and the nature of the occupation. **Early analysis**





from the assessment indicated employees were concerned about finances, work burnout, stressed familial relationships, and administrative stress.

The following mission statement was created in response to the needs-assessment:

The Wellness Unit is committed to reducing or removing interferences to employee wellness by:

- Identifying new and enhancing existing resources
- Developing and providing wellness education
- Collaborating with academic institutions on innovative Law Enforcement studies
- Developing partnerships with health and wellness providers
- Staying abreast of wellness program best practices through research
- Developing and administering a fitness and preventative health incentive program
- Serving as an advocate for employees enduring personal or professional difficulties

Wellness in law enforcement requires changing the culture. The term “culture” is not always easily understood by officers, but it has been described by some authors as simply, “the way we do things around here.” Members of SDPD’s Wellness Unit were committed to a vision of changing the [stigma](#) associated with officer’s asking for help and understood it would continue if left unchallenged, kept alive by the old beliefs and fears embedded in long serving officers. While tenured officers still receive in-service training on wellness and resource availability, **SDPD recognized in order to implement a culture of wellness, emphasis needed to be placed on reaching the newest generation of officers.**

The Department has been hiring heavily since 2012 and is aggressively attempting to instill a proactive mindset as it relates to personal wellness. New officers are immediately taught to recognize the Wellness Unit as a service, not unlike payroll or operational support (the unit that provides equipment such as radios and flashlights), as one of many necessary support services intended to fully equip employees to address their needs. The day prior to new officers starting





the academy, they are given a wellness brochure fully describing available help services. It includes contact information and cell phone numbers to access the wellness team on a 24-hour basis. The resources are available to the employees and their families, and can be directly accessed with no expectation that the employee go through or notify their supervisor. While in the Academy, recruits are given 8 hours of instruction on Emotional Survival, based on the work of Dr. Kevin Gilmartin. Immediately after graduation, a full day of psychological preparedness is facilitated by the chief psychologist and her staff for the new officers and their families. This affords the wellness staff another opportunity to familiarize new officers with the resources while introducing and providing direct access to family members. Department chaplains, psychologists, the wellness team and other department members attend to meet the officers and their families. They provide insight into the necessity of proactively tending to one's wellness. A series of speakers, all of whom have endured significant trauma or personal crises, share experiences of how they were impacted, handled the stress effectively or ineffectively, and about their utilization of available resources. The presentations are intended to assist in preparing officers for whatever may come their way, including a career ending injury or incident.

In an effort to reach senior officers and sergeants, two hours of wellness training are offered during their mandated cycle of advanced officer training. Topics include PTSD, suicide, depression, substance abuse and an overview of services available. The department also requires that promotional candidates for the rank of lieutenant, sergeant, detective and senior officer read and be tested on Dr. Gilmartin's book, *Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement*. Two hours of Wellness training are given during Command Training, a forum which includes the management team of every division within the department. Recognizing that many civilian employees are subject to the same traumatic stressors and administrative stress that exists within police departments, civilians working in the crime laboratory and communications division are provided resiliency training co-facilitated by the department's contract psychologist and Wellness staff. A monthly newsletter is also published and offers an array of articles to assist employees in their personal wellness.





Initially, the Wellness Unit was set up in an offsite location to provide anonymity and insure confidentiality. Very few people came to the offsite facility in the first year, mainly because the wellness staff preferred meeting employees at their convenience and at a location where they felt most comfortable. Most meetings occurred at the local Starbucks or close to the employee's workstation. **As the Unit developed its footprint in the department by attending line-ups, teaching classes, and responding to critical incidents, its reputation for trustworthiness and responsiveness dictated kicking it up a notch. The decision was made to move to police headquarters in the form of a wellness center.** In the interest of removing the stigma for seeking help, the decision was made to normalize services offered by being very visible. The center houses team members at each corner of the office with a living room setting in the center. The door of the center, just across from the cafeteria, is propped open and free flowing with complimentary coffee always brewing. Additionally, a wellness library was created with a comfortable sofa and chairs. The center is for all employees to visit, whether they need assistance or not. It is so frequently visited that it is difficult to tell who is there for business and who simply wants a cup of coffee. On the occasions where privacy is needed, the door is locked with a sign posted indicating that a meeting is occurring.

A two-year evaluation of the unit by all department members was conducted in 2013 and produced the following results:

- 99% of have heard about the wellness unit
- 59% of have used the services of the wellness unit
- 72% believe the stigma of asking for help has been reduced
- 80% have an increased awareness of wellness issues related to the job
- 66% feel that wellness issues are more widely discussed
- 88% believe they could ask for and receive help
- 85% would use the services if needed
- 51% know of people who have used the services





- 81% would feel comfortable walking into the wellness center

Under the leadership of the SDPD Wellness Unit, a County Wellness Forum was created that includes representation from all San Diego County Law Enforcement including Federal and adjoining County agencies. The forum provides for resource sharing, training, and support for the smaller agencies who may not be equipped to handle the response to a significant incident without assistance. **It provides for an employee of one agency to use a resource from another with complete anonymity.** Meetings are held on a quarterly basis and typically include presentations by experts in the field of wellness. The meetings are attended by police psychologists, chaplains, peer supporters and anyone providing wellness services in law enforcement.

The unit maintains a Wellness Advisory Committee comprised of medical doctors, psychologists, other mental health practitioners, researchers, employee union representatives, chaplains and cross-representation of sworn and civilian department members. The committee meets on an as-needed basis and serves to provide expert advice to the Wellness Unit staff.

The Wellness staff is currently comprised of two police officers and two sergeants. Their primary role is to meet with employees who are in crisis or on its path. Officers can expect that Wellness Unit staff will respond to critical incidents, including in-custody deaths and officer involved shootings. Upon arrival at these scenes, members from SDPD Wellness coordinate the response of Peer Support Officers. The Peer Support Officer's role is to assist with the immediate emotional wellbeing of the officer and to provide an explanation of each process involved in the preliminary investigation. The Wellness Unit also works with FOCUS, the San Diego Police Department's Psychological Services Program, to ensure a psychological debrief of these critical incident are conducted for the involved officers.





Employees can request personal services or call about an employee they wish to be checked on. Although it's preferred that a supervisor reach out to their own employee in crisis, it is well understood some do it better than others. Supervisory training includes tools to assist them in being the primary care giver to their employees. However, if a trusting relationship has not been established, it is unlikely that a subordinate or peer will open up or accept help, particularly if there is a performance nexus. The Wellness staff is frequently asked to check on employees who are under investigation, experiencing issues at home, or for a variety of reasons. More often than not, the employee receiving a call is receptive or at least appreciative. In many cases, the employee will accept a referral or an invitation to meet with the team member. Many simply walk into the Wellness Center and ask to speak with someone because they know the service is available and recognize the value. Often, simply speaking with someone who can relate to their issue is all the employee wants. The Wellness staff looks at the major incidents of the previous day and preemptively contacts officers who may have been exposed to vicarious trauma. Periodic checks of injured or disabled officers are conducted to maintain contact with the department and to offer additional resources.

Another benefit to employees available through the SDPD Wellness Unit is the Member Assistance Program (MAP). MAP employees volunteer their time to anyone who needs assistance. Members serve on a voluntary basis after being interviewed and attending a class facilitated by a department psychologist. Members maintain a profile, including a photo, email address and a contact number that is available to all department members on the Department's Intranet. Their profiles offer biographic information about the employee including their personal experience with crises they have managed and overcome so that others may benefit from their experience and assistance. Employees can peruse the profiles in their entirety or enter key words, such as divorce or foreclosure, directing them to an employee who has experienced similar issues and is offering to be a resource.

The San Diego Police Department Wellness staff has assembled a number of resources to confidentially and compassionately address potential substance abuse issues amongst department





members. Whether it is injury/pain medication dependence or alcohol abuse, the Wellness Unit has a developed strategy to assist the individual. Members of the team have attended the Naval Drug and Alcohol Counseling School and have amassed a roster of law enforcement / first responder sensitive treatment options. Residential detoxification and outpatient treatment in closed environments are pre-arraigned along with law enforcement fellowship meetings.

Department leaders have been very supportive of the Unit's effort. In cases where an individual requests assistance and requires time off to tend to a personal issue, family crisis, or simply needs to be moved to a less stressful assignment, the employee can make the request through a wellness advocate. If their request is not used as an opportunity to avert a performance issue, their wellness advocate handles the notification of their need without the expectation of an explanation. Three individuals from the department have attended alcohol rehabilitation without anyone other than their wellness advocate knowing. In two of the cases their leave time was granted through donations by other employees who knew only that their time was being provided to an anonymous employee who needed assistance.

To keep track of all the services and efforts provided by the Wellness Unit, a monthly recap of all contacts are made for statistical purposes. Minimal demographic information and issue type are gathered to assist the unit in addressing themes for future training and outreach. To maintain confidentiality and maintain trust, names and/or identification numbers are not kept or written anywhere. Additionally, a Quarterly Management Report (QMR) is given to the Chief's Executive Committee which focuses on the following: number of employees and hours spent on contacts through wellness unit staff, chaplains, and the members assistance program, along with issues addressed in rank order, training provided, projects and community partnerships, and critical incident summaries. The Unit also maintains an operational manual that can and has been repeatedly provided as a resource, to help outside agencies establish their own wellness units.

The SDPD's Wellness Unit continues to grow in scope and size, always looking for a new way to serve members of the San Diego Police Department as they face an unknown future with





ever increasing demands and dynamics from the community. What is clear from SDPD is a demonstrated commitment from its leadership over the past 5 years that makes employee wellness and meeting critical employee needs an organizational priority, which shows department culture has changed. This commitment to wellness and the next evolution in enhancing its culture will be a department emphasis on developing leaders to more effectively take on the role of primary care givers for their employees in the interest of growing a happy and healthy organization that meets the needs of the entire community, including those who comprise SDPD – also known as America’s Finest.

