

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Law enforcement officers often respond to multiple calls involving people struggling to function well in society. Examples include people with substance user disorder, people experiencing homelessness, individuals with severe mental illness, and those with chronic family discord. Usually, the responding officer can do little to solve or even improve these difficult problems. Deputies also respond to calls involving people who need assistance when they are victims of or witnesses to crime, disaster, or trauma. Such trauma can be overwhelming.

Obviously, both types of calls are inherently stressful; that stress is compounded by the hypervigilance required to make sure no one is harmed. Deputies perform these services either roadside, or in homes or community settings – generally places where the officer has little control over the environment and limited knowledge of potential risks in the setting. Moreover, officers work in an assortment of uncomfortable situations, such as inclement weather, poor lighting, loud environments, unsanitary living conditions, in the presence of death and decay, or when being yelled at, berated, or videotaped.

Law enforcement officers generally gravitate to this work because they have a desire to help people. Some describe police work as “a calling.” These noble intentions, however, do not shield officers from the stresses I describe, nor do they protect from the emotional injury caused by what is known as a critical incident. This term refers to any actual or alleged event that creates a significant risk of substantial or serious harm to the physical or mental health of those involved.

Most people experience an estimated two to three critical incidents in a lifetime; law enforcement officers have 18 such exposures PER YEAR. A 2015 study places the average exposure to critical incidents over a law enforcement career at 188 such events.

The consequences of critical incidents and job-based stress have been compounded by the effects of the pandemic. Additionally, relationships between law enforcement and the community as described by the media are not always accurate, and these portrayals are harmful to the morale of law enforcement officers. You could say it is a perfect storm.

As Sheriff, I am much like a football coach. I cannot win without players prepared, willing, and able to serve. For us, a win is a successful response to a call for service or officer-initiated action. Therefore, it is incumbent on me to mitigate the effects of the trauma my deputies encounter.

Gone are the days when we expect deputies to “shake it off” or “suck it up.” Elevated risk for suicide, unhealthy substance use, and divorce rates in our profession speak to the inadequacy of that culture. The consequences of repeated exposure to stress and critical incidents demand a comprehensive commitment to mental health. As such, we offer:

- Peer and agency support: we expect our supervisors to encourage those on their shift to talk about their experiences. In the aftermath of a situation where the deputy’s life was at stake, or where the deputy witnessed the physical and emotional devastation of a suicide, rape, or murder, he or she is not expected to act as though it never happened.

- The services of FMRT: this agency provides psychological and medical support for safety-sensitive employers. Our deputies are familiar with this group as they also perform our pre-hire suitability assessments.
- Debriefing sessions: the county's emergency services department holds optional sessions for all stakeholders involved in highly intense critical incidents. Participants review the event, discuss their human responses to it, support one another, and learn about warning signs and support options should the negative effects of the event persist or worsen.
- Orange County Employee Assistance Program: deputies can access the same services available to any county employee when they are experiencing stresses or situations that interfere with quality of life.
- NCLEAP: this 501(c)(3) non-profit organization provides peer-driven assistance to first responders who have been involved in critical incidents.
- Emergency Chaplains: we receive assistance from this Durham-based organization which is available to minister to us while working side-by-side to care for people in crisis.

What can you do? Follow the rules, and if you break them, understand that the deputy holding you accountable is serving the community, not picking on you. Recognize that ours is a job that demands more than many are willing or able to give; it has an impact on our lives. When you see deputies in the community, offer a kind word or a friendly wave. Much like a football team finds it easier to play in front of a supportive crowd, such gestures go a long way.