

*Give us the tools and we will finish the job.* Sir Winston Churchill, 1941.

## Training Police Family Members, Part 2



**S**hould an officer's family members receive training beyond lethal force and firearms issues? Some law enforcement agencies are committed in providing that training. Although attendance cannot be mandated, it can certainly be encouraged.

Captain Steven Carter of the Denver, CO Police said, "When someone makes the choice to become a police officer, it is a decision that affects that officer's entire family. The support and understanding that an officer receives is, in large part, based on the level of understanding each family member has of the unique nature of the law enforcement profession.

"If the family doesn't understand the processes, systems and methods of law enforcement, they will add unneeded stress into their setting. Many times family members will not ask questions of their loved ones for a variety of reasons, and yet an officer will suffer in silence when that suffering could be eliminated if the family just had a better understanding of what officers go through."

The Denver Police Department offers a 33-hour training program, much like a citizens police academy, for three hours each week for 11 weeks, at least once each year. Denver PD's curriculum includes such topics as use of force; firearms training; arrest control tactics; investigations, internal affairs and the complaint process; dynamics of crime; psychological services; gang unit; volunteers in

policing program; media and policing; and a variety of other topics.

Carter said, "Two things that this program should produce are volunteers who work periodically in the agency. Second, the graduates should be encouraged to form an alumni association. This should become a support group where people can reach out to others for companionship and understanding. It could also serve as a resource reference for services such as daycare or baby-sitting for those who work nightshifts."

Officer Jessica Schlieman of the St. Cloud, MN Police said the psychological aspect of law enforcement is one of the most important areas to address from a family perspective. Schlieman said, "Families often experience the ups and downs of law enforcement just as the officer does. Many officers bring home their struggles with the job, especially if they are involved in critical incidents. Even if an officer attempts to keep the struggles away from the home life, the family senses problems or feels the officer is distant."

Not all officers believe that their respective agencies should be responsible for training an officer's family members. "Realistically, in most cases, agencies have neither the time nor the funding to provide training for family members," said Sergeant Steve Papenfuhs of the San Jose, CA Police. He said, "Additionally, with many officers living outside the borders of their employing agency, the relevance of the training provided by the officer's agency may be in question. Officers are primarily responsible for providing relevant training to family members."

Clinical psychologist Dr. Ellen Kirschman said, "There is a 'police officer's paradox,' the kind of personality changes officers' experience, how they affect communication and intimate relationships, and what families can do to cope / buffer themselves against these changes damaging the family. Training should also address gender issues and how these affect communication. I try to dispel concerns and myths about danger, safety, etc. I try to normalize some of these changes, look at what is positive as well as negative, and get the group to brainstorm solutions to common problems such as communication difficulties. As always, the best context for training this population is positive, fun and fast paced."

Kirshman addresses a number of psychological issues relating to the police family in her book, "I Love a Cop: What Police Families Need to Know." Along with Dr. Lorraine Greene, Kirshman created the Web site [www.policefamilies.com](http://www.policefamilies.com) with a grant from NIJ. There are outlines for family orientations, including PowerPoint slides that can all be downloaded for free.

Another acclaimed book, "Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement, A Guide for Officers and Their Families," by Dr. Kevin Gilmartin, a 20-year law enforcement veteran, encourages officers to take charge of their lives to survive both physically and emotionally. Gilmartin realizes that there is no quick-fix approach to some of the emotional problems that officers and their family members address.

He said, "I believe it is time we act proactively through a training mode to prevent emotional problems. Sort of like substituting the old saying 'Keep the Walls Bare' by another tactic and avoiding placing yourself in danger, maybe the saying should be "Starve All The Divorce Attorneys" by avoiding the problem and receiving proper training."

Ironically, as we have seen an increase in the effectiveness of an officer's tactical expertise and awareness, it potentially produces officers who are more at risk for difficulties in their personal lives. Officer safety and awareness of potential threats increase a law enforcement professional's awareness of his environment and increase his tactical expertise and survival rates. That is the great news; we have seen the bar being raised over the past 25 years in terms of officer safety and tactical skills, which saves cops lives.

Gilmartin said, "The psychological blowback of hypervigilance after prolonged periods of elevated alertness is that officers transition into their personal lives in a detached / exhausted state that sets into motion a deterioration of activity in the other realms of the officers' lives, i.e. physical exercise, hobbies, family engagement, and spirituality. As the career progresses, the very effective tactical officers run the risk of being deficient in the non-work-related aspects of their lives.

"So the officers risk becoming highly effective tactically and very deficient in other support systems, making them prone to being unable to tolerate the petty minimal annoyances that are part of any career in law enforcement. Things such as directives to wear ties and put on hats become intolerable issues that cause the officer to spend more time focused on petty issues, losing the idealism that led to the high levels of investment in the career for the first years that actually led to the highly effective officer."

Gilmartin speaks of a paradox, "Cynicism is distrust of human nature and motive, which in the police officers' world translates into officer safety. Trust has no survival value tactically for an officer. Distrust keeps officers alive. However, distrust, which serves them so well on the street,

becomes the undoing of their personal lives. These issues are extremely easy to teach, however, the problems they can cause can be overwhelming when left unresolved. You can't solve a problem if you don't know what the problem is."

When agencies involve the officer's family, they add at least one dimension of support to maintain the officer's effectiveness and long-term well-being, both personally and professionally. It is also a good management and budgetary practice. Officers cost a lot of money to screen, hire, train, and equip. They cost next to nothing to maintain, but the cost is off the charts when you consider the destruction to the officer, family, agency, and community when officers don't survive emotionally. The question now becomes, "Can an agency afford to not train family members?"

If any police agency conducts citizen police academy training, it can, at a minimum, encourage police family members to attend that training. Better yet, why not modify that program for police family members? Training family members, according to Denver PD's Captain Carter should also go beyond current family members. "I'm a strong proponent of training boyfriends and girlfriends so that they are better prepared to make the decision regarding marriage."

Every officer knows just how important a back-up officer can be in the area of personal safety. Now, that officer's back-up can go beyond the officer's shift by including family members! The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) offers a 2001 Police Family Life Education Project (FLEP) Document #187858, and a 222-page document from 1996 titled "Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families." Both documents can be downloaded by going to: [www.ncjrs.gov](http://www.ncjrs.gov). The Institute for Law Enforcement Administration offers a two-day training program, "Police and Family Conference, Backing Up a Cop: Building Better Law Enforcement Relationships," which may include tuition funding. Go to: [www.theilea.org](http://www.theilea.org).

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