

A Word About Officer Wellness

By **Kathy Platoni, Psy.D., DAIPM, FAIS**

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It is nearly impossible to even begin to conceive of officer wellness and resilience, when the very lives of our law enforcement officers are at stake and the new reality is one of absurdity. Still, self-care remains critical to the ability of every law enforcement officer to cope and to sustain, either on or off the job, and cannot be put aside at a time of one global and one national crisis. We must place a spotlight on this. For the brothers and sisters in blue, this is not the time to withhold on the focus for wellbeing; physically, mentally, behaviorally, or spiritually (Platoni, 2020). Neither is this the time to carry the terrible burdens of serving as the bullseye for targeted violence alone. Talk. Reveal. Unburden. De-escalate. Speak long, passionately and frequently with those whom you trust: your family, your friends, your inner circle of support. Peer support and the utilization of formally trained peer support teams are entirely critical at this time, as the universal shared support of those who wear the same boots is the most powerful prescription of all. Do not remain silent about that which has the potential to eat away at your psyche and your soul from within. This will surely come back to haunt and to eventually manifest physically if overlooked, ignored, or crammed down inside. The great truth is that only when silence is broken, can healing begin. (Hogeland, 2018).

4 August 2019, 0230 hours. Dayton SWAT alert tone drop. I peeled myself off the ceiling. At the time, I was on active duty with State Defense Forces, holed up at the Motel 6 in Columbus,

Ohio, when 7 separate calls came from the command staff of Dayton PD. All I heard in those stark and surreal moments was “bodies all over the street”. My gut sank to my feet as I placed an immediate crisis call to the first of the callers. I wasted no time in departing active duty and shifting my vehicle into airplane mode to journey back to Dayton in record time. For me, this was a relive of the Fort Hood Massacre. I knew at that very moment that nothing would ever be more important than sparing those officers from the inflamed and unhealed wounds that I have carried for the ten long years. This was to become far more than just fulfilling a role as the department psychologist, but making it my solemn mission to provide for their psychological welfare, whatever the cost and however many the number of hours that would be required to provide for the psychological support and crisis intervention for Dayton’s finest. In the months that followed and even into the present, it would become clear that multiple departments and copious numbers of officers were involved in responding to this gruesome tragedy and never offered any type of psychological intervention. This was a sad and sorrowful statement for far too many suffering souls, left to their own devices, trying to navigate their way back from hell. A year later, there is still the echo of trauma reappearing. It is no different now, another of the darkest of times for the totality of the law enforcement community. We owe our law enforcement professionals no less than access to the highest quality psychological care. Hopefully,

this can be rendered from those who have not necessarily worn the badge, but who have done their time in the trenches and walked through some kind of fire to truly understand the nature of police work and all the raw, twisted metal of life and death that they plough through every day; our everyday heroes who placing their lives on the line for the very salvation of the tide of humanity gone wrong, faced every day, for decades on end without respite (Platoni, 2020).

This is not so much about how much the experts know or what interventions they bring to bear or resiliency programs, peer support, suicide prevention mandates and the like. Some of these long ago fell into disrepute, encompassing the learning of means to steadfastly adapt and overcome through cognitive behavioral exercises that claim to build what they never do. Many of these trainings result in death by power point and classrooms filled with audiences of comatose students. Yes, most of these are essential trainings, but at the end of the day, it is about who shows up, how much they genuinely care, and their ministry of presence for the law enforcement community that really matters and has the potential to make a difference outside the classroom. My strongest recommendation is to seek the services of police or forensic psychologists in your jurisdiction or preferably, any mental health professional with experience in dealing with trauma, law enforcement, and/or military personnel and Veterans. Contact the Ohio Psychological Association

(ohpsych.org), the National Association of Social Workers, Ohio Chapter (www.naswoh.org), or the Ohio Counselor, Social Work, and Marriage and Family Therapist Board (cswmft.ohio.gov) for a list of recommended professionals with this type of training and experience. People generally do not care how much one knows until they know how much one cares. It really is that simple.

Critical incident stress management is an invaluable tool in the arena of re-stabilization and restoration of functioning in the field of emergency services, whether police, fire, 9-11 dispatchers, military, or corrections. This has proven the test of time and the research has certainly substantiated this, time and time again. This has truly been one of the most powerful and durable interventions utilized in the combat theater. On the battlefield of the streets of America, the results are no different.

Prior to departing Columbus during the early morning hours of 4 August 2019, the day of the Dayton Mass Shooting our Team Coordinator for the Southwest Ohio Critical Incident Stress Management Team (www.cism-southwestohio.org), Deb Hawkins, had already assembled teams of certified and highly trained and experienced debriefers to deliver immediate CISM services in the hours following the catastrophic and tragic Oregon District mass shooting. Debriefing teams, in accordance with training and service provision protocols through our governing body, the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, are comprised of police officer and/or fire fighter peers, chaplains, and licensed mental health professionals. These three-step defusings continued throughout the course of the day and until every firefighter and police

officer identified on scene had been guided through the defusing process. Defusings are an abbreviated form of the seven step critical incident stress debriefing, usually provided directly following critical incidents (within 8 hours) and as close to the scene of the critical incident as possible. The goals of an effective and successful defusing are to normalize reactions to exceedingly abnormal life events, to alleviate or diminish the impact of critical incidents, to promote and accelerate the recovery process, and to reduce cognitive, behavioral, and physical symptoms of critical incident or post-traumatic stress. Additionally, defusings allow for the facilitation of swift ventilation or the downloading of traumatic events. Finally, defusings are designed to assess the need to conduct more comprehensive, full-fledged debriefings and to make available, a host of additional support services. It is most significant to note that the all members of CISM teams in the State of Ohio are required to maintain complete confidentiality with respect to information revealed during either defusings or debriefings, per the Ohio Revised Code. Every police department, regardless, should have access to Critical Incident Stress Management Teams, as they are established regionally throughout all fifty states and in Canada. For more information, contact the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (icisf.org).

In the days, weeks, and months following the Oregon District tragedy and thanks to the wisdom of Chief Richard Biehl, LTC Matt Carper, LTC Eric Henderson, as well as the entirety of the command staff the Dayton Police Department, each and every officer directly or indirectly involved with apprehending and shooting the suspect and who

engaged in emergency lifesaving maneuvers (Dayton, Kettering, West Carrollton, Sinclair Community College, and several other departments dispatched their officers to the scene of this mass shooting, very many of whom performed CPR on the dying and transported countless victims of this horrific event to Miami Valley Hospital) were referred for psychological screening within the first 24 to 48 hours of this event. This enabled the rapid resolution of expected traumatic reactions to this catastrophic event and equally as importantly, expedited a return to duty when disquieting symptoms were sufficiently reduced and officers involved accepted the realization that involvement in another officer involved shooting or mass casualty event might again, be imminent at any time, on any day. As a direct consequence of the insight and foresight of the Dayton Police Department, the usual and customary three-session limit was lifted and officers were encouraged to seek treatment for an extended period of time on a case by case basis, some for months on end, others even returning again for treatment months following this tragic event. The Dayton Police Department demonstrated and redefined, for the entirety of the Miami Valley, what thriving and promotion of resilience following trauma looks like. No tragedy is insurmountable when plans for wellness are set in motion long before the next one occurs. This demonstrates officer wellness and the promotion of resilience of the very best kind.

Though a number of police departments throughout the Southwest Ohio region have already engaged in the process of sending their officers for mental health wellness checks on a yearly basis, authorizing three

treatment sessions for each officer, this may very well be the time to initiate such programs on a widespread basis with qualified mental health professionals capable of providing for the welfare of those on the front lines. Offering a safe haven and a third ear for listening is essential for those who are placing their lives on the line for every day they serve upon that thin blue line. Every officer must be provided a voice, an outlet, and the emotional support that accompanies this (Platoni, 2020). There is, however, much more to the story of officer wellbeing. First and foremost, the law enforcement community's sworn duty is to prevent the communities in which they work and live from being leveled by violence. It is the impact of the brutal inhumanity against police that has been largely ignored and overlooked until recently. This is particularly salient for minority police officers, who are even more likely to be caught in a crossfire of bewilderment and divided loyalties, a struggle which is tearing apart their very souls. Police officers are physically and emotionally exhausted by endless days and nights of trying to manage protests before they ignite, working for consecutive weeks on end without a single day off in order to manage a rising tide of civil unrest. In constant danger and with a relentless fear of losing their lives in the line of duty at the hands of often volatile crowds, whose unsurpassed hatred of them would seek to do the unthinkable, these leaves little or no chance to de-escalate or recharge. Once again, this is also the time not to perpetuate one's own silence, submerging despair and anguish of vast proportions down the rabbit hole. We in the mental health business must now propel ourselves forward with a fundamental concern for those who are paying an equally terrible price for

the gross injustices of prejudice and discrimination: the law enforcement community at large. There is no group, no entity, no profession asked or demanded more of than police officers. Those of us who are dedicated to the welfare of the first responder community will be waiting at the sidelines when they call.

Resources for Law Enforcement Officers

Save a Warrior Program

Save A Warrior is an original, Warrior-led, well-grounded and timeless journey for active duty military personnel, returning Veterans and first responders who feel desperately alone. Give us a week and you will change the way you see - and live - your life. SAW is an alternative, warrior-led, holistic service that equips Veterans, military personnel, police, firefighters and other first responders with a community of support and effective techniques to overcome the symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress and suicidal ideations. SAW is unique, intense and it works (Spradlin, 2020).

Instructor - Tim Spradlin is a shepherd and equine learning facilitator at Save A Warrior. He has over 43 years of experience in fire, EMS and law enforcement (retired 32 years full time), currently serving as a Reserve Deputy for Greene County Sheriff's Office. He is also retired from 30 total years of service in both the Air Force and Air Force Reserve service and is an Iraq War combat Veteran. Tim is a County Veterans Services Commissioner and operates the nonprofit Finally Home Farm, Equine Therapies for Veterans and First Responders near Xenia, Ohio (Spradlin, 2020).

"Integrity First, Service Before Self, Excellence in All We Do"

<https://saveawarrior.org/home>
<http://www.finallyhomefarmllc.com/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6951nafmZAs&t=77s>
William Timothy Spradlin,
SMSgt/1stSgt (Ret), USAFR
Greene County Veteran Services
Commission
Office: 937-562-6020
Mobile: 937-708-6474

Odyssey Program for Law Enforcement, Military Personnel and Veterans

<https://www.autumntrailsstable.com/odyssey.html>

Tri-State Peer Support Team

Comprised of first responders, mental health professionals, and chaplains, the Tri-State Peer Support Team, created by retired Fire Fighter Ed Von Lehmden and co-founder Amy Foley, provides a wealth of resources for any first responder and family members experiencing any degree of critical incident or post-traumatic stress from exposure to on the job chronic stress, trauma, and cumulative trauma. They are also available 24 hours a day to listen, to offer peer support, and to refer to any number of critically important and appropriate resources.

<http://www.hamiltoncountyfirechiefs.com/tri-state-peer-support-team.html>
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QgffU_b8DdYuGWcm7tZtTxwR953w8Lb-

Amy Foley is a co-founder of the Tri-State First Responder Peer team. This multijurisdictional, multidisciplinary team approaches peer support by building resilience, creating awareness

and vetting resources. This team's unique insight is changing the conversation around mental health from one of crisis to one of building resilience in departments. Their vision is to create a peer support team in every department, no matter what the size. You may contact her at a.j.foley2013@gmail.com or by cell at 513-607-9290.

Amy earned her BS in Marketing from the University of Kentucky. She has also received her Design Thinking Certification from the University of Virginia Darden School of Business and a Certification in Positive Psychology from The University of Pennsylvania. She has worked in peer support for the past 10 years, creating opportunities for people with lived experience to share their story of recovery and change the lives of others. She is also working on my Trauma Certification through the Tri-State Trauma Network.

Retired Fire Fighter Ed Von Lehmden is the other co-founder of the Tri-State First Responder Peer Support Team and the Chairperson of

the Hamilton County Fire Chiefs Association Health and Wellness Subcommittee for Mental Health Awareness. He has 22 years of first responder experience, including fire, EMS, and Law Enforcement. He has dealt extensively with mental health and suicide in first responders and the military. Ed's expertise and training stems from the National Fire Academy "Managing Officer Program", the Ohio Fire Chief's "Chief Officer OFC", the Ohio Fire and EMS Instructor -Paramedic Fire Officer; I, II, III, IV courses, and extensive training through the FFBHA "Behavioral Health Program Development Course", the IAFF "Trained Peer Supporter" course, ICISF "Assisting Individuals in Crisis", Ohio "ASSIST", U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance "VALOR", FRCE Stress First Aid 2.0 (Train the Trainer), OSU Wexner Medical Center "STAR" program, and the UC Stress Center "It's Not All in Your Head".

Ed graduated magna cum laude from Columbia Southern University with a degree in fire science. He retired as Deputy Fire Chief from the North College Hill Fire Department in 2018.

He has also worked as a Fire Fighter, Paramedic, and EMS Instructor for the City of Reading Fire Department and the Colerain Township Department of Fire and EMS. He can be reached at evonlehmden@gmail.com or at 513-617-0092.

Combat Stress Magazine

This publication is dedicated to the welfare of Service Members, Veterans, clinicians, first responders, and family members. With a worldwide audience, this magazine features some of the nation's premier authors and experts from the military and first responder sides of the house. Subscriptions are free.

<https://www.stress.org/military/combat-stress-magazine>

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4. Platoni, K. (4 June 2020). *Letter to the Brothers and Sisters of FOP Lodge 117*. June 12, 2020.
5. Spradlin, T. (4 June 2020). *Save a Warrior Program*. *Southwest Ohio Critical Incident Stress Management Team Monthly Meeting*. SWOCISM Lecture, Zoom Meeting.
6. Von Lehmden, E. (11 June 2020). *Tri-State Peer Support Team Board and Leadership Meeting Announcement*.



About the Author

Dr./COL Kathy Platoni has been a practicing clinical psychologist for more than 38 years and maintains her private practice in Centerville, Ohio. In service of her country and as an Army Reserve clinical psychologist, she has deployed on four occasions in time of war and is a combat Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, both Joint Task Force-GTMO and Afghanistan

Dr. Platoni is a graduate of the School of Professional Psychology of Nova Southeastern University in Davie, Florida. She held the position of Chief Psychologist for the US Army Reserve for six years and is a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College. Dr. Platoni retired from the US Army with the rank of Colonel in October of 2013, receiving the Legion of Merit for 34 years of meritorious service. In 2015, COL

Platoni was sworn in as a member of the 4th Civil Support and Sustainment Brigade, Ohio Military Reserve; back in uniform for her 39th year as the Brigade Psychologist for State Defense Forces. She has served as the Dayton SWAT psychologist as an integral member of the team and consultant to the Dayton Hostage Negotiation Team since 2011. She currently provides direct mental health services for 26 police departments in both Ohio and Kentucky.

Dr. Platoni is was inducted into the Ohio Veterans Hall of fame in 2019. Most recently, was selected as the recipient of the Best of Dayton's Psychologist Award and the Ford Oval of Honor Award.