



# NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

## THESIS

### PEER SUPPORT IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

by

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December 2020

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**PEER SUPPORT IN LAW ENFORCEMENT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Peer support programs have been around U.S. police departments for many years, but little research has been conducted as to whether these programs are effective. To this end, the present research aims to establish whether peer support works in the sense of enhancing recruitment, retention, and overall officer well-being within the field of law enforcement. This project gathered information in the form of a survey from medium-sized municipal police agencies in the western United States, as well as in-person interviews. The overwhelming consensus is the need to “normalize” seeking mental health help within police organizations amid any officer’s personal stress, organizational stress, and cumulative stress. Additionally, peer support programs provide a level of assistance that may allow agencies to retain officers, especially women, who value such programs more highly, according to the results. Ultimately, this project finds that officers cannot help others if they do not first have help themselves; peer support programs are a way to provide the help officers need for success at work and at home.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

|       |                                                |
|-------|------------------------------------------------|
| EAP   | employee assistance program                    |
| FBI   | Federal Bureau of Investigation                |
| LEHWA | Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act |
| OIS   | officer involved shooting                      |
| PTSD  | posttraumatic stress disorder                  |
| SDPD  | San Diego Police Department                    |
| SME   | subject matter expert                          |

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Peer support programs allow law enforcement officers to speak to their peers about stresses on and about the job in a structured setting and provide a level of safety and guidance to officers who experience traumatic incidents or who may struggle with cumulative stress. Peer support programs act as the bridge to assist officers in seeking mental health professionals. Increasingly—but not uniformly—peer support programs have become fixtures in departments across the country.

Specifically, peer support programs represent one aspect of an overall officer wellness program—possibly a very important one in certain circumstances—and it may play a role in officer retention and recruitment, but no empirical data has been located to support this contention. To this end, my research aimed to establish whether peer support would work, and if agencies implemented this type of program, would it enhance recruitment, retention, and overall officer well-being within the field of law enforcement? This research was conducted by gathering information from medium-sized municipal police agencies in the western United States and conducting in-person interviews. The project used a mixed methods research design to obtain qualitative and quantitative data and to assist in determining if peer support is necessary for officer well-being and if peer support affected recruitment and retention.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative research allowed a comparison of survey answers from police officers and in-person interviews with subject matter experts (SMEs). The overwhelming request by the SMEs was the need to “normalize” seeking mental health within police organizations due to personal stress, organizational stress, and cumulative stress. Additionally, organizational or bureaucratic stress is more stressful and causes more problems for officers as they navigate this career and peer support programs provide a level of assistance that may allow agencies to retain officers. The research confirms that organizational stress outweighs the other stresses in officers’ lives. The following recommendations are provided to give agency administrators some options to assist in their officers’ overall wellness.

1. Normalize the need for mental health and officer wellness. Strive to shift the old culture and open up the lines of communication with employees on wellness programs.
2. Implement a peer support program and provide the fiscal and administrative support for the program to succeed.
3. Open the peer support program up to all employees and have a diverse cross-section of employees to represent the team.
4. Consider having mental health professionals available to your employees so peer support team members can help employees seek assistance from professionals.
5. Ask for input regarding this type of program. Pick the right people, but do not force the selected personnel and require strict confidentiality.

Law enforcement is constantly changing, and these law enforcement professionals deserve the best mental health assistance that can assist them through a rigorously long career. The trauma sustained throughout a career in law enforcement affects many lives, not just the officers involved in the incident. Cumulative stress builds over the years and offering a level of assistance from a peer support program would assist officers in combating the effects of stress throughout their careers. The men and women who put their lives on the line deserve the option of having a formal peer support program to support them through their times of need.

Overall, a peer support program is not only necessary, but I would argue, vital to the sustained and high level of service officers provide to their communities. Officers cannot help others if they do not first help themselves; peer support programs are a way to provide the help needed for success at home and work. The qualitative and quantitative research provided in this project has contributed to the research and literature in an effort to bring this valuable topic of peer support in law enforcement to the forefront of police administrators.

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Things are only worth doing when they take work, grit, and determination. This thesis is a culmination of a long, fulfilling, and dedicated career over the last two decades. The profession of law enforcement is a large group of men and women dedicated to helping others. I am honored to be given the opportunity to attend the Naval Postgraduate School and appreciate all the faculty and staff in the program.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Law enforcement employee assistance programs (EAPs) and peer support programs have been in existence since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the intervening decades, law enforcement agencies have had varying degrees of formal and informal peer support programs designed to provide different levels of mental health wellness support for law enforcement personnel.<sup>2</sup> Law enforcement officers make up part of the first line of defense in homeland security, and their well-being is essential for the security of this nation and the communities they serve.

Peer support represents one aspect of an overall officer wellness program and may play a role in officer retention and recruitment, but no empirical data has been located to support this contention. All the research located is valid, but no research verifies that peer support actually improves officers' overall well-being. Agencies' differing names for peer support, formal and informal programs, and many anecdotal ideas about the necessity of peer support all pose a challenge to drawing firm conclusions. My research aims to establish whether peer support works and if agencies implement this type of program, will it enhance recruitment, retention, and overall officer well-being within the field of law enforcement? This research gathered information from medium-sized municipal police agencies in the western United States and compared them for best practices within the field of law enforcement.

### **A. RESEARCH QUESTION**

Do peer support programs contribute to the overall recruitment and retention of law enforcement officers?

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<sup>1</sup> David B. Goldstein, "Employee Assistance for Law Enforcement: A Brief Review," *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2006): 33–40, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02849500>.

<sup>2</sup> Goldstein, 33–40.

## B. LITERATURE REVIEW

A career in law enforcement ranks as one of the most stressful careers that currently exists.<sup>3</sup> For officers and their families, the occupation entails the danger of day-to-day exposure to stressful situations as a condition of the occupation. Symptoms of stress, such as performing poorly, consuming drugs or alcohol, resigning themselves to conditions, or committing suicide may affect officers “involved in shootings or other equally traumatic incidents.”<sup>4</sup> Police officers experiencing a traumatic incident may feel distant from their organizations or families, and be disconnected from a support system.<sup>5</sup> Criticism and scrutiny about officers’ duties, from both the public and the media, often result in negative portrayals of the police, which also cause stress to the officers.<sup>6</sup> This literature review addresses job stress and organizational/bureaucratic stress and seeks to disconfirm or confirm a gap in the literature on the measurement of a peer support program and its relationship to recruitment and retention within the field of law enforcement.

Contrary to common assumptions, several researchers find the police environment, not the job alone, as responsible for stress. A study by Gershon et al. determined that job stress in police officers had three commonalities: mental, behavioral, and physical traits.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, Gershon’s study, “found that organizational stressors, not critical incidents, are most strongly associated with perceived police stress.”<sup>8</sup> Organizational stress may come from many areas, such as a lack of promotion, a lack of

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<sup>3</sup> Richard L. Levenson Jr., “Prevention of Traumatic Stress in Law Enforcement Personnel,” *The Forensic Examiner* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 16–19.

<sup>4</sup> Charity Plaxton-Hennings, “Law Enforcement Organizational Behavior and the Occurrence of Post-Traumatic Stress Symptomology in Law Enforcement Personnel Following a Critical Incident,” *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 19, no. 2 (2004): 54.

<sup>5</sup> Plaxton-Hennings, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy D. Davey, Patricia L. Obst, and Mary C. Sheehan, “Demographic and Workplace Characteristics which Add to the Prediction of Stress and Job Satisfaction within the Police Workplace,” *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 16 (2001): 29–39, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02802731>.

<sup>7</sup> Robyn M. Gershon et al., “Mental, Physical, and Behavioral Outcomes Associated with Perceived Work Stress in Police Officers,” *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 36, no. 3 (March 2009): 275–289, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854808330015>.

<sup>8</sup> Gershon et al., 284.

opportunity for movement within the organization, internal affairs investigations, the organization's failure to hold officers accountable in a consistent manner, and perceived discrimination or disparate treatment.<sup>9</sup> By the same token, Davey, Obst, and Sheehan assert that for many officers, feelings of stress come from the organization, largely because officers deal with stressful situations on the job every day.<sup>10</sup> In this context, a frequently mentioned source of stress for officers is police administration. Likewise, Violanti et al. details job duties with heavy volumes of paperwork, poor compensation, and changing job duties as contributing to administrative or organizational stress.<sup>11</sup> Several aspects of the research mention administration or organizational issues as the primary reason for stress. Along this line, the Gershon study identifies many contributing factors to officers' levels of stress and negates the idea of a single cause of stress.<sup>12</sup> Thus, cumulative stresses from many sources may all contribute to officers' stress levels.

Taking this idea further, Davey, Obst, and Sheehan focused on police work involving "job content" and "job context."<sup>13</sup> In their view, greater levels of job stress correlated with less workplace support.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, officer stress levels also respond to management and organizational changes within the department.<sup>15</sup> Anderson et al. and Violanti's articles concur with Davey, Obst, and Sheehan's finding and "contradicts common anecdotal reports that it is the dangerous, unpredictable nature of police work that is the underlying cause of stress."<sup>16</sup> In summary, Davey, Obst and Sheehan's study found an inverse relationship between job stress and workplace support and a positive correlation between job satisfaction and such support.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the organizational climate

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<sup>9</sup> Gershon et al., 275–289.

<sup>10</sup> Davey, Obst, and Sheehan, "Demographic and Workplace Characteristics," 29–39.

<sup>11</sup> John M. Violanti et al., "Highly Rated and Most Frequent Stressors among Police Officers: Gender Differences," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 41 (2016): 645–662, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-016-9342-x>.

<sup>12</sup> Gershon et al., "Mental, Physical, and Behavioral Outcomes," 275–289.

<sup>13</sup> Davey, Obst, and Sheehan, "Demographic and Workplace Characteristics," 30.

<sup>14</sup> Davey, Obst, and Sheehan, 29–39.

<sup>15</sup> Davey, Obst, and Sheehan, 29–39.

<sup>16</sup> Davey, Obst, and Sheehan, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Davey, Obst, and Sheehan, 29–39.

and culture within an agency should be taken into account when determining the level and need of mental health support for officers and their families.

Similarly, the culture within an organization may determine the stigma associated with seeking mental health. According to Pasillas, Follette, and Perumean-Chaney, overcoming the stigma around seeking psychological services in law enforcement agencies is absolutely necessary.<sup>18</sup> Echoing this idea, White, Shrader, and Chamberlin assert that understanding the culture may allow sensitive and professional services to be rendered to the officers when the need arises.<sup>19</sup> Providing mental health services to law enforcement officers demands a sensitivity to and deep understanding of the culture within the organization and career field.

Officers' personal beliefs of being "weak" or "incapable" of handling themselves in a professional manner may explain why they do not seek assistance. Officers worry more about the negative perception of their "weakness" and refuse treatment even if it is at the cost of their own well-being. The stigma associated with seeking mental health assistance hampers officers from coming forward to obtain the psychological assistance that could help them find success in their chosen career paths.<sup>20</sup> Officers take care of their bodies through physical fitness, but do not value their psychological well-being in the same way. Officers in the early stages of their careers are told to be "strong," which means being able to handle themselves mentally without outside assistance.

The need for mental health assistance within police agencies may vary based on officer characteristics including gender, race, culture, and sexual orientation. For example, Violanti and Drylie's 2008 study cited depression in 6.2 percent of policemen versus 12.5 percent of policewomen, as compared to a 5.2 percent incidence in the

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<sup>18</sup> Rebecca M. Pasillas, Victoria M. Follette, and Suzanne E. Perumean-Chaney, "Occupational Stress and Psychological Functioning in Law Enforcement Officers," *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2006): 41–53, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02849501>.

<sup>19</sup> Amy K. White, Gregory Shrader, and Jared Chamberlain, "Perceptions of Law Enforcement Officers in Seeking Mental Health Treatment in a Right-to-Work State," *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 31 (2016): 141–154, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-015-9175-4>.

<sup>20</sup> Pasillas, Follette, and Perumean-Chaney, "Occupational Stress and Psychological Functioning," 41–53.

“general population.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, female officers’ rate of depression is more than double that of the general population and of policemen. This disparity is concerning as increasing rates of depression can lead to thoughts of suicide.<sup>22</sup> It may also indicate a greater need for female officers to receive mental health assistance as part of their employment. This single study stood alone in linking gender to depression and suicide in law enforcement officers.

Yet, police officers who do seek mental health treatment may prevent or mitigate job stress. For example, White, Shrader, and Chamberlain found that law enforcement officers who seek appropriate treatment may prevent long-term psychological or social problems “including divorce, alcoholism, violence, isolation, difficulty in holding employment, and suicide.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, they assert that the use of mental health services and early detection of potential officers at risk may prevent long-term psychological damage to the officers and their families.<sup>24</sup> Yet, to Pasillas, Follette, and Perumean, law enforcement officers who experience higher levels of occupational stress may be using inappropriate coping strategies in dealing with their stress.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the literature disagrees about whether seeking help or coping strategies most affect police officers’ levels of stress. How officers handle their stress may directly affect how well they manage issues at work and at home.

Continual trauma or ongoing stressful events cause avoidance, addictive behavior, isolation, or dissociation from non-law enforcement people; law enforcement officers may display all these characteristics.<sup>26</sup> Officers who do not seek mental health assistance may be less willing to engage with members of their organization and their friends. This type of behavior may negatively affect the officers’ overall well-being and their personal interactions with family members. To prevent such a self-reinforcing spiral, Pasillas et al.

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<sup>21</sup> Violanti et al., “Highly Rated and Most Frequent Stressors among Police Officers,” 645–662.

<sup>22</sup> Violanti et al., 645–662.

<sup>23</sup> White, Shrader, and Chamberlain, “Perceptions of Law Enforcement Officers,” 142.

<sup>24</sup> White, Shrader, and Chamberlain, 141–154.

<sup>25</sup> Pasillas, Follette, and Perumean-Chaney, “Occupational Stress and Psychological Functioning,” 41–53.

<sup>26</sup> Pasillas, Follette, and Perumean-Chaney, 14–53.

advises that departments “Focus on creating a supportive work environment in which supervisors and fellow law enforcement colleagues are able to acknowledge and deal with work stressors and mental health concerns in an accepting way.”<sup>27</sup> Creating an environment that welcomes mental health assistance is a step in the right direction in providing for officers’ well-being.

### **C. RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research used in this project was a mixed methods design using both qualitative and quantitative data collection. The qualitative data was gathered from three in-person interviews with subject matter experts (SMEs). The quantitative data was gathered by sending out an on-line survey to three municipal law enforcement agencies in California and Arizona. The Naval Postgraduate School Institutional Review Board approved this research project.

### **D. OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS**

Chapter II provides an officer’s story to set the stage for peer support and examines the San Diego Police Department’s Officer Wellness Program. Additionally, this chapter details the history of peer support and outlines the research that is the basis for this project.

Chapter III examines the quantitative on-line survey results, provides discussion with the open-ended survey questions, and analyzes the data to determine if peer support programs influence recruitment and retention.

Chapter IV gives a detail summary and analysis of the qualitative data gathered in the three personal interviews. This data is compared to the survey data and further analyzed for policy recommendations.

Chapter V concludes this thesis project by providing the trends that were determined and exposed through the research. Additionally, this chapter provides recommendations for future research and policy recommendations.

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<sup>27</sup> Pasillas, Follette, and Perumean-Chaney, 49.

## **II. OFFICER TRAUMA AND THE NEED FOR PEER SUPPORT**

Peer support entails an immediate contact with a peer after a traumatic event, and such contact helps the officers seek additional resources or bring in a professional to assist with their needs. Peer support in law enforcement over the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s has been called many things from mental health assistance to crisis management, professional assistance, critical incident stress management, and trauma support programs. Currently, the name trending is “officer resiliency.” All these names focus on supplying the right services to officers at times of need to ensure officer wellness. The key difference between peer support and other kinds of mental health and wellness programs is that police officers talk to one another based on shared experiences and understandings.

This chapter explores the development of peer support as an idea and a practice, and it demonstrates how peer support fits in with an overall officer wellness program, based in part on the example of the San Diego Police Department’s implementation of an Officer Wellness Program. Finally, this chapter outlines the considerations that informed the research at the heart of this thesis.

### **A. AN OFFICER’S STORY**

One rainy day in southern California in December 1997, a young officer with less than three years as a municipal police officer responded to a call with a man with a gun, and found herself in the middle of a shooting of a suspect with an AK-47 rifle. Although this shooting involved many officers, it profoundly changed this officer’s life, her perspective, and approach to (self) healing and well-being. She witnessed a fellow officer being shot in front of her, a shocking and traumatic event amid a tense situation.

On the day of the shooting, the young officer had followed two of her fellow officers in a vehicle ahead of her to respond to a call of a man shooting people. They drove into an intersection but stopped because the shooter appeared directly in front of them. The two officers in the vehicle ahead of her came under fire immediately. She placed her vehicle between the shooter and the officers being targeted. This action

distracted the shooter enough to cause him to target her rather than the other officers. The space between the vehicles allowed the officers to flee their vehicle and run toward the rear of her vehicle. On the way, the shooter hit one of her colleagues. Fellow responding officers pulled him into a rescue vehicle and took him to the hospital.

After exiting her vehicle to create distance from the suspect, she and another officer continued to shoot at him from the rear of her vehicle. Additional officers flanked the suspect, and the shooting suddenly stopped. The officers behind the rear bumper moved up and confirmed the suspect had been fatally shot. All the officers looked around and confirmed that no one else was injured; they began setting up a crime scene.

The entire detective division was summoned to the department and the District Attorney began the investigation. All the involved officers returned to the station and were advised not to talk about the incident; the next 12 hours were spent with interviews, photographs, and paperwork. This day started as any other but ended as a day that she considers to have changed her life forever. She now has a “new normal” on the job and off because of this event.

At the time, the department forced her to take four days away from work. This mandated separation left her feeling isolated and alone at a time when she needed someone to reinforce her feelings as normal and reassure her of her ability to deal with the trauma. Weeks and months went by; she was back on the job and thought everything was fine. Over the next year, she worked as if she had not experienced this traumatic event. She went to work, talked “cop” with her peers, and continued as if nothing traumatic had occurred. Yet one year to the day, she broke down and acknowledged becoming an angry cynical cop with inner bleeding and bruising invisible to the eye. She needed help and realized seeking it was part of healthy survival.

But where to turn for help? The agency she worked for lacked a peer support program; many agencies across the nation did not offer this type of support. Cop culture was partly to blame because no one wanted to be considered “vulnerable” or see a “shrink.” Stigma was real, and she did not want to be thought of as “weak” by seeking formal mental-health assistance. On the other hand, did her fellow officers really expect

her to “suck it up” and carry on? Exactly how was she expected to answer explicit or implied arguments that the shooting incident is just part of the job and “choosing this career means you should be able to deal with it?” Recognizing her cynical self and acknowledging her feelings of anger actually led her to seek help from a peer. This peer gave her the nudge she needed to seek professional help; one year and an offer for free professional hockey tickets later. This decision turned out to be the best decision she has ever made and launched her on the path of peer support and officer wellness.

One shooting incident is traumatic; some officers will experience more than one shooting in their careers. How their agency treats them afterwards makes all the difference in their healing and ability to navigate a career in law enforcement. Healthy police officers make better decisions, provide better service to their communities, and can better train future police officers by providing positive outcomes from traumatic incidents. Fellow officers providing assistance and listening to their peers begin the process of healing from traumatic events.

## **B. THE ADVENT OF PEER SUPPORT**

Peer support in law enforcement constitutes officers helping officers after a traumatic work or personal event or any combination of the two.<sup>28</sup> In the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the allied field of education studied peer counseling in a study of student-to-student assistance at Kansas State University.<sup>29</sup> The author, Murphy, determined the results of a student-to-student support system as being better if not equal to a professor providing support to underclassman.<sup>30</sup> An article by Greenstone references Murphy and contends that the application of peer support would be helpful to law enforcement.<sup>31</sup>

The issue is persuading law enforcement officials to recognize and acknowledge the emotional toll that some aspects of the job can take, especially amid the prolonged

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<sup>28</sup> James L. Greenstone, “Peer Support in a Municipal Police Department: Doing What Comes Naturally,” *The Forensic Examiner* 9, no. 3/4 (March/April 2000): 33–36.

<sup>29</sup> John P. Murry, “The Comparative Effectiveness of Student-to-Student and Faculty Advising Programs,” *The Journal of College Student Personnel* 13, no. 6 (November 1972): 562–566.

<sup>30</sup> Murry, 562–566.

<sup>31</sup> Greenstone, “Peer Support in a Municipal Police Department,” 33–36.

exposure to the kinds of incidents that make up a typical policing day, dangerous or violent situations, bloody assaults, or crimes against children. The prevailing, if unhelpful, attitude among police officers has been stoic silence. In an article from 1987, Lawrence Blum provides an example of how officers avoid their own emotions to be effective in their jobs.<sup>32</sup>

Shows of emotion on the street can make the officer lose control of a situation, and it is no help to be grief stricken, enraged, or feeling helpless after the victim has already been hurt. Therefore, the successful police officer has developed the ability to “stuff down” or repress distressed emotions as the survival tool. This tactic is used automatically in both work and family situations for a majority of officers. “If you feel, you cry; if you cry, you can’t work; if you can’t work, you’re losing it; if you lose it, you can’t be a cop anymore.”<sup>33</sup>

Peer support programs provide direct support from a peer and may lessen the officers’ feeling of vulnerability during their daily activities and traumatic events.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, this type of support keeps the officers in a hard-earned career in law enforcement and provides a continued level of community service at the federal, state, and local levels.

### **C. PEER SUPPORT AND OFFICER WELL-BEING**

Peer support programs differ from traditional EAPs. In the latter program, employees receive a level of assistance that will best fit their needs with problems, for example financial management assistance, marriage counseling, alcohol or drug counseling, etc. EAP services are considered an employee benefit and provided by third-party vendors hired by a city or county as part of the employee benefit package. Peers do not provide support but professionals from outside the agency do. These programs can be quite useful in their focused areas, but the model—largely because of the penchant of law enforcement officers to squelch their feelings—rarely addresses mental-health needs effectively.

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<sup>32</sup> Lawrence N. Blum, “Officer Survival after Trauma: The Companion Officer Program,” *Journal of California Law Enforcement* 21, no. 1 (March 1987): 28–32.

<sup>33</sup> Blum, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Blum.

Peer assistance comes in many forms and may have many different names, titles, and organizational structures. Breaking down “peer” and “support” as defined in the dictionary, a peer is “a person who is equal in abilities, qualification, age, background, and social status,” in this case, another police officer.<sup>35</sup> Support is defined as, “to bear or hold up (a load, mass, structure, part, etc.); serve as a foundation for.”<sup>36</sup> Using these two words together provides a level of assistance for an officer and a foundation for one peer to relate to another. Accepting assistance does not come naturally to a police officer; providing assistance is a daily occurrence. Most officers help others and do not commonly accept help for themselves.<sup>37</sup> Understanding the need to seek assistance forces the officers to acknowledge their own self-care and purports this need to the community they serve.

Peer support programs have developed over the years and now have both sworn and professional staff (non-sworn) members, such as dispatchers, records personnel, and crime scene investigators, etc. In a peer support program, an officer or employee provides assistance to a fellow employee; in this case, an officer who has walked in the same shoes. The peer supporter gives officers a safe space to express their feelings, explain situations and options, and actively listen to foster a welcoming environment during a time of need. Seeking any type of mental health support in the field of law enforcement is stigmatized and the fear of being labeled as “weak” or “incapable” to handle the job prevents personnel from seeking assistance. Speaking to a fellow officer allows for ease of communication and builds a base of trust for disclosure. Peer support in law enforcement provides a layered approach to seeking assistance. If a peer support member determines the employee needs additional services beyond basic peer support, then the peer supporter would assist in providing the employee with guidance to experts and professionals trained in the specific area of need and offer to help officers through the process.

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<sup>35</sup> *Dictionary.com*, s.v, “peer,” accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/peer?s=t>.

<sup>36</sup> *Dictionary.com*, s.v, “support,” accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/support?s=t>.

<sup>37</sup> Greenstone, “Peer Support in a Municipal Police Department,” 33.

Retired Captain Valerie Tanguay-Masner states that starting a career by educating new officers in the academy on the topic of stress and police suicides may provide the individual recruits with a foundation of openness and create greater acceptance.<sup>38</sup> Her sentiment is correct and consistent with the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act (LEHWA), which Congress passed in 2017 and signed into law in January 2018.<sup>39</sup> This act passed both houses of Congress unanimously and policymakers acknowledged, “Law enforcement agencies need and deserve support in their ongoing efforts to protect the mental health and well-being of their employees.”<sup>40</sup> The LEHWA act paves the way for many mental health services, describes military models, and asks whether the models will work for law enforcement, details suicide prevention and needed mental health checks, provides recommendations for the implementation of programs, and lists ways agencies can build resilience that does not end in the academy, but continues throughout officers’ careers.<sup>41</sup> Legislation that acknowledges the need for mental health in law enforcement should help lessen the stigma of seeking mental health and also validate the need for such services.

#### **D. A MODEL PROGRAM: SAN DIEGO POLICE DEPARTMENT**

The San Diego Police Department (SDPD) has one of the largest and most progressive peer support programs referred to as the wellness program. This program acts a guidebook to agencies seeking to implement a peer support or wellness program. In 2011, the agency experienced several personnel investigations and the following were listed in the publication’s introduction about the program as the reason for implementing the program: “Between February and August; 10 SDPD officers were investigated for offenses ranging from rape and sexual battery to driving under the influence. Six of the

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<sup>38</sup> Valerie Tanguay-Masner, “Life after Retirement in Search of Happily Ever After,” *Journal of California Law Enforcement* 43, no. 1 (2009): 25–30.

<sup>39</sup> Deborah L. Spence et al., *Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act: Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2019), 1–49.

<sup>40</sup> Spence et al., 2.

<sup>41</sup> Spence et al., 1–49.

10 officers were arrested.”<sup>42</sup> These investigations were followed up by five deaths within its ranks, and through these tragedies, the SDPD began its wellness unit.<sup>43</sup> Then Captain Sarah Creighton accepted the offer to lead the officer wellness program in the SDPD.<sup>44</sup> Later, she was promoted to Assistant Chief and directly referred to the need for an officer wellness program. The program was featured in a research study that started in 2016 and was published in 2018 by the Police Executive Forum.<sup>45</sup> The wellness program addresses overall wellness and employs a full-time wellness team to do so. The SDPD example can be modified depending on the size of the agency.

The SDPD Wellness Program has a two-part peer support program, general peer support, and officer involved shooting (OIS) support/in-custody death peer support.<sup>46</sup> These two divisions aim to provide general peer support personnel by sworn or professional staff and OIS or in-custody death support only from sworn officers who have been involved in a shooting.<sup>47</sup>

Assistant Chief Creighton highlighted the importance of support from leadership to ensure the program’s success and sustainability. In a publication from the Police Executive Research Forum titled, *Building and Sustaining an Officer Wellness Program: Lessons from the San Diego Police Department*, Assistant Chief (ret.) Sarah Creighton highlighted the need for visible organizational support of wellness:

I learned that if your organization thinks something is important, it needs to be on the organizational chart and have the highest-ranking person possible in charge of it. It needs to be a visible, dedicated arm of the organization. Otherwise, it’ll fall away.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Police Executive Research Forum, *Building and Sustaining an Officer Wellness Program: Lessons from the San Diego Police Department* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2018), 1.

<sup>43</sup> Police Executive Research Forum, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Police Executive Research Forum, 15.

<sup>45</sup> Police Executive Research Forum, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Police Executive Research Forum, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Police Executive Research Forum, 35.

<sup>48</sup> Police Executive Research Forum, 15.

In response, the department initiated a needs assessment survey of all 2,500 employees (1,800 sworn and 700 professional staff/non-sworn).<sup>49</sup> The survey (700 responses) uncovered the four main issues bothering personnel: “stress, anger, depression, and ‘work turn-off.’”<sup>50</sup> Work turn-off was interpreted to mean the inability to turn-off work related thoughts when off-duty. The survey results gave the wellness team a starting point, and the program has been gathering data and adjusting the program since its inception. Assistant Chief Creighton stated, “The key is when you get someone who has used wellness services and tells someone else that they had a good experience.”<sup>51</sup> This type of feedback will build credibility in any program implemented within a department and represents the quintessence of the peer-support dynamic.

#### **E. BUT DOES IT WORK?**

Many people have related stories of productive peer support interventions, but little scholarship extends beyond the anecdotes. Interestingly, no research explains why departments do not have peer support programs. Perhaps some members of the law enforcement community still believe that seeking mental health support is a sign of weakness, a misperception, which in turn, may explain why many law-enforcement leaders do not believe in peer support. Additionally, many agencies are fiscally unprepared to build a peer support program and believe the funds should be used for other types of police training.

Due to the gap in research on the results of peer support programs in law enforcement, I decided to conduct independent research consisting of a survey and personal interviews. This section details the methods used to gather the research and provides details on the recruitment process for the agencies who received the surveys; it also documents the research process and protocols employed during this analysis.

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<sup>49</sup> Police Executive Research Forum, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Police Executive Research Forum, 15.

<sup>51</sup> Police Executive Research Forum, 28.

## **1. Methods**

The research consisted of mixed methods measures using a quantitative on-line survey and qualitative personal interviews. As stated by Creswell, “A mixed method research design is a procedure for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study, and analyzing and reporting this data based on a priority and sequence of information.”<sup>52</sup>

## **2. Selection and Recruitment**

The recruitment process for this research project began with reviewing literature on peer support programs and determining whether peer support programs affected recruitment and retention within law enforcement agencies. I decided to conduct on-line agency surveys and to conduct three in-person interviews with SMEs to gain two different research perspectives. The Institutional Review Board application process began and was approved for both agency surveys and personal interviews.<sup>53</sup>

## **3. Surveys**

The agencies were selected from personal knowledge of the police chiefs and the agencies currently having some form of a peer support program. The agencies selected to participate in the online survey portion of this research project were from three different geographical areas: northern California, southern California, and central Arizona. Although the agencies differed in sworn personnel size, all had a sworn capacity of 199 officers or more.

The on-line survey participants were all sworn law enforcement personnel with a wide range of years of service, rank, and gender. All sworn personnel at a given agency received a survey from a non-sworn agency administrator so no survey participant would feel “required” to participate based on a supervisor sending the request. The majority of survey participants were male (83.8 percent), educated (70.5 percent) with a B.A. or

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<sup>52</sup> John W. Creswell, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2002), 560.

<sup>53</sup> NPS IRB Protocol #NPS.2020.0032-IR-EP7-A.

higher, and currently hold the rank of officer (65.7 percent). The mean number of years of service was 16, with a range of service from 1–47 years. See Table 1.

Table 1. Survey Respondent Demographics (N = 105)

| <b>Variable</b> | <b>Percent (N)</b>                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gender          | Male 88.3(88)                                                                                                                                                            |
| Education       | High School 1.0 (1)<br>Some College 11.4 (12)<br>Associates Degree 17.1 (18)<br>Bachelor’s Degree 43.8 (46)<br>Some Graduate School 5.7 (6)<br>Graduate Degree 21.0 (22) |
| Rank            | Officer 65.7(69)<br>Detective 4.8(5)<br>Sergeant 15.2 (16)<br>Lieutenant 8.6 (9)<br>Captain/Commander 1.0 (1)<br>Deputy Chief/Chief 4.8 (5)                              |

The on-line survey consisted of 23 questions, some using a Likert scale with multiple-choice questions and some open-ended questions. The survey was broken into five separate question categories: demographics, agency specific, peer support program, recruitment and retention, and open-ended-strengths and changes. See Appendix A for the list of questions asked in the survey.

Seven hundred eighty sworn officers at the three participating agencies received the link to the on-line survey. Of the total number of surveys sent, 145 surveys were started and 105 were completed. This response total represented a 13.5 percent rate of return.

In the middle of this research process, a pandemic struck the United States, and for several months, many first responders were tasked and asked to conduct business in an unprecedented manner. First responders endured stress, illness, changes in job expectations, layoffs, and furloughs. Additionally, due to the extraordinary events of the spring and summer protests, police excessive force incidents, and COVID-19, the

response rate for this research project was much lower than anticipated. As a result of the aforementioned circumstances, collecting survey information may have been reduced or ignored by survey recipients.

The overall response rate of 13.5 percent falls below a recommended rate of 30 percent to 35 percent for categorical data as suggested by Bartlett et al.<sup>54</sup> However, research suggests studies with lower than standardly accepted response rates are commonly accurate in describing a given phenomenon.<sup>55</sup> Combined with the open-ended questions allowing for effective triangulation and validation of quantitative responses, the response rate does not negatively affect the results.<sup>56</sup>

#### **4. Interviews**

The interviews were conducted in person with SMEs. The interview participants were selected based on personal knowledge of their expertise and a department recommendation. Interviewee BB has a doctorate in clinical psychology and has been in practice for more than 35 years. She started training in “peer support” more than 30 years ago at the request of a municipal police department’s deputy chief. Interviewee AA has a doctorate in clinical psychology and has been in practice for more than 20 years. Her practice assists agencies in new hire psychological testing, establishment of peer support programs, and trauma debriefs. Interviewee CC has a doctorate in psychology and has been involved in critical incident debriefs and peer support programs for the past 10 years. The clinicians primarily practice in three different counties: Los Angeles, Orange, and San Bernardino, all in southern California.

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<sup>54</sup> James E. Bartlett II, Joe W. Kotrlik, and Chadwick C. Higgins, “Organizational Research: Determining Appropriate Sample Size in Survey Research,” *Information Technology, Learning, and Performance Journal* 19, no. 1 (2001): 43.

<sup>55</sup> Allyson L. Holbrook, Jon A. Krosnick, and Alison Pfent, “The Causes and Consequences of Response Rates in Surveys by the News Media and Government Contractor Survey Research Firms,” in *Advances in Telephone Survey Methodology*, ed. James M. Lepkowski et al. (New York: Wiley, 2007), 499–528; Nicole M. Mealing et al., “Investigation of Relative Risk Estimates from Studies of the Same Population with Contrasting Response Rates and Designs,” *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 10, no. 26 (2010): 1–12; Penny S. Visser et al., “Mail Surveys for Election Forecasting? An Evaluation of the Columbus Dispatch Poll,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 181–227.

<sup>56</sup> Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), 1–347.

I conducted all interviews in person and digitally recorded them with the interviewees' written permission. I asked 20 interview questions ranging from qualifications, knowledge of peer support, their clinical services, how peer support has changed over the years, cumulative stress, stigmatization of mental health, goals of a peer support program, peer support for personal reasons, organizational or bureaucratic stress, and the impact of peer support on recruitment and retention, see Appendix B. Each of the interview participants are active clinicians and often de-brief officers after high stress situations or traumatic incidents.

## **F. CONCLUSION**

This chapter explored the development of peer support as an idea and a practice, and it demonstrated how peer support fits in with an overall officer wellness program, through both the officer's story and the San Diego Police Department's Officer Wellness Program. Considering the history and background of peer support, a determination was made to conduct a survey with three municipal agencies and three in-person interviews.

This project employed a mixed methods design and combined a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews. I want to determine whether peer support is working and whether they thought peer support contributed to officers' recruitment or retention.

### **III. SURVEY RESULTS**

This chapter provides the results of the surveys and the three in-person interviews to show how often officers use peer support. Overall, this chapter shows that the participants marginally believe peer support affects recruitment of new officers and has more of an effect with lateral officers. Participants also acknowledged that peer support does affect officer retention, and surprisingly, a gender gap emerged in the results. In the on-line survey, peer support was defined as the use of emotional support or assistance from a peer or peer group within an officer's agency on a formal basis. All data in the text, tables, and figures came from this original research.

#### **A. SURVEY RESULTS**

On the one hand, the responses suggest that peer support does play a role in recruitment. On the other hand, peer support seems to help in officer retention. Appendix C presents the details of the survey's protocols of administration. This section presents participants' impressions of peer support, the degree to which peer support affected recruitment, and the degree to which it influences retention.

##### **1. Overall Impressions of Peer Support**

When asked if they would recommend peer support to a fellow officer, participants overwhelmingly endorsed it with a 93-percent response. Still, some 32 percent stated they had never felt the need to use peer support. Although peer support strikes officers as a good idea, I interpreted this result as an expression of their willingness to help others, but not seek help for themselves. Even though the survey did not ask about stigma directly, I construe this response as being at least partially informed by a persistent, if perhaps unconscious, sense that any kind of mental-well-being support signifies weakness.

One quarter of the participants stated they had used peer support three or more times since being at their agencies. On the other hand, a smaller number—15 percent of

the participants—answered they had never used peer support but have referred a fellow employee to the program.

Table 2 displays the results for the following question: How often have you utilized the peer support program in your agency?

Table 2. Use of Peer Support Frequency (N = 105)

| <b>Frequency of Use in Agency</b>                              | <b>Percent (N)</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| For three or more events                                       | 24.7 (26)          |
| For two events                                                 | 10.5 (11)          |
| For one event                                                  | 16.2 (17)          |
| Never, I have not had a personal need                          | 32.4 (34)          |
| Never, I have only referred someone                            | 15.2 (16)          |
| To my knowledge my agency does not have a peer support program | 1.0 (1)            |

In the survey, participants responded to various questions regarding when they had used peer support and for what type of event they had used the program. As Figure 1 illustrates, the participants rated the level of helpfulness from their agencies' peer support program as overwhelmingly positive at 78 percent. Eighty-three percent of the participants perceived the peer support program as useful for the debriefing of a critical or traumatic incident. Most participants believed this type of debriefing happened well after the event occurred, and not at the scene of a crime. Yet, a majority of the participants, 89 percent, felt peer support on-scene or during a critical incident or traumatic event would be helpful.

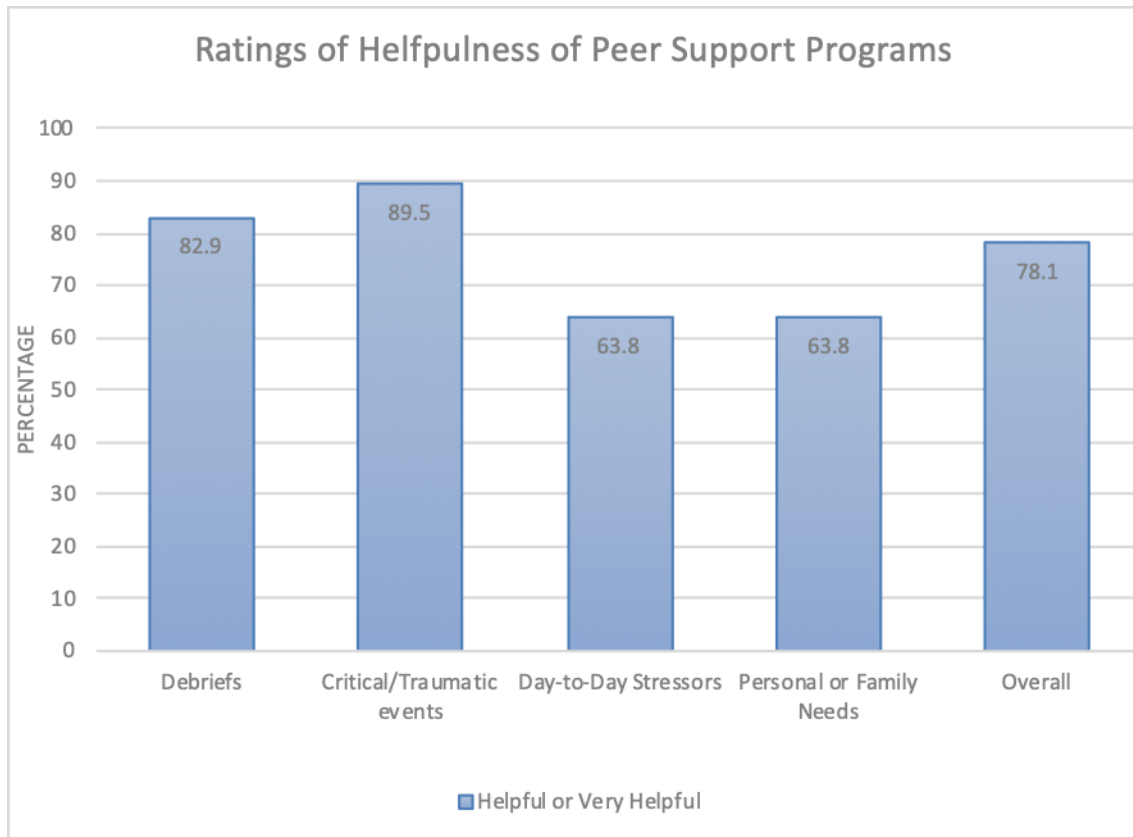


Figure 1. Ratings of Helpfulness of Peer Support Programs

Oftentimes, peer support addresses not only on-the-job issues, but also personal or family matters. More than 63 percent believed peer support would be helpful for personal needs related to family issues, particularly marriage, finances, scheduling, or the death of a family member. This finding suggests that having personal relationships with peer employees allows employees to feel comfortable enough to share challenges in their personal lives.

## 2. Peer Support and Recruitment

As to whether peer support affects the recruitment of new officers to law enforcement, 32 percent responded “Yes.” Follow up questions indicated that 40 percent find peer support helpful and 50 percent indicated that it helps in the recruitment of lateral officers when discussing the helpfulness of peer support and recruitment (see Figure 2). Since recruiting and educating potential new employees remain areas for

improvement, this data offers peer support as a promising tool.<sup>57</sup> Although peer support had less influence on the recruitment of new officers, lateral officers should be given peer support information since it might affect their decisions to move to other agencies.

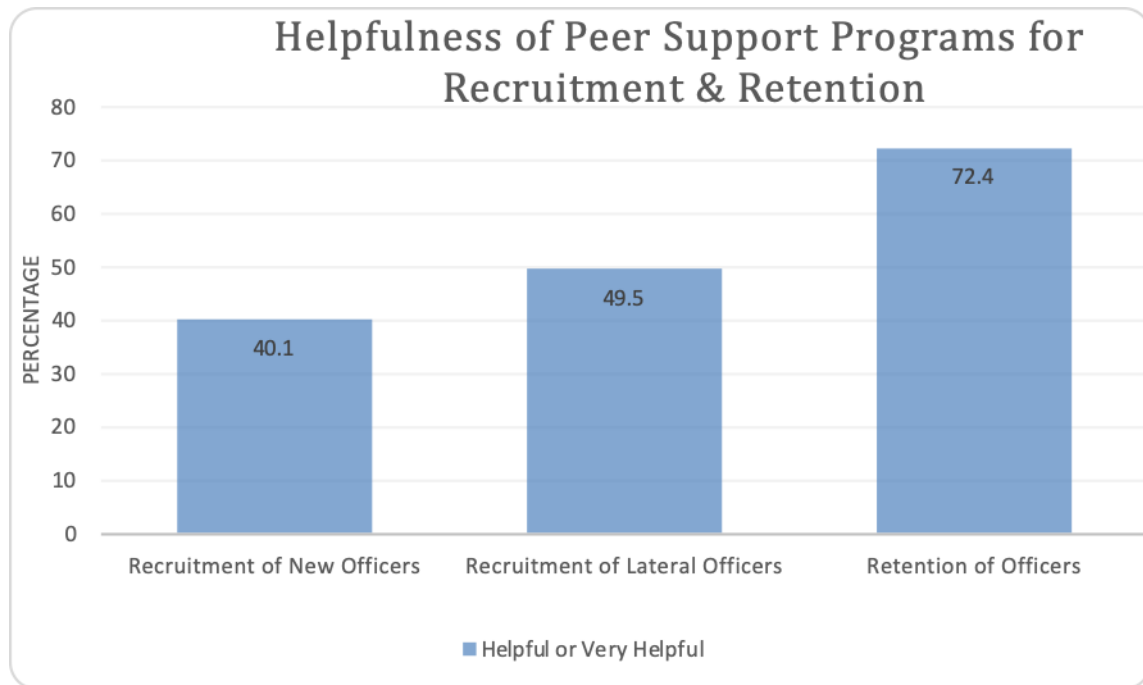


Figure 2. Helpfulness of Peer Support Programs for Recruitment and Retention

The data reveal a meaning gender divide. Specifically, 71 percent of women, versus 39 percent of men, viewed peer support as enhancing officer recruitment, as shown in Figure 3. This significant difference shows the increased value that women place on peer support. This aid may be particularly valuable in recruiting women into law enforcement careers given the low number of women in the field.

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<sup>57</sup> Jane B. Northup, "Police Personnel Retention Challenges: Literature Review and Recommendations," *Police Chief* 85, no. 9 (2018): 20–27.

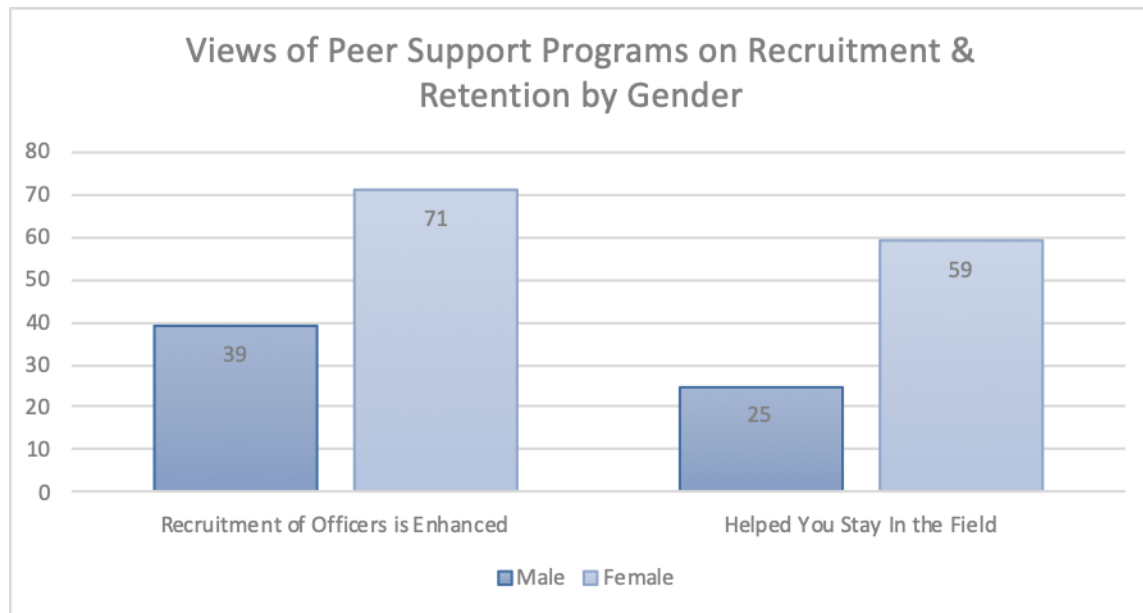


Figure 3. Views of Peer Support Programs on Recruitment and Retention by Gender

### 3. Peer Support and Retention

Seventy-four percent of participants affirmed that peer support influences retention. When asked about the helpfulness of peer support programs in retaining officers, nearly 73 percent valued such programs, as Figure 2 shows. In other words, peer support can influence the decisions to leave their agencies, and thus deprive the force and the public of their accumulated expertise and training. Officers who have tenure may see the importance of peer support because of their time on the force.

In this context, too, a clear gender difference emerged, with 59 percent of females versus 25 percent of males stating that having a peer support program helped them stay in the field of law enforcement, as illustrated in Figure 3. In terms of retaining employees, peer support clearly plays a role in retaining females in this career.

### 4. Open-ended Question Results

The on-line survey had two open-ended questions, one on the strengths of the program, and one on areas of improvement needed within the peer support program. A total of 70 responses address the strengths of their agencies' programs. Most participants

agree on four main categories: team members who truly care and are compassionate, responsiveness to traumatic events or critical incidents, accessibility of resources and availability of large numbers of personnel on the peer support team, and members who are trusted to maintain confidentiality, as Figure 4 shows.

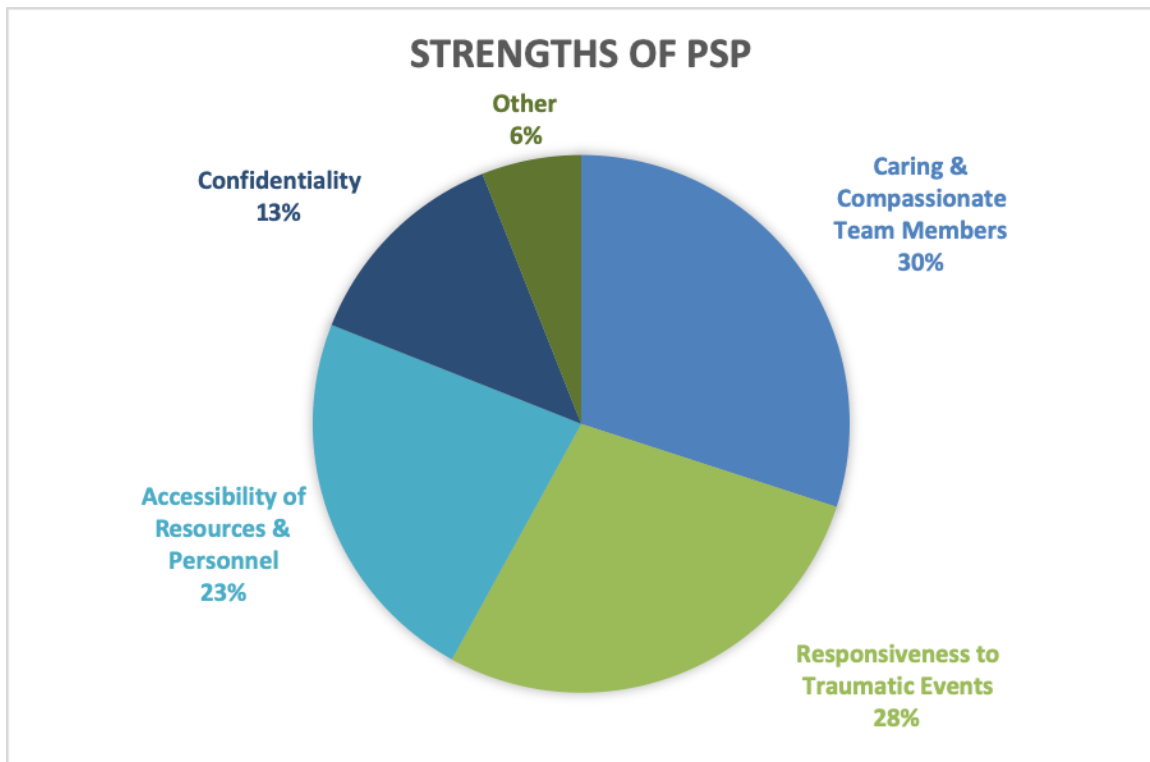


Figure 4. Strengths of Peer Support Programs

Believing that members of the peer support team care for the person they were helping and feeling the compassion from their peer account for 30 percent of the responses received. As one of the responses notes, “The members of the team seem to truly believe in the cause. They seem to genuinely want to help.” In this way, officers want team members who they find to be caring and compassionate. Strikingly, overall, care and compassion outweighed the need for confidentiality. This result contrasts with a majority of the literature concluding that concern over confidentiality prevents officers from seeking peer support.

Additionally, 23 percent of the participants appreciate the accessibility of resources and personnel. The confidential nature of the program is a strength area but only important to about 13 percent of the participants, as shown in Figure 4. One participant expresses the critical nature of confidentiality by commenting, “Everyone has confidence in the confidentiality of the program, which is crucial for success.”

In areas for improvement, 53 responses were grouped into 16 different response categories, as displayed in Figure 5. The top five categories based on frequency of response were communication to the department (16 responses, 30 percent), additional personnel and more diverse peer support members (12 responses, 23 percent), confidentiality (six responses, 11 percent), family support or everyday life stress assistance (four responses, 7 percent), and destigmatize (four responses, 7 percent). If a response covered more than one category, it was then tabulated in each area of improvement.

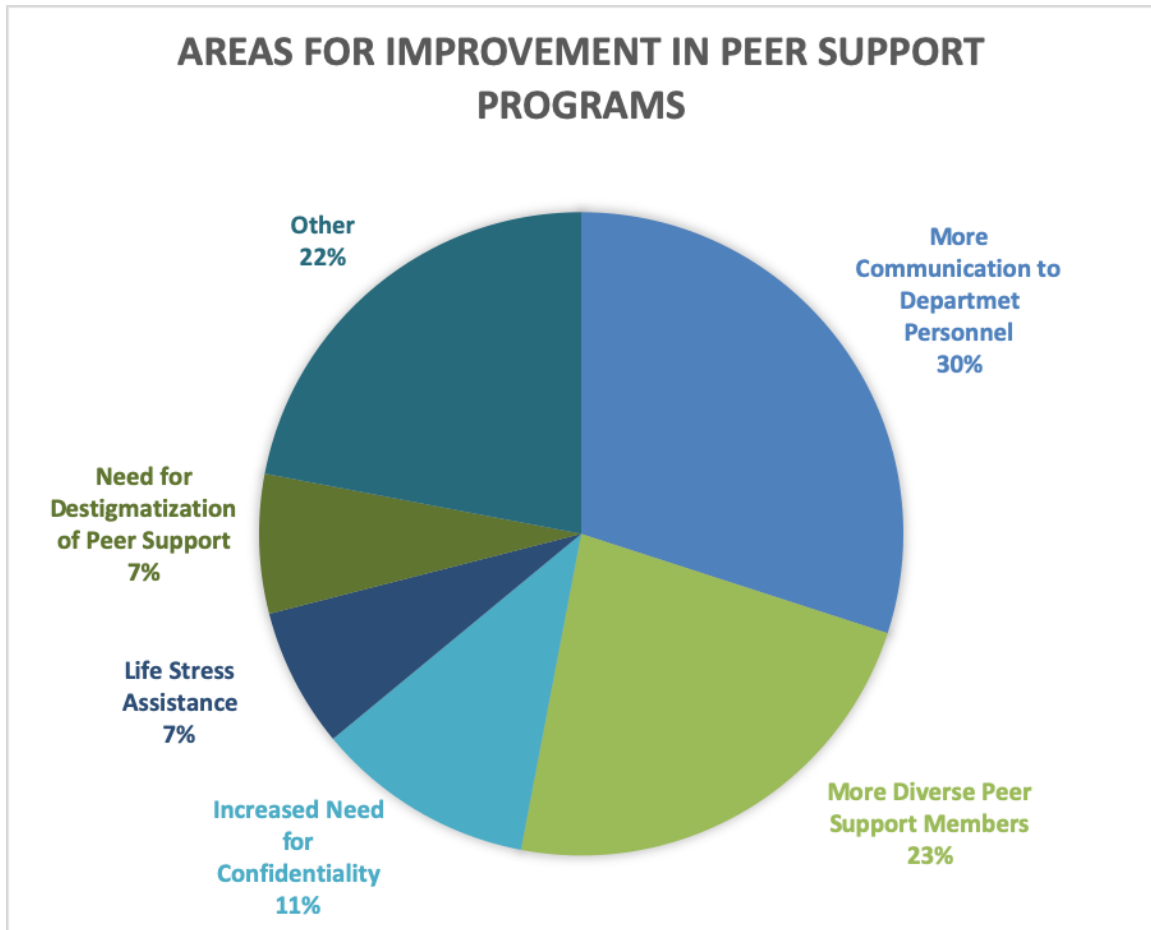


Figure 5. Areas of Improvement

The highest number of responses concern communication to personnel and providing many channels for sending peer support information, such as briefing trainings, videos, and overall better marketing within the department. One participant stated, “LET MORE PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT IT. ADVERTISE [sic] IT MORE.” Another participant stated:

I think to further improve the peer support program at our agency, our department could better educate new officers on the program and what services they provide. In some cases officer(s), especially younger officers are unaware of the peer support team’s role until they are involved in a critical incident. I also think that many officers are unaware of the wide variety of services that are available outside the realm of critical incidents (i.e. job stress, family therapy, etc.).

Educating the department by marketing the program, as seen in the aforementioned comments, may increase the use of peer support within an agency. Likewise, participants emphasize the need to expand peer support services by diversifying the personnel on the team and opening it up to different workgroups in the department.

Additionally, participants disclosed that confidentiality as an area that needs improvement. One participant voiced this concern, “More confidentiality amongst [sic] the group.” Another response:

Confidentiality is a must. Some of the people in the peer support program an [sic] likely well meaning [sic] people. Unfortunately, my experiences in this profession prohibit me from reaching out for assistance to people I only know from a professional setting. Being a cop does not automatically make you a good person.

Moreover, participants imagine that having a peer support team that reaches out to officers on a proactive basis and converses about family issues or daily stresses would be extremely helpful and appreciated. One participant stated, “Better marketing and more proactive involvement so people feel more comfortable reaching out, especially my older generation who was not brought up in a time where peer support existed.” Such actions provide officers outlets for everyday types of personal stressors, such as finances, marriage problems, and other daily issues that arise and not just for critical incidents or police work.

The final area of improvement is the need to reduce the stigma surrounding the use of any type of mental health assistance the employee wants. One participant disclosed a desire to see an, “Increased efforts to destigmatize the idea of asking for help as a police officer.” Another participant’s response reinforced the need to destigmatize, “We need to change the stigma associated with asking for help.” These powerful statements validate the need to destigmatize mental health within law enforcement.

Interestingly, confidentiality and stigma appear as areas of strength and needed improvement, and this result lacks a definitive answer, as the employing agencies’ respective programs may influence it.

## **B. CONCLUSION**

Retaining employees affects morale, and if each employee told one other person about how peer support was helpful, this in and of itself would support keeping or improving upon a current peer support program. These findings support this conclusion and may help agency leaders recruit and retain staff. At a time when law enforcement is struggling to recruit new personnel effectively, an agency head should do everything possible to retain the current employees in whom they have already invested.

The stark difference between recruitment and retention suggests that additional education, training, and personal testimonials about the peer support program should be employed to recruit new and lateral officers. An explanation of the program may set one agency apart from another in the recruitment and hiring process. The gender gap that emerged between men and women in both recruitment and retention provides a path forward to enhance the recruitment of women. Receiving peer support information in the recruitment process may cause a potential employee to join an agency.

Potential future education within the department could entail a peer support program marketing plan. Specifically targeting women, who overwhelmingly desire peer support, as confirmed in the survey, would assist agencies in seeking a diverse workforce. As seen in some of the responses, this advertising would allow the department to detail the exact services offered. Once provided to personnel, I argue that such formal communication would demystify and reduce the stigma behind peer support.

## **IV. INTERVIEW RESULTS**

This chapter presents the results of personal interviews with the three clinicians who work with law enforcement on mental health issues, including peer support. These three SMEs agree on the need to “normalize mental health” in law enforcement. This sentiment also coincides with some of the open-ended responses in the survey.

Additionally, all the interviewees infer that the vilification of law enforcement in social media and society today has increased officers’ levels of stress. For this reason, among others, the SMEs endorse peer support as the bridge for officers to obtain the needed mental health professional assistance in their times of need, for police personnel, as well as other front-line workers and first responders. The original interviews conducted for this thesis appear in summary form in this chapter, and the interviewees are cited only by initials. All direct quotations come from these interviews.

### **A. INTERVIEWEE AA’S VIEWS**

I conducted the first in-person interview with AA at her office in Los Angeles, California. AA is a police psychologist and has a doctorate in clinical psychology. She is board certified in police and public safety psychology. She has been in the field of peer support for more than 20 years and started her career as a pre-doctoral intern at the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department. AA contends peer support is just as important as other training provided to officers—for example, shooting, driving, and legal updates—and this training must be delivered on an ongoing basis to reinforce the idea that seeking mental health assistance is normal in a law enforcement career.

I asked AA whether she believed a peer support program benefits all police personnel, sworn and professional staff. She concludes that the law enforcement environment is very stressful; people begin to build up stressors, for example, bureaucratic stress, post-traumatic stress, and critical-incident stress. To function amid the pressure, they (officers or employees) suppress their feelings, which, over time, creates a “recipe for disaster” and may lead to mental health issues.

AA opines that today's police officers experience more stress because of the media and the increasing level of scrutiny that attends any major incident, and many minor ones, as well. She comments that today's officers have to contend with social media overexposure and the vilification of law enforcement with each and every action being videotaped, or audio recorded, which fuels criticism from all quarters. According to AA, officers from 20–25 years ago did not have the same level of attention.

Interestingly, AA adds, "Bureaucratic stress most definitely has been more stressful than what happens out on the street." The reason, she says, begins with law enforcement's environment with its culture that acts "like a family." As a consequence, members tend to rely on the other people within law enforcement to provide support. If, for example, someone is passed up for promotion or feeling being passed over, this rejection cuts deeper than, say, even very negative media surveillance; an external voice, after all. Officers more or less assume that public attention will not always be favorable or pleasant, but it is part of the job. The bureaucratic stress, on the other hand, is not anticipated until an officer is well into the career. I asked AA if she finds a build-up of the bureaucratic stress, just as cumulative stress results from the day-to-day stress. AA responded, "I do, yeah of course." AA trusts that mental health services and resources offer a way to combat such cumulative stress, and a peer support program has a major role to play in this connection.

How does a peer support program combat stress? According to AA, immediate intervention, assistance in obtaining medical resources, decreasing "hyper-vigilance," and the shift in accepting assistance, has destigmatized the need for mental health assistance. AA explained how peer support programs often reach out to families and significant others, as the stresses of the job often follow officers home. AA comments that at one point in time, kids felt proud to have a parent in law enforcement, but now she finds that kids are being ridiculed or shamed by their peers because their parents are police officers, which thus causes stress for the parent officer and the child.

AA outlines three key factors for peer support programs: assisting in debriefings of critical incidents, providing the feeling of or a sense of support for personnel, and educating through experience how cumulative events in law enforcement can affect an

officer's life. These factors help build a department's credibility and pave the way for officer well-being. To AA, a peer support program aims to change the culture in law enforcement, and ultimately educating personnel about mental health, managing stress, teaching peers how to identify red flags or preventing substance abuse, and creating an opportunity for support. Even if the peer's principal activity directs the person to a formal support program or a psychologist's office, the connection to a fellow officer or employee is vital. AA finds it helpful to have peer support members make the introduction followed by others within the agency who "sign off" on the "new" person, rather than hoping that the outside professional and the treatment offered somehow is accepted. Such an insider introduction helps facilitate the delivery of any future services the officer may need. Additionally, AA submits that the younger officers look to the older officers or their field training officers to demystify peer support; this shift has taken place over the last several years and has become the culture within agencies, but much progress remains to be made.

AA opines that most departments should have a police psychologist, EAPs, access to chaplains, and a peer support program to enhance an overall wellness program. AA reiterates that a police psychologist may help the officers through the mental injuries they have and advises whether officers may need time off from work, guides officers toward specific services, and provides worker's compensation information to the employees in need. This multi-prong approach helps establish a more in-depth wellness program within the agency and delivers all services privately with complete confidentiality.

AA reveals that peer support programs entail some fairly intensive and consistent training. The departments select a group of peer supporters and then AA or another professional delivers a three-day training to the designated peer support personnel. She then conducts a quarterly training, and provides assistance for critical incidents, marital issues, and various other topics.

AA has established programs in several different agencies and then brought leaders from these agencies in to stand up a regional program within the County of Los Angeles. She offered this type of program to other professionals in the field and provided a network to be able to offer peer support to provide it countywide, similar to a mutual

aid program.<sup>58</sup> If an agency did not have a peer support program but called for emotional mutual aid, this request marked the beginning of the agency observing firsthand how a peer support program works, and often these agencies started their own peer support programs as a result of their own needs. AA contends that California law enforcement is leading the country in peer support programs.

AA confirms that peer support programs must start from the top down with the support and commitment of the agency's chief to maintain credibility, stability, and sustainability. AA concludes the "buy-off" by an agency usually comes down to "credibility." AA established credibility in her early career training while conducting research with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and this exposure set her on a career path of helping law enforcement officers. Credibility within the law enforcement family is the most important aspect of starting a peer support program that persists.

In the end, AA asserts peer support and mental health assistance must be normalized in the field of law enforcement, as a practice and as a funding priority. Indeed, funding for this type of program poses a challenge because of the lack of data to track results or uses that may help determine whether the program actually works. AA also believes funding often prevents starting a peer support program but thinks this problem can be overcome by showcasing peer support successes from neighboring agencies. AA also declares that mental health services cost money, not least because policing is a job where people are "seriously damaged." AA contends that agencies spend so much time teaching officers to shoot, drive, and master the mechanics of the job, but mental health is the "last thing on the list." According to AA, agencies must take better care of their officers and provide services to assist them, and peer support programs offer a level of guidance to needed resources without overreaching in the level of services provided.

I asked AA for an example of peer support successes and failures. On the plus side, she asserts she has "watched peer support programs keep someone from committing

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<sup>58</sup> Mutual aid is the term used when agencies assist one another when they need additional personnel for an event. In this context, mutual aid employs peer support personnel from another agency.

suicide.” In AA’s experience, the biggest failure in a peer support team is the loss of confidentiality by either an administrator or a team member. AA has seen peer support programs fail or lose credibility because of the loss of confidentiality. As mentioned in the survey results, confidentiality is something that each agency has to secure within the program.

According to AA, having some type of ongoing mandated mental health, officer resiliency, wellness classes, and training on an annual or biannual basis can enhance officer wellness and resiliency. Annual wellness check-ups and a wellness “down room” (space to be able to go immediately to decompress from a critical incident) help officers cope with their many stressors.

AA was asked whether she was aware of a peer support team being used as a recruitment tool for new officers joining law enforcement. She reinforced the idea of it as a good tool, but she is not aware of it being used by a department in that capacity. She envisions that if she were a new or prospective officer and noticed that an agency had a peer support program, then she would view the agency as taking care of their people. As far as retention is concerned, AA maintains that peer support is a great retention tool and when officers see their peers seeking assistance from the peer support program, it gives credibility not only to the program, but also to the department.

## **B. INTERVIEWEE BB’S VIEWS**

I conducted the second in-person interview at BB’s office in San Bernardino, California. BB has a doctorate in clinical psychology and has been the Director of the Counseling Team International since 1985. She also is the wife of a retired deputy sheriff. She has an extensive background and has attended several Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) training courses, and has taught courses for the FBI and the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department. She first became involved in peer support when approached in 1989 by a Deputy Chief in an agency in southern California who asked BB to read an article about peer support. He signed her up for a training class at the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department in 1990. She has been helping law enforcement personnel—and helping them help themselves—ever since.

BB endorses peer support as a way of “paying it forward” in law enforcement, as well as helping each other through a very trying career. To be sure, she said, peer support aims to decrease sick time, provide emotion support, and prevent anger issues that may lead to use of force in the field. Most importantly, according to BB, peer support must be the immediate assistance to guide employees to additional resources in their times of need.

BB observes that law enforcement officers are willing to help total strangers every day at work, but are reluctant to seek such help because they do not want peers to label or stigmatize them for seeking help. BB explains the stigma on both sides, both the receiver of peer support and the provider of peer support, may be subject to such stigma. She described her experience that many officers fear showing emotion or shedding a tear. BB argues officers should, “Exercise those tear ducts, that is why they gave them to us!”

BB emphasizes that peer support is the “conduit” to provide someone the assistance or professional help needed; it is not intended as the “end all be all” for the officer. That is, the peer is not supposed to absorb the stresses and issues time after time, without a referral to mental health professionals. On the one hand, such a peer support arrangement would keep an officer in need away from vital professional help. By the same token, the advising peer also runs the risk of emotional overload. As BB would advise a prospective peer, “Don’t marry [the help-seeking member], because they are going to drain you. We do not want peer supporters to get burnt out from helping too much.” On the other hand, BB declares that fellow employees can see changes in people they work with on a daily basis; by contrast, a mental health professional will not have such a baseline upon meeting the employees for the first time. In other words, the peer’s knowledge helps to mark when employees have changed their behavior and can guide the employees to seeking professional assistance.

According to BB, a peer’s role involves three steps: “listen, access, and refer”; BB calls this process “The Peer Support Triad.” A successful wellness program, according to BB, requires peer support, chaplains, and mental health professionals all working together. BB also mentions that peer support programs have recently added canines to the programs, and this new program has become a fourth option in some agencies.

BB concedes that peer support does not work for everyone, as some officers do not want to talk to members of their own department whom they pass in the hall or encounter in a briefing setting. She also does not credit peer support with being able to stop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because the disorder involves not just one factor and is not usually diagnosed immediately, anyway. However, she sees peer support as “social support” that can assist people in receiving the type of assistance needed for their specific issues. (She highlights how peer support helps with officers’ cumulative stress, whether the stress comes from within the agency or from everyday life events.) Peer support is used in both on and off-duty times of need and in such personal matters as marriage and financial situations. Moreover, she underscores how now, with law enforcement under so much critical scrutiny, today’s officers have the highest levels of need ever for peer support programs

BB asserts peer support can help both sworn and professional staff, but the peer supporter must be a real peer in terms of workgroups; in other words, an officer should be peer support for an officer involved in a shooting, not a professional staff member. The “like-minded” employee may be able to provide insight that someone from another workgroup may not be capable of providing.

BB has launched more than 100 peer support programs, both inside and outside of California. I asked BB how she gained credibility for peer support programs. She summarizes by saying, “You need the right people on the bus!” That is, leadership must hand pick the people on the team and not force or assign the team members. BB explains that having a nomination process along with an oral board examination has been the best type of system for selecting peer support members. BB concurs with AA that funding can be a barrier to starting a peer support program. The real threshold problem for BB, however, remains the lack of knowledge on the part of organizational leadership. Of the bottom line of officer wellness, BB warns, “You pay now, or you pay later.” I took this point to mean the department may open themselves up to more liability if officers harm someone in the course of their jobs, and then the agency pays out in a civil claim or worse, the officers may take their own lives. Personnel will leave the job after years of

training and experience. In any such scenario, the impact on the agency will last for a long time.

I asked BB to discuss the successes and failures of peer support programs. BB explains the best type of programs starts with a selection process, provides training to the members, meets once a month, and brings in mental health professionals to provide short training sessions to ensure the peer support team does not overstep its boundaries. This model mirrors AA's description of successful programs. BB provides an example of an agency with 1,000 employees that had been holding peer support meetings monthly for more than 22 years. She stated this program's success came from its consistent training and in-person meetings throughout the years. BB attributes the most common reasons for a program's failure to an agency's administration requiring personnel to be on the team, when the team does not conduct training, when fellow employees do not use the team, or when certain peer support team members are over used and become burnt out.

BB and I discussed whether she knew of peer support being used in the recruitment or hiring process of new employees. BB has not heard of having peer support as a recruitment tool and she was uncertain whether any agencies use peer support in their hiring process. She noted that if an officer were seeking to move laterally to another agency, all other things being equal, an existing peer support program would signal that the "chief cares about his people."<sup>59</sup>

The same dynamic applies to retention, according to BB. She articulates the result of peer support, "I believe peer support members can help keep officers working and getting an officer the help they need at a time of crisis." BB also agrees with AA that organizational stress causes the greatest amount of stress for officers during their careers. In BB's opinion, internal stress and agency politics especially affect the higher levels of management and administration within an organization. BB pronounces officers with 5–20 years of experience most often use peer support programs, although the range is broad and depends on many factors, both on the job and in the officers' personal lives.

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<sup>59</sup> "Lateral" in this context is when an officer moves from one agency to another agency.

She further argues peer support members should be used with personnel who have already retired. When officers retire, without preparation, they transition from having “important jobs” to being done, all in one day. Policing is not the type of job that officers can just turn off; BB reports that officers need to undergo a process of decompressing from this type of career to assimilate safely back into civilian life. BB communicates that peer support members should be reaching out to the retired members and help with the retirement transition, but not too many agencies provide that level of peer support.

### **C. INTERVIEWEE CC’S VIEWS**

The third and final interview took place at CC’s office in Orange County, California. CC has a doctorate in psychology and has worked in the field of crisis and trauma for more than 20 years. She has been working with law enforcement agencies throughout Orange County for more than 10 years; during this time, she has been conducting critical incident debriefs and supporting peer support programs. Additionally, she has conducted critical incident debriefs with fire departments in Orange County. CC created a four-hour class to provide officers specific trauma training that taught them how they can be supportive to their peers. As a result of this course, various police departments approached CC to start peer support programs.

CC finds that both sworn and professional staff benefit from peer support as long as the culture of the department reflects a “peer support mindset or philosophy.” She adds that professional staff, meaning employees who are not sworn police officers, oftentimes feel like it is an “us versus them” standoff vis-à-vis the sworn personnel or that the civilian staff is somehow “less important.” CC strives to communicate the message of peer support for the entire department. For one thing, she conveys the idea of the ripple effect of a critical incident that may affect dispatchers, crime scene investigators, or civilian investigators. In other words, a traumatic incident or scene likely affects more agency personnel than the first officers who report it.

When asked about the most frequent users of peer support, CC posits, “It totally depends and oftentimes is incident-driven, either in their personal life or professional

life.” In other words, seeking help through peer support is less a matter of years-on-the-job than a result of today’s events.

According to CC, an aspect of peer support is helping officers deal with cumulative stress. Peer support helps officers by creating a safe place to receive resources and encouragement while providing help immediately following a crisis or trauma. She underscores the need for immediate validation of employees’ feelings helps with their normalization. Although she does not specifically advocate that police personnel exercise their tear ducts, CC insists that feelings are the “F-word” in law enforcement; for this reason, she prefers talking about reactions and the best way to communicate within the culture of law enforcement, not “feelings.” CC speaks about how law enforcement officers cover their feelings because “others need you to be strong so you don’t get to be human, at least not until your uniform comes off.”

I asked CC how peer support can assist with an officer who may be experiencing PTSD. CC outlines three areas that peer support may help with: (1) provide outreach mechanisms to provide support the employees in need, (2) be available to converse with the employees and determine what resources are needed, and (3) conduct critical incident debriefs with mental health professionals. CC acknowledges, “there is no quick fix for PTSD,” but peer support can help guide the affected officers toward mental health professionals.

CC concurs that organizational or bureaucratic stress causes a higher level of stress, so intangibles like being passed over for promotion, personality differences, and leadership styles can accumulate in a particularly harmful way. She comments that people in general, as well as law enforcement employees in particular, want to be heard and feel like they have leaders who listen.

CC claims that peer support acts as a safety net for personnel to feel safe and ensures employees do not feel alone. Furthermore, the primary reason for peer support is to provide employees with the necessary resources to assist them through a crisis. She articulates the need to have “lifetime fitness” from a mental health standpoint and not just a physical fitness perspective. She also suggests that policies within police departments

must welcome new members and encourage new members to join the peer support team. Additionally, the peer support team should be proactive—going out and talking to personnel regularly—rather than waiting for someone to ask for help.

CC opines that shiftwork and sleep deprivation increase employees' levels of stress. She also verbalizes the central nature of employees' personal lives for seeking peer support. She also expresses the need for department-wide representation to locate those who may have experienced similar types of events to provide true peer guidance to employees in need.

CC comments that the shift in the culture within law enforcement in the last five years has made it possible to achieve a “peer support mentality.” In particular, she disclosed a change in the way people accept, use, and understand peer support programs. In her experience, if the leadership at the top of an agency accepted the need for peer support programs, then the culture within the agency adopted a peer support mentality. We discussed how the chief's support could help in funding this type of program. CC hypothesizes that buy-in for a peer support program from the chief of police outweighs even a lack of funding, not least because if the chief wants the program, then the funding somehow will be allocated for its implementation.

CC offers some clear guidance for overcoming the stigma attached to peer support or seeking any other kind of help. Her first suggestion is not to ask the person, “Do you need peer support?” Rather, have people just show up and start talking; it should be a simple conversation, she claims. More broadly, creating a culture within a department of openness allows for acceptance.

We discussed the need for agencies using peer support to track statistics to justify funding this type of program. CC notes how agencies account for the use of a peer support team, and she pinpoints the biggest challenge as the inability to quantify the numbers or casual use of peer support personnel. She underscores an additional wrinkle. Casual conversations between peer support members and employees oftentimes seem like every day chitchat, but they actually demonstrate peer support at its best, when the two

parties just have a conversation. Nevertheless, how can a peer support program capture such interactions to justify its continuance?

I asked CC to provide examples of successes or failures in peer support programs. As far as failures go, CC judges that if individuals fall through the cracks and no one from peer support reaches out to them in their times of need, then the program (to say nothing of the agency) has failed. More specifically, if someone is off the job on administrative leave and no one talks to the employee, then “that is a failure!” The isolation of this officer is both unnecessary and unhelpful. Another failure she discusses is a breach of confidentiality. Meaning, the failure to maintain someone’s use of peer support or talking about someone who used peer support for services breaches privacy and fails the officer being helped.

CC finds far more successes than failures. She contends that these successes are expressed every day on the ground in the thank you notes or statements of appreciation that peer support members receive from the employees who used the services. CC claims that training within a program is also a success and when peer support members receive training upon entering the program, members realize the need to not only assist others, but also realize their own need to practice good personal mental health.

CC highlights the impact of peer support by saying, “I don’t know of any departments that specifically use peer support as a recruitment tool, but I know once people get hired, they are talking about peer support.” She shares that recruits in academies throughout southern California hear about peer support programs, but at that point, the recruits have completed the hiring process. As far as retention is concerned, CC confirms that if peer support reaches out to someone and directs the employee to needed resources, this outreach helps the officer stay at an agency. CC contends peer support gives the support needed for employees to feel they are not alone and “sometimes that is all the person needs.” She further notes that peer support or trauma support programs signal that, “We care about our people.” Nobody wants to work for a department that says, “suck it up” all the time. Thinking of the officer’s story that leads this thesis, this distinction delineates the “old school mentality” versus the “peer support mentality” or the “officer wellness perspective,” and CC agrees.

We discussed how this type of program would be beneficial to other first responders, for example, fire and medical personnel. CC currently works with fire and medical facilities to provide training on stress and peer support programs. She recently was asked to teach a class on self-care and trauma health to medical professionals at a hospital within Orange County. In this way, other first-responder communities are considering the benefits of peer support.

CC wants law enforcement officers to know that when they experience trauma, they will work through it, even if they will now have a “new normal” as they go through life. Continuing, CC expresses the sentiment, “I want people in this business to know that it is okay to not be okay.” Although peer support programs may or may not have such a motto, CC’s words strongly suggest that the ordinariness of needing help most aptly sums up peer support.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, all three SMEs reiterate the need to “normalize” seeking mental health in law enforcement without stigma; this sentiment also mirrors some of the open-ended responses in the survey. Breaking down the stigma of peer support is a difficult task in a paramilitary organization, but with the insight provided by the SMEs, a shift in the culture provides for becoming a more caring and compassionate agency.

Additionally, all three interviewees argued that organizational or bureaucratic stress cause increased levels of stress in officers; playing an even greater role than the daily duties officers experience in the community. The interviewees fervently believe that law enforcement officers are being vilified in the media and this scrutiny increases officers’ levels of stress. Peer support acts as the “bridge” or “conduit” for officers to obtain the professional mental health needed.

The selected SMEs provided significant insight into peer support programs in not only law enforcement, but also how peer support could be expanded to other front-line workers and first responders involved in critical incidents and trauma. Furthermore, they concur that support from the head of an agency and upper management determines the

success of a peer support program and ensures appropriating the funding needed to execute it effectively.

## **V. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The main research question for this research project was do peer support programs affect recruitment and retention in law enforcement? Research results suggest that peer support programs do influence the retention of officers in a law enforcement career. At the same time, I determined that peer support programs only moderately affect recruitment within law enforcement but have a larger impact on lateral and female officers. In light of these findings, I provide suggestions for future research and lay out the limitations of this research project.

### **A. ANALYSIS**

During the research process, I realized that this project offers agency leaders—particularly those contemplating either instituting or expanding a peer support program—some evidence-based research on which to base their decisions. Such programs may play a role in connection with other staffing goals in a time of high tensions for many police forces.

Interpreting the data gathered from the surveys and personal interviews revealed five main categories of concern: organizational or bureaucratic stress, recruitment, retention, impact of the media, and the need for an officer wellness program. This section reviews each category in turn. This process has confirmed the need to implement an officer wellness program, not only for recruitment and retention, but also for the longevity of officers in this career.

#### **1. Organizational or Bureaucratic Stress**

All three SMEs agree that stress from within the organization is greater than the stresses experienced on the streets during their day-to-day work. The level of stress experienced by officers touches their personal lives and affects their work in complex and cumulative ways. Organizational or bureaucratic stress appears in the literature base; however, all three SMEs surprisingly identified it as a particular issue.

Giving officers mental health training and the resource of a peer support program promotes successful stress management, including the less traumatic but similarly disruptive bureaucratic pressures. The training and peer support program afford officers the opportunity to develop coping skills, which thus allows the agency to retain well-trained, tenured officers with the skills needed to cope with stress throughout their careers. Peer support programs provide options for officers to seek professionals and also speak to fellow officers who can provide insight into department processes and help employees navigate internal politics. Organizational stress may be mitigated if the employees learn how to decrease stress through conversations with a peer support team member. If an agency can lessen organizational or bureaucratic stress by having a peer support program, then the employees have improved mental health and overall officer wellness.

## **2. Recruitment**

The quantitative data and qualitative data both demonstrate that peer support plays little to no role in the recruitment of new officers. Although the SMEs had not seen any use of peer support on fliers or other marketing material for hiring, they all thought it could be an area for further research. The survey results validate that of the SMEs' interviews; however, the recruitment of lateral officers seemed to be promising.

This gap reveals an opportunity for future recruitment material. A robust peer support program may also be an area to focus recruitment directly on a specific gender. As shown in the survey results, many more women than men believe that peer support may enhance recruitment. Although the sample size of female officers is small, this relative representation is consistent with the low numbers of females in the field of law enforcement. More importantly, though the results suggest that departments can and should approach the lifecycle of female officers differently, peer support can help at every step. I was not expecting the significant gender gap in the research related to recruitment.

All three SMEs did say that if a lateral officer saw that an agency had a peer support program that would be interpreted as a level of care from the chief or head of the

agency. This level of care or compassion also was provided as one of the top four strengths in the open-ended questions on the survey. The need to increase the levels of care and compassion within an agency may be achieved by diversifying the workforce and opening lines of communication between peer support team members and employees throughout the agency. Agencies should make conscious efforts to shift the culture within the department to a “peer support mentality.” A culture shift may begin by starting conversations and setting goals. Likewise, conversations reflecting care and compassion mark a culture transition within an agency.

### **3. Retention**

Although the survey results showed some correlations between peer support and retention, the SMEs emphatically endorsed peer support as assisting in officer retention. AA, BB, and CC all provided additional information regarding retention based on their own experiences.

AA’s example of peer support keeping officers from, “killing themselves” demonstrated a profound result. Peer support has been discussed in many different contexts, but the most important one is preventing another officer from committing suicide. I do concur that if peer support prevents a suicide, then it is an absolute win. Saving a life is the ultimate goal and absolute necessity for a peer support program; all other benefits of the program pale in comparison to saving a human life.

Even if the employee who shared the information about peer support had never used peer support, she overwhelmingly either used it or provided information to another employee. This use of the program may or may not influence others from using peer support, but it does educate personnel, person-by-person. The open-ended questions revealed the need for greater education and marketing of peer support programs. This section of the survey surprised me because the desire for more information about peer support illustrates that a shift in the culture in law enforcement is already occurring.

Additionally, providing services for personal issues, such as family, money, the death of a loved one, and many other areas resonated in the survey and in the interviews with the SMEs. Having the participants voice their need for assistance with their private

lives is an area that I thought may be present, and the survey results supporting this idea also pleasantly surprised me. I do believe all the services a peer support program can offer will lead more officers to remain in their agencies.

#### **4. Impact of the Media**

This project did not expressly engage the topic of critical—or disparaging—media and public attention to law enforcement, though I clearly recognized the stressfulness of the situation. The SMEs in their discussion on the topic substantiated this stress. A way to combat this level of stress to officers is to start the discussion within the agency using peer support and explain what officers can expect, which will allow officers to manage their expectations and plan for different scenarios. Peer support programs can assist officers in managing their expectations, and this type of planning may prepare the officers for what may happen as they go through their careers.

#### **B. NEED FOR OFFICER WELLNESS**

This journey has brought many areas of concern for an officer's well-being to the forefront. An important conversation revolved around the absolute need for an officer wellness program in every department. In the officer's story in Chapter II, it seems that if her agency had had a peer support program with which it had responded to the crime scene and assisted officers, then maybe the level of care and compassion needed to make the officer feel cared for would have put her on a path of health recovery immediately following the traumatic event. I believe a peer support program and immediate compassion does make a difference and would have made a difference in the officer's story and road to recovery.

Whether called a peer support program, a trauma support program, or an officer wellness program, every agency across this country needs to evaluate the health and wellness of the officers on the streets seriously. Law enforcement officers need to be a priority not only to their agencies but also to the very communities they have been sworn to serve. Many people try to become officers and realize at some point that this job is not for everyone, but for the officers left behind, they need support, care, and compassion to succeed as officers of the law and human beings.

### **C. LIMITATIONS**

Throughout this research project, several limitations affected the research discovery process. In the middle of this project, the world suffered from a pandemic of COVID-19 with a catastrophic loss of life. Many first responders were tasked with conducting their law enforcement duties in an unprecedented manner. First responders endured stress, illness, changes in job expectations, layoffs, and furloughs. Additionally, due to the extraordinary events of the spring and summer protests, police excessive force incidents, and COVID-19, the response rate for this research project was much lower than anticipated. As a result of these aforementioned circumstances, collecting survey information may have been reduced or ignored by survey recipients. Nonetheless, its results provide a reference point for how peer support programs assist officers throughout their careers.

I stressed the confidentiality of the survey to all participants and provided an option for them to stop the survey whenever they wanted to stop. Due to the hierarchal and para-military nature of such organizations as the police agencies surveyed, however, the participants may have believed their answers would be shared with their respective agencies, which thus limited the number of answers on the open-ended question results.

### **D. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Additional research is needed in the field of peer support, officer resiliency, and overall officer well-being. Agencies with peer support programs need to track and log the program's use and publicize its benefits within the agency. Future studies seeking information at every level in a career may allow for additional outcomes within a program.

Using a broader research base, such as the International Association of Chiefs of Police or the Police Executive Research Forum, may expand the capabilities to obtain survey results. This expanded base may also assist in targeting agencies that do not have peer support programs and opens possibilities for an agency to implement such a program. The policy implications that a peer support program have on an agency are minimal; however, the need for the evolution of culture within a department takes time.

All three SMEs agree on the absolute need for support of this type of program from the top administrators within an agency. Without support from the top, this type of program will not succeed. Additionally, establishing the fiscal platform for a successful peer support program gives the program legitimacy within the department, and as mentioned by CC, sends a message of the “peer support mentality.”

## **E. CONCLUSION**

Law enforcement is constantly changing, and this nation’s law enforcement professionals deserve the best mental health assistance that can assist them through their rigorously long careers. The trauma sustained throughout a career in law enforcement affects many lives, and not just the officers involved in the incident. Anderson, Litzenberger and Plecas’s study confirmed that “factors within the organization and organizational structure that can cause distress include lack of administrative support, the promotion process, inadequate training or equipment, excessive paperwork, intra-departmental politics, and frustrations with the criminal justice system and court leniency” and credited Violanti and Aron’s work.<sup>60</sup> Cumulative stress builds over the years and offering a level of assistance from a peer support program would assist officers in combating the effects of stress throughout their careers. The men and women who put their lives on the line deserve the option of having a formal peer support program to support them through their time of need.

Overall, a peer support program is not only necessary, but I would argue vital, to the level of service officers provide to their communities. Officers cannot help others if they do not first help themselves; peer support programs are a way to provide the help needed for success at home and work. The qualitative and quantitative research provided in this project has contributed to the research and literature base in an effort to bring this valuable topic of peer support in law enforcement to the forefront of police administrators.

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<sup>60</sup> Gregory S. Anderson, Robin Litzenberger, and Darryl Plecas, “Physical Evidence of Police Officer Stress,” *Policing: Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 25, no. 2 (2002): 403; John M. Violanti and Fred Aron, “Police Stressors: Variations in Perception among Police Personnel,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 23, no. 3 (1995): 287–294, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0047-2352\(95\)00012-F](https://doi.org/10.1016/0047-2352(95)00012-F).

## APPENDIX A. SURVEY QUESTIONS

IRB Agency Survey Questions  
Scherer-Cohort 1903/1904

### **Demographics:**

- 1) What is your current rank?
- 2) What is your gender? (1-male, 2-female)
- 3) What is your highest level of education? Add categories (HS diploma, Some college, BA, MA or above)
- 4) How many years have you been a Police Officer?
- 5) How many sworn officers does your department currently have?

**Agency Questions:** For the purposes of this survey Peer Support is defined as the utilization of emotional support or assistance from a peer within your agency.

How often have you utilized the Peer Support Program in your agency?

- \_\_\_ For three or more events since being at my agency
- \_\_\_ For two events since being at my agency
- \_\_\_ For one event since being at my agency
- \_\_\_ Never, I have not had a need
- \_\_\_ To my knowledge my agency does not have a Peer Support Program

For the below listed questions please answer

- 6) Would you recommend peer support to a fellow officer?  
1-Yes, 2-No, 3- Unknown
- 7) Do you believe peer support affects recruitment?  
1-Yes, 2-No, 3- Unknown
- 8) Do you believe peer support affects retention?  
1-Yes, 2-No, 3- Unknown
- 9) Have you known officers who left the department due to a lack of peer support?  
1-Yes, 2-No
- 10) Are you considering leaving the agency because of a lack of peer support?  
1-Yes, 2-No, 3- Unknown
- 11) Do you believe recruitment is enhanced by a peer support program?  
1-Yes, 2-No, 3- Unknown
- 12) Do you believe management supports you by having a peer support program?  
1-Yes, 2-No, 3- Unknown

### **Peer Support Program:**

For the following questions please rate the level of helpfulness using the scale below:  
1-Not Helpful, 2-Somewhat Helpful, 3-Helpful, 4-Very Helpful, 5-Not Applicable

- 13) Using the peer support program for debriefs?
- 14) Using the peer support program for personal assistance after critical/traumatic incidents? (Critical/traumatic Incidents are defined events that do not happen very often, but when they do, are serious and severe in nature)
- 15) Using the peer support program for on the job and day-to-day stressors of the career?
- 16) Using the peer support program for personal needs within your family environment such as a death of a family member, financial, marital, scheduling, work life balance or any other family issues?
- 17) Overall please rate your agencies peer support program's level of helpfulness?

**Recruitment and Retention:**

For the following questions please rate the level of helpfulness using the scale below:

1-Not Helpful, 2-Somewhat Helpful, 3-Helpful, 4-Very Helpful, 5-Not Applicable

- 18) To what extent do you believe your agencies peer support program helps in the recruitment of new officers?
- 19) To what extent do you believe your agencies peer support program helps in the recruitment of lateral officers?
- 20) To what extent do you believe your agencies peer support program helps in the retention of officers?
- 21) Has your agencies peer support program helped you stay in the law enforcement career?

**Open ended questions:**

- 22) What are the general strengths of the peer support program in your agency?
- 23) What changes could be made to the peer support program in your agency to help it better meet your needs?

## **APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **IRB Interview Questions Scherer Cohort 1903/1904**

1. Can you please tell me your qualifications and title?
2. How long have you been involved in peer support or similar types of programs?
3. How did you first begin in the field of peer support for law enforcement?
4. Do you believe a peer support program benefits all police personnel? Sworn and professional staff?
5. What is the goal of a peer support program?
6. Have you ever started a peer support program from the ground up?
7. How did you get the program established and gain credibility within the program?
8. Do you see funding or lack of resources as a barrier for agencies starting and expanding peer support programs?
9. Can you give me examples of successes and failures?
10. Do you know if agencies use peer support as a recruitment tool? How?
11. Do you believe agencies use peer support as a retention tool? How?
12. How does this type of program help officers combat cumulative stress?
13. How does this type of program help officers combat PTSD?
14. Do you see officers using peer support for personal reasons? Marital, financial, etc.?
15. When do you see officers using this program, as new officers (1-5 years) or as seasoned officers (5+ years)?
16. Do you think this kind of program can be used in other first responder areas, such as fire or medical personnel?
17. Do you assist those types of programs too?
18. How do you deal with the stigma of seeking peer support assistance?
19. In your opinion does officer stress come more from external day to day calls for service or internal organization inequities, such as lack of promotion, politics, feeling unsupported? How do you think this can be combated to assist in reducing officer stress?
20. Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?

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## **APPENDIX C. RESEARCH PROTOCOL**

Consent for the survey participants appeared in the on-line survey questionnaire itself. Participation in the on-line survey was completely voluntary, and the participants had the opportunity to stop the survey at any point during the process.

After the initial on-line survey was sent out, all sworn personnel received a reminder email 24 days later requesting their requesting participation. The non-sworn administrator also sent out the reminder email to participants, as previously mentioned, so the participants could perceive the process was completely voluntary and anonymous. The survey was administered by Lime Survey.

The interview participants had to sign a copy of the consent form conferring the rights to audio record and cite the participant in this research project. See appendix D for a copy of the interview participant consent forms. All personal interviews were conducted in-person at the participant's location of choice. All participants agreed to be recorded and cited for this research project. Data analysis was conducted by using JMP Pro 15.0, SPSS (version 26), and Excel.

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## APPENDIX D. CONSENT

### Naval Postgraduate School Consent to Participate in Research

**Introduction.** You are invited to participate in a research study entitled, “Peer Support in Law Enforcement.” The purpose of the research is to evaluate how peer support programs are utilized in law enforcement agencies and do they contribute to recruitment and retention.

- 1) Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled, and you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you otherwise would be entitled.
- 2) Breach of confidentiality is a possible risk.
- 3) The prospective subject will not benefit from this study.
- 4) There is no direct benefit to you for participating in the research
- 5) The alternative to participating in the research is to not participate

**Procedures.** Participants in this study will be asked to answer questions in their field of expertise as they relate to peer support.

1. Each Participant will be requested to answer 24 questions in their field of expertise related to the peer support processes. The interview is expected to take 45-60 minutes to complete. If a follow-up interview is requested, it will last no more than 20-30 minutes.
2. A maximum of 3 participants will be asked to participate in the interview portion of the study.
3. All participants that are interviewed in-person, over the phone or virtually will be audio recorded with approval by the participant. The purpose of the audio recordings is so that the researchers can more easily review and better comprehend what was stated during the interviews. If the subject declines to being audio recorded, the alternative is for investigators to take notes in real time.  
☐ I consent to being audio recorded.  
☐ I do not consent to being audio recorded.

**Location.** The interviews will take place over the phone, in-person, or virtually at a location and time of the participants choosing. Participants may answer the interview questions via in-person interview or via phone interview at a place and time desired by the participant.

**Cost.** There is no cost to participate in this research study.

**Compensation for Participation.** No tangible compensation will be given.

**Confidentiality & Privacy Act.** Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by law. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. All data and forms collected will be stored on a secure NPS server. All consent forms will be scanned and save on the NPS secure server and hard copies destroyed. At completion of research, data will be de-identified and stored the Principle Investigator on the NPS secure server.

Only the researchers and principle investigator will have access to the information. Only participant's name, position, telephone number will be collected and will be used for scheduling participation.

If you consent to be identified by name in this study, any reference to or quote by you will be published in the final research finding only after your review and approval. If you do not agree, then you will be identified broadly by discipline and/or rank, (for example, "fire chief").

☐ I consent to be identified by name in this research study.

☐ I do not consent to be identified by name in this research study.

**Points of Contact.** If you have any questions or comments about the research, or you experience an injury or have questions about any discomforts that you experience while taking part in this study please contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Carolyn Halladay. Questions about your rights as a research subject or any other concerns may be addressed to the Navy Postgraduate School IRB Chair, Dr. Larry Shattuck, 831-656-2473, lgshattu@nps.edu.

**Statement of Consent.** I have read the information provided above. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and all the questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been provided a copy of this form for my records and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that by agreeing to participate in this research and signing this form, I do not waive any of my legal rights.

---

Signature of Participant

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Date

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