

Reflections on Leading in Challenging Times

By Cherie Castellano, CSW, LPC, AAETS

The aftermath residual effects of the stress of a global pandemic and nationwide protests about police misconduct has more cops reaching out for help and leaders are rising to foster Officer Wellness in New Jersey.

At Cop2Cop we have noted recent increases in calls, requests for training and prevention services and most significantly requests for our crisis response services in the aftermath of trauma and critical incidents. Police Chiefs throughout New Jersey have informed this increase as officials because you have worked to reduce the stigma of asking for help. You're saying, "make the call" which has long lasting impact unknown to most due to our strict confidentiality guidelines. Often that initial Cop2Cop call becomes ongoing peer support calls with multiple conversations with only a small fraction of the callers discussing the threat of suicide.

What is clear during these Cop2Cop calls is that cops are undoubtedly under more pressure in the wake of the pandemic and protests about the police.

We have heard from officers about violence at protests, and feeling threatened, isolated in their communities and concerned about their families and their futures. Officers have reported anxiety, grief, loss, and trauma exposure more than ever before. Many officers struggle with serving their communities committed to protect and serve while feeling "disheartened and sad" about the scrutiny and judgment they face daily.

It doesn't help that police protests follow years of working under the threat of the pandemic, when some officers experienced illness, loss and family stress all while in the service to others.

The community embracing officers is a big part of their job satisfaction and when that connection is not there, they're feeling it.

Although Cop2Cop is mainly for New Jersey officers, we receive calls from across the country. Interactions increased following the declaration of the pandemic as well as the George Floyd case events.

Most Americans do not have high confidence in police, according to a Gallup poll. The 48% of people who expressed having "quite a lot" or "a great deal" of confidence in law enforcement was the lowest share in 27 years, and the decline was even more pronounced among black adults, fewer than a fifth of who reported high confidence.

"There is no question that this is a difficult time for police officers, who are facing new challenges and risks from the COVID crisis, while simultaneously facing a crisis of trust because of "unjustified deadly force" in other cities," stated Attorney General Gurbir Grewal as he launched the New Jersey Resilience officer training directive.

After three years of success our Cop2Cop professional peer counselors and licensed clinicians continue to partner to mentor and support the Resilience program peers (RPO's) who are trainers, not mental health professionals. We staff a RPO helpline with professional peers and licensed clinicians designed exclusively to respond to the needs of the 700 plus RPO's in New Jersey who may find themselves facing an officer in distress or coping with real mental health or addiction challenges from the officers they train in resilience skills. Many call Cop2Cop directly for a handoff but the new RPO helpline offers them consultation and guidance.

Cop2Cop offers our national best practice model peer support services as part of our Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care National Center for Peer Support serving a variety of high risk first responders, military, and caregiver populations. Although Cop2Cop is legislated by law and funded annually, we have not had an increase in funds in 23 years. Based on our huge service demand increase and 23 years of service at Cop2Cop, I recently offered testimony at a budget hearing sharing statistics and outcomes to request additional funding for FY 24. The increased funds will be utilized to hire more peer and clinical staff to be "live" 24/7 and to respond to increased crisis response requests without depleting the Cop2Cop helpline staff resources.

As leaders you recognize in challenging times you need to maximize your toolkit for Officer Wellness. Today include in your toolkit the access to Resilience Training (RPO's) to build strength, use Cop2Cop or your EAP to offer culturally competent peer support and mental health services, and in the aftermath of a crisis or critical event access Critical Incident Stress Management teams like Cop2Cop, EAP, Community or Union resources. If all else fails, perhaps explore the NJ Police Chaplains Association and keep the faith. Thank you for shining in the darkness we face in these challenging times.

Cop2Cop 1-866-267-2267
RPO Helpline 1-833-486-5776