



## National Sheriffs' Association Psychological Services Board

### **Tips From Peer Supporters About Navigating The COVID-19 Crisis**

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This has been a March to remember. In three weeks Covid-19 has changed many aspects of our way of life. “Social distancing,” “flatten the curve,” “safer at home,” and many other catchphrases have entered our lexicon. We are watching as tents and containment zones are being put up outside hospitals, our government is sounding the alarm; all while many members of our society fail to heed the warnings of public officials, healthcare workers, and the scientists who are working non-stop to confront this pandemic. And, we in law enforcement continue to do our jobs while faced with a shortage of supplies and an uncertainty of what is to come. This emergency isn't like past emergencies. This is not a riot (yet), an active shooter, a terrorist attack or even a natural disaster. This is new, and this emergency is widespread with seemingly no end in sight. Covid-19 has certainly caused officer stress to increase at work and at home, and it is our job as peer supporters to help our partners manage stress that will certainly be cumulative as this crisis progresses.

Many officers are stressed. Parents are homeschooling their children suddenly, elderly family members are being cared for and self-quarantining, and many departments have gone to emergency scheduling. Spouses are also on emergency scheduling or may have been laid off from work. The future is murky for many people right now and for some it is just too much.

You know your department best and there are many ways to keep officer morale high during difficult times. Your peer support team should develop a unified message and have a plan to assist officers coping with the many issues related to Covid-19 that are foreseeable:

- Overwork and burnout
- Fear of bringing the virus home
- Family issues
- Personal safety
- Petty calls (neighbors calling on each other for failure to socially distance)
- Loss of income
- Loss of a friend, family member, or coworker

Whether your department has a peer support program or not, you can help officers by taking simple steps to make their days at work easier and helping them continue to serve their communities even as the services provided continue to change:

- Remind officers of the available Employee Assistance Programs
  - Make sure your officers know who your peer supporters are and how to contact them
  - Assist officers with locating available family counseling
  - Look for opportunities to get officers involved in helping our communities; i.e. select a restaurant to support as a team, go on a bear hunt while patrolling neighborhoods, etc.
  - Develop a mindfulness routine at work and implement it
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- Continue positive messaging and work on “nudging” officers to follow the same social distancing and other protocols established for the public
- Be sure officers know their concerns are heard

Like most things in life, we will get through this crisis together. Make sure as a peer supporter your message remains honest, positive, and realistic, and continue to build trust within your department. Finally, don't forget to take care of your own needs and set the example your peers need. This crisis has touched us all, and although there is so much out of our control right now, we can continue to focus on the wellbeing of our partners and our communities. And finally, please don't forget, a simple, “How are you holding up?” can go a long way.

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During this unprecedented time, getting information out is important for public and department staff safety. The communication to the public, as well as staff, should be professional, factual, timely and frequent. This will help reduce stress, improve compliance and morale, and de-escalate frustrations for all. Here are a couple of ways to get information out to your departments and the public that seem to work the best, in my opinion.

### **How to message department personnel**

In this digital age, there are a lot of different ways to get information out quickly. Most of the agencies I work with are having good luck using the app WHATSAPP. It is an end to end encrypted app. A group can be set up and information, photos and documents can be sent out to all members in the group. The media, photos, links and documents are saved and easily accessible to all members of the group at any time. Members can be easily added or removed. Groups can be set up so that only administrators can send out messages and the group members cannot respond. This can be an asset to small and large departments in the dissemination of timely information sharing.

### **How to get information to the public**

For the public, any of the large social media sites will work. A linked account with Facebook, Instagram and Twitter would be a good place to get info out to the public in addition to the department's website. To ease fears and reduce stress, the information should be professional, accurate, timely, often and with as much explanation as possible without jeopardizing tactics or ongoing investigations. The more professional and business-like we can be, the more the public will perceive control of situations and the leadership your department represents in the community. If your department wishes to put out humorous or any other feel good information, that should be done in a different place. This will help keep the important news in one place without clutter or distraction. I have found it works best if only a few people oversee updating social media. This helps keep the message consistent and focused.

### **How to de-escalate**

The public and department personnel are in the same boat on this one, people want to be heard. We all have fears and concerns in uncertain times. Whenever possible, outside of a safety concern situation, we should take some time and listen to the people. They want to tell you the things they are seeing, feeling and fearing. Most of us feel better after having someone listen to us, especially when that someone is in charge and is seen as a community leader and protector. We do not have to have the answers. We just need to listen and have empathy.

Wishing you all the best during these trying times.

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