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Healing the badge: Program helps police cope with trauma

By John Simerman
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CONTRA COSTA, Calif. — He smiles now, with earnest, gleaming eyes, but Joseph Banuelos easily recalls standing in his yard two years ago, shooting rounds into the grass and thrusting a gun in his mouth.

A state drug agent who had worked in West Contra Costa, buying undercover on the same Richmond streets where he grew up, Banuelos was arrested twice over a weekend for driving drunk, he said. A year earlier, he had blown a 0.26 on a breathalyzer — more than three times the legal limit.

He had screwed up at work and his days as a law enforcement official would soon end. Worse, the images of past calls haunted him:

Turning a corner and seeing a 16-year-old boy who had shot himself in the head "looking at me, and as God is my witness I thought I heard him say, 'Mom, please help.'"

The bullet that hit a 12-year-old, with Banuelos unable to move as rifle shots flew and the father pleaded for help as the boy bled out in his arms.

That triple murder-suicide in Novato.

"I have this uncanny way of being involved with head shots," said Banuelos, 44. "There was a lot of them."

When he finally got help, it came through a little-known retreat in the west Marin County woods, a discreet program set up by law enforcement officials for police, firefighters and other "first responders" who suffer post-traumatic stress, deep depression and other symptoms stemming from what they see or do on the job.

In a redwood-paneled room with a picturesque lake view, clinicians and peer counselors guide them over six intensive days to unravel the kind of trauma they cannot share with co-workers or bosses, much less therapists or general support groups.

Modeled after a program in Boston, the [West Coast Post-Trauma Retreat](#) is one of just two residential treatment programs in the world for first responders.

Lately, its leaders say they see more people with military service — police officers who were deployed as Reserves, for instance, or soldiers who return home to jobs in law enforcement. Focus on PTSD in soldiers has grown dramatically, with studies showing huge numbers from the war in Iraq. Sometimes it turns up later, after the uniform turns from green to blue.

"One person that went through (the retreat), he was a machine-gunner and his shootings were from a distance. It's more or less shoot-and-scoot there," said Michael Pool, a retired police sergeant who helped found the retreat. "Lo and behold he's in law enforcement, gets into a shooting and it's up close and personal. He's looked the person in the eyes."

Symptoms take time to rear up, said Joel Fay, a 30-year San Rafael police officer and psychologist who directs the retreat, part of the First Responder Support Network.

The March killings of four Oakland police officers have become a frequent topic at the retreats, Fay said, but the damage may unfurl later for some who responded to it.

"It takes about a year to start seeing people," he said. "You've got the funeral activities, the fundraising. When all that's done and you're left by yourself, that's when it starts to take a toll."

For some it takes decades, with heavy drinking and divorce the frequent fallout.

"It's easier when it's a specific memory than with a 30-year veteran who's been to 30 fatalities, seen 25 dead babies," Fay said.

"Imagine just lying in bed and you can smell the crime scene 10 years later. Or look in the mirror and see a dead person who isn't there. These are symptoms people really have."

Most who attend the retreat are police officers, but firefighters, emergency room nurses, even Coast Guard personnel are among the 60 to 70 clients that the retreat sees each year. Lifting the stigma remains the big challenge, organizers said.

"It's easy to come in and say I twisted my knee. I'll be on crutches. But I can't walk in and say every time I think about getting in my patrol car I want to cry," Fay said.

Some agencies have warmed to the idea that psychological trauma should be treated like other on-the-job injuries. Most often, workers' compensation or police associations pay for the retreat.

The California Highway Patrol has sent several officers there, following a wave of suicides in the ranks earlier this decade.

"We see things people aren't supposed to see. We are the ones that are supposed to solve the problems. When we can't or when we feel maybe we helped make it worse, our minds just can't cope with that sometimes," said Rick Mattos, president of the California Association of Highway Patrolmen.

"When I started, the usual way was, we'd all get together in a bar, talk it over and maybe drink too much. We're trying to keep our people a little healthier mentally."

Antioch police Chief Jim Hyde, who helped launch the program eight years ago, also does peer support training for National Guard units. In his 29 years of police work, Hyde said, he has had four former partners kill themselves.

"For too long in my profession, and I know the fire service, we've just tried to stuff it," he said. "I think we're changing the culture."

You wouldn't know it watching a group of seven first-responders at the start of each retreat, said Fay. Banuelos recalls being "a complete wreck" when he showed up. Many others come with hats or sweatshirt hoods pulled far down over their eyes.

"If they could, they'd disappear," Fay said. "To put 'em through six days, and we're going to ask you about emotions and feelings, talking through it? Man, they don't want to do that."

The days are long, with few breaks and swarms of clinicians. With other police officers as peer supporters, some of it gets "in your face," said Pool. But many leave laughing, relieved in part that they are not alone, no longer isolated.

"It's a physical transformation," said Banuelos, now a peer supporter.

Whether they return to police or other emergency work is secondary, said Fay.

"We don't take a stand on whether you should go back to work."