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Officers take their own lives at alarming rates

By Suzanne Bohan, Staff Writer, 7/24/2006
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On July 12, a California Highway Patrol officer ended his life in a South San Francisco park. In January, a CHP veteran fired a bullet into his head above Emerald Bay at Lake Tahoe. That same month, another highway patrolman killed himself in the Napa area. Another CHP officer fatally shot herself last fall in San Francisco.

These four are of seven CHP officers who died by suicide since October, said Rick Mattos, a patrol officer and president of the California Association of Highway Patrolmen, the union representing CHP officers.

The stunning figure has galvanized attention within the CHP.

"And there may be more I don't know about," Mattos added.

These deaths, law enforcement experts point out, aren't just a spate of tragic anomalies.

Each year, an estimated 450 law enforcement officers nationwide take their own lives, said Renee Meador, director of the National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation. In comparison, roughly 150 die annually in the line of duty.



Alan Benner stands by a beach near his Pacifica home. The 35-year veteran of the San Francisco Police Department helped launch the pioneering peer support program, which aids officers coping with on- and off-the-job emotional trauma.

(Jean-Paul Horre - Staff)

"If you take a look at

how many bad guys are taking us out, as opposed to how many take themselves out, we're missing the boat," said Alan Benner, a Pacifica resident and 35-year veteran of the San Francisco Police Department who served his last five years as staff psychologist.

For years, a little-discussed subculture of despair within law enforcement agencies has pushed many officers into the abyss. But a growing psychological sophistication is taking root within the agencies, which law enforcement psychologists credit with catching more — but certainly not all — emotionally burdened officers before they turn their weapons on themselves. Over the past decade, it's a trend that has gained momentum nationwide with the adoption of well-regarded peer support systems within law enforcement agencies, as well as employee assistance programs offering psychological support. In 2002, the FBI bolstered the efforts by releasing a comprehensive report called "Suicide and Law Enforcement."

The number of officers who reach such a state of despair are a tiny percentage of the roughly 700,000 sworn law enforcement officers nationwide.

"For most officers, the unpredictability is part of the joy of the job. They don't want a desk job," said Gerard Sumprer, Ph.D., who worked as a staff psychologist for nine years with the CHP and now consults for the agency's pre-employment psychological screening program.

Officer candidates are screened for emotional stability. Disqualifiers, Sumprer said, include a history of impulsive behavior or "poor judgment," alcohol abuse, poor stress tolerance, clinical depression and a lack of assertiveness.

"If you see a law enforcement officer, you can generally bet they have better mental health than your average citizen," Sumprer said. "But if the stressor is strong enough, anyone is going to be taken out."

Though the percentage of officers who take their own lives is small, the losses year after year take their toll on colleagues, not to mention families.

"It's an angry act," said Benner, the SFPD psychologist. "And the people left behind have the greatest damage."

In California, the CHP in the mid-1990s established peer support programs for traumatized officers, as well as employee assistance programs.

But the recent deaths spurred the agency in January to renew its focus on officer suicides, Mattos said. In February, Mattos also published an article in the union's newsletter titled "Law Enforcement Suicide: A Hidden Epidemic."

Perhaps the most notable change within the culture of law enforcement is the way the historically taboo subject of suicide is now openly broached.

"We're starting to call it suicide instead of 'accidental discharge,'" said Ken Walter, a CHP officer in San Diego who overcame his own debilitating despair after fatally shooting a man in 1993.

"We're starting to face this animal," Walter said. "And, by doing so, people are starting to realize how prone we are to such a stress that our world

closes in and there's no other option."

Keeping calm takes a toll

Like most suicides, multiple factors, including relationship failures, lead to the irreversible decision to end a pain they believe will never cease. But the traumatic scenarios routinely faced by law enforcement officers can cause even the most psychologically strong to buckle.

"We're the ones who have to maintain calm at horrible scenes," said Mattos, the CHP union president. "We're the ones who too often see sights that no one else wants to see — the bodies, the misery. It has a cumulative effect."

Mattos recalled the emotional fallout from a 1976 school bus accident in Martinez that killed 29 people, mostly children. The officers involved, Mattos said, "had significant problems," and many retired under stress-related disability. "That happened in an era of, 'You're just supposed to walk it off. Just get over it.'"

Walter, a 17-year CHP veteran, described an accident one Christmas morning in which a boy and his parents, driving in a car filled with gifts, were killed by a drunken driver.

"There's blood all over the presents, and there's a dead little boy," Walter said. "Everyone just shut up and did their job. When we go back and we're in the debriefing room, it's quiet," he added, noting that "it's never quiet" during debriefings. Every expert interviewed for this article, without being asked, mentioned that the death of children by accidents or violence is particularly traumatizing for officers.

Walter, who serves as a peer support officer, said he recently counseled a CHP officer called to the scene of a fatal car crash. The officer attempted to hold the hand of a woman trapped in a car but could only grasp a finger. She died moments after he released his hold when paramedics arrived.

"He did need to talk," Walter said. "He kept talking about the frustration of the incident, that he couldn't do more."

Walter said he eased the officer's distress by asking him to consider how much comfort he gave the dying woman with his simple act of touching her. The officer seemed relieved after the conversation, Walter said.

Walter has counseled countless officers over the years, and he said he sees a similar reaction almost every time.

"People take that deep breath, that sigh of relief, like, 'So, I'm not going crazy.'"

Peer support programs entail confidential meetings between an officer seeking assistance and one trained to address emotional issues. Increasingly, bosses and co-workers confide their concerns about a co-worker who appears despondent, and the peer support officer will seek that officer to ask about his or her emotional state.

If the peer support officer senses an officer is so despondent as to commit

suicide, the strategy is to question the person forthrightly.

"We're in the beginning stages of this approach," Walter explained. "I ask, 'How do you feel? Are you thinking of hurting or killing yourself?'"

The blunt approach, Walter said, usually gets people talking.

"It kind of shocks them into telling the truth."

It was different in '93

There were no peer counselors when Walter needed one in 1993, when as a 26-year-old officer he fatally shot a man who was preparing to shoot him.

It was a routine speeding stop, and Walter was stunned to find himself facing a man drawing a gun. Walter pulled his weapon and fired, instantly killing the man.

"That shook my world," he said. "I damn near met my maker. You realize at a young age that you might die six hours into your next shift."

Walter voluntarily withdrew from field work and for five months served on administrative duty. He also decided to see a psychiatrist, who helped ease his anxiety and sense of isolation on the job.

"I thought everyone was looking at me in a different way," he said. "Like, 'He shot someone. He's a different guy right now.'"

Walter also had bad dreams, in which he imagined struggles with law enforcement and personal scenarios, and during his dreams he felt an unnerving sense of confusion.

"It was so uncomfortable, I never wanted to sleep," he said.

Though he never considered suicide, Walter credits the counseling with restoring his ability to function on the job and in his personal life.

"I had gone from a place where my world had pretty much closed in, and the doctor really guided me back to the world."

Making the pain stop

Benner, the SFPD psychologist, said the way officers learn to disengage emotionally to gain a sense of control during a crisis also adds to the emotional strain of the job.

"You suppress feelings of fear, anger, revulsion and even deep empathy," he said. "The problem is that behavior doesn't get hung up in the locker room with the uniform."

Suppressed emotions may manifest themselves as backaches, headaches or panic attacks. The latter especially can lead to a spiral of despair, Benner said.

In a job that requires emotional calm, panic attacks can engulf officers in shame, Benner said, recalling conversations with officers who considered or attempted suicide as a result of panic attacks.

"If you add alcohol as a disinhibitor, suddenly (suicide) seems like a heck of a good idea to make the pain stop," Benner said.

But these anxiety attacks are highly treatable, he emphasized. Experts also point to the transitory nature of suicidal feelings, if emotional support is provided in time.

Walter said the counseling he received and his own insights about his work have left him much more comfortable when facing threatening situations. On his first day back on active duty, Walter had to wrestle a man to the ground, which he said he handled easily. Not long after, he was chasing a man who began pulling something from his jacket — possibly a weapon, Walter thought.

"I had so much more peace going through that decision-making process in responding to the threat," he said.

Walter didn't fire his gun, and the man was actually reaching into his jacket to toss a stash of illegal drugs.

Old-school tradition giving way

The old ways of maintaining a tough-cop persona still linger, Walter said, but the new vanguard likely won't be carrying it on.

"We still have some old-school mentality that you take these people out for a drink and tell them to get over it and march on," he said. "I say, 'No, sir, that's not how you do it.' That's why so many of the old guard retired as alcoholics, and their lives are over."

In fact, when many of the older officers talk with Walter about the CHP's peer support program, they ask him, "'Why didn't we have this when I was younger?'" he said.

And the on-the-job emotional support increasingly provided to officers not only has kept some officers from suicide, Mattos said, but is creating a healthier work culture.

"The benefit is officers can concentrate on their work instead of the stresses they've been through," Mattos said.

"This job uses people up," he emphasized. "If we can have people retire healthy, that's the goal. We don't want to retire a bunch of empty hulls."

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