

An Action Guide to Support Public Safety Mental Wellness



Introduction

Due to the demands of their roles, public safety employees encounter traumatic situations which are conducive to increased mental health challenges. There are strategies every city can put in place to help mitigate this risk. This guide will walk you through steps and considerations for addressing public safety mental health.

Creating a public safety mental health program is an organization's responsibility. It can build a culture of wellness that will give employees permission to talk openly about their mental health challenges and seek help when needed before they become chronic conditions. The entire organization is responsible for creating this supportive work environment where employees feel "it's OK to not be OK." Providing a wellness program can also support morale, resiliency, retention, and job satisfaction.

**One in five adults will suffer from a mental illness,
according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness.**



Step 1: Wellness starts with leadership

Creating a successful public safety mental health culture starts with city leadership and public safety leadership working together to normalize the conversation regarding mental illness.

Start by considering your own feelings. It may help to think about mental illness as a mental injury. People heal from injuries, and mental injuries are treatable.

City leadership from departments such as administration, fire, police, human resources, and finance should meet and discuss what it means to be an organization that supports mental health.

Form a team of employees to carry out next steps.

Consider asking some or all of the following questions:

- How easy or difficult is it for employees to talk about their mental wellness at work?
- What factors contributed to your answers?
- How can we as leaders normalize conversations around mental illness? Do we model and support wellness practices?
- Do we have an environment where people with mental illness will seek the internal and external help they need? If not, how can we create it?
- Do public safety employees feel like valued members of our city government and community?
- What wellness strategies are currently in place? Do we know what mental health resources are available for our public safety team? Do we encourage use of them? How do we know they are working?

Organizational wellness is not a program; it's a philosophy.

PTSD AND MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKIT:

Prior to the meeting have all group members review the League of Minnesota Cities PTSD and Mental Health Toolkit for public safety, focusing on the Keeping Your Department Well section.



Step 2: Form a team

Form a public safety wellness team that can help inform, design, or evaluate your organizational wellness strategy.

It's important to think about creating a culture that supports wellness from the bottom up, with strong support from leaders. Consider including team members who will champion your work: line-level officers, firefighters, civilian staff, union rep(s), training officers, supervisors, informal organizational leaders, and members of your human resource team.

1. Begin by discussing these questions:
2. Create a mental health survey for public safety employees. Questions should allow for employees to reflect on their perception of their own mental health, as well as their perception of the organization's wellness culture.

- What are our desired outcomes?
- What do we want to happen?
- What questions do we want to ask our employees?
- Do we have strong leadership support to start this?
- Do we want participation to be required or voluntary?
- Are we willing to change our department culture?
- Can we live with the consequences if we don't establish a program?

View sample wellness survey questions



Be mindful of language about mental health; avoid using words like “crazy” or “insane.”



Step 3: Draft a plan

Using information from your employee mental health survey, your wellness team can design a plan to create or enhance a culture that supports public safety mental health.

Define the vision, goals, objectives, and action steps of your plan.

It may be necessary to phase in your program elements over time.

Research internal and external resources such as program models, community partners, and grants.

Here are some important considerations:

- Review policies and practices surrounding mental health treatment and recovery, such as leave policies, medication policies, and fitness for duty practices, with a goal to remove treatment barriers whenever possible.
- Review scheduling of shift workers to ensure there is adequate opportunity for rest and sleep.
- Include opportunities for family members to learn about trauma-related mental health issues and how to support their public safety professionals.
- Incorporate training of supervisors on how to provide emotional support, and how to speak with employees experiencing mental health issues.

Think about framing the wellness plan as a way to care for the whole employee by including the following components into your program. *Adapted from Dr. Daniel G. Amen, "The End of Mental Illness"*

Purpose: Find ways to help keep employees focused on their mission. Having a strong sense of purpose builds resilience.

Physical: Provide information and scheduling that allows employees to get adequate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

Emotional: Establish peer support programs, yearly mental health check-ins, mental health counseling sessions, trauma debriefs, etc.

Social: Promote connection through involvement in civic clubs, organizations, sports teams, hobbies, creative endeavors, and other activities outside of work.

Inner Self: Remind people of the value of activities such as meditation, tai chi, and prayer that can restore a sense of calm, and support healing.

Financial: Offer financial wellness advice and education through webinars, workshops, department training and one-on-one financial counseling.

Remind people often that mental illness is treatable and doesn't have to define a life or end a career.



Step 4: Put your plan into action

Deliberate and consistent communication with all stakeholders will be important to the success of your program. Use roll calls, briefings, memos, emails, and other means of communication.

Ensure everyone understands the importance and the need for the mental health program. Provide opportunities for people to get their questions answered.

Ideas to kick off your program include:

- Design department training specifically about mental health, and the process for how mental health injuries will be handled in the organization.
- Host a family event and invite a speaker to discuss the signs and symptoms of trauma-related mental injuries.
- Hold a wellness fair that includes things like health screenings, employee assistance program representatives, civic organizations, health clubs, yoga studios, nutrition information.

Leaders can support mental health by modeling healthy behaviors and creating a work culture that is both accountable and compassionate.

PTSD AND MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKIT:

Review the Creating Supportive Work Environments section for tips on supporting your employees and communicating effectively.



Step 5: Measure for success

Measuring the overall success of your wellness program should happen on a regular schedule and when your wellness team identifies a need to revisit an element of your plan.

Short term

- Do employees use the program?
- Are employees interested in enhancing the program?
- Do employees recommend the program?
- Are we making progress to the outcomes we decided in step two?
- If not, how do we recalibrate?

Long term

- Have sick days and absenteeism decreased?
- Have health insurance and workers' compensation costs decreased?

Keep mental health information and help resources visible in your break rooms, locker rooms, and other areas of your department.

www.lmc.org/ActionGuide

For more information:

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