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Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative - Policeone.com interview with Jack A. Digliani

How was the “Make it Safe” Police Officer Initiative developed?

The Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative was developed out of the conceptualizations of police primary and secondary danger, and the Below 100 Initiative.

What are the primary and secondary dangers of policing?

The primary danger of policing is comprised of the inherent risks of the job, such as working in motor vehicle traffic, confronting violent persons, and exposure to traumatic incidents. Secondary danger is a component of the three “seconds” in policing. The three seconds in policing are *secondary danger*, *second injury*, and *secondary trauma*. The secondary danger of policing is the idea that equates “asking for help” with “personal and professional weakness”. Second injury is the harm that can be caused to officers when they are poorly treated following involvement in a critical incident. Secondary trauma, also known as vicarious trauma, refers to the indirect traumatization that can occur when a person is listening to or is otherwise exposed to persons that have been directly traumatized. Secondary traumatization is a real concern for the spouses and family members of officers that have been involved in a critical incident, and previously non-traumatized officers and others participating in departmental critical incident debriefings.

What is the overall goal of the Make it Safe Initiative?

The 12 elements of the Make it Safe Initiative are designed to reduce secondary danger, prevent second injury, and diminish the risks of secondary trauma.

How does the Make it Safe Initiative relate to the Below 100 Initiative?

The Make it Safe Initiative complements the Below 100 Initiative. While Below 100 aims to reduce officer line-of-duty deaths, Make it Safe is an effort to reduce the number of officer suicides by making it easier for officers to ask for help and by increasing the general level of officer mental wellness. To accomplish this, major changes in the police culture must take place.

As you see it, what changes need to be made in the police culture?

There is a great deal of officer-support variability in law enforcement agencies. Some departments seem unaware of the secondary danger of policing and therefore have done little to address it. Others have implemented programs that are intended to support officer mental wellness and thereby reduce secondary danger. These departments have developed officer-involved critical incident policy and protocol, provide specialized in-service training, provide easily accessible and confidential counseling services, and have created functional peer

support teams. This is a great step forward. However, the effectiveness of these programs will be undermined to the extent that internal mistrust exists. For example, the best intentioned departmental programs that have been implemented by the most enlightened administrators will be limited in what they can accomplish if officers dismiss them or refuse to utilize them due to fear of administrative or peer reprisal or ridicule. This is the change needed in the police culture, and the primary reason for the Make it Safe Initiative.

Do fears of administrative and peer reprisal and ridicule tell the whole story?

No. If you are an officer fortunate enough to work for an agency that has implemented viable officer-support programs, remember that department good intentions and supportive programs can only do so much. Officers themselves must assume responsibility for their mental wellness.

For some officers, it is not concerns of administrative reprisal or peer ridicule that keeps them from reaching out when they are in trouble. It is the way in which they think about themselves as police officers. Too many officers maintain the mindset, “I’m a cop, I give help, I don’t ask for help” or “I will handle this on my own even if it kills me”. Unfortunately, this way of thinking is often reinforced by other officers. Police officers must re-think what it means to be a police officer. Everyone has a limit to what they can cope with alone. A healthier police mindset includes a willingness to seek support when things get tough. To encourage this, police agencies must make it safe to do so.

What about job stress and the Make it Safe Initiative?

All occupations include unavoidable stressors. When dealing with the unavoidable stressors of policing, some officers believe “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen”. This is a colorful way of expressing the idea that if things become too stressful, you should withdraw.

While withdrawal from a stressful environment is a recognized stressor management strategy, it is not always desirable, nor is it the only way to deal with job stress. When thinking about the “kitchen” and “heat”, withdrawal may be a viable option, but there is another strategy that police officers should consider: “Let’s lower the heat in the kitchen when possible, and when not possible, let’s help one another to better manage the heat”. The Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative is designed to help officers lower and better manage the heat.

Any closing remarks?

I encourage officers to visit www.jackdigliani.com to learn more about the Make it Safe Initiative. I also encourage officers to bring the Initiative to the attention of their administrators. Together we can make a difference.

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