**Jack A. Digliani, PhD, EdD**
**Police Psychologist**
www.jackdigliani.com

## The Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative is designed to address the secondary danger of policing

### Police Primary and Secondary Danger

The primary danger of policing has two components: (1) physical primary danger and (2) psychological primary danger.

Physical primary danger. The *physical primary danger* of policing is comprised of the inherent, potentially life-threatening risks of the job, such as working in motor vehicle traffic, emergency vehicle operation, representing a target for disgruntled persons, and confronting armed and violent individuals. One needs only to read a newspaper or watch a news program to understand the physical primary danger of policing.

Psychological primary danger. The *psychological primary danger* of policing is related to, but distinguishable from the physical primary danger of policing. The psychological primary danger of policing is represented in the increased probability that due to the nature of policing, officers will be exposed to critical incidents, work-related cumulative stress, and human tragedy. This higher probability of exposure results in an increased likelihood that officers will suffer psychological traumatization and stressor-related disorders. It is the increased likelihood of psychological traumatization and the increased likelihood of experiencing stressor-related disorders that comprises the psychological primary danger of policing. Another way of saying this is that the physical primary danger of policing constitutes a work environment that generates the psychological primary danger of policing.

Secondary danger. Unfortunately, there is also an insidious and lesser known *secondary danger* of policing. The secondary danger of policing is often unspecified and seldom discussed. It is an artifact of the police culture and is frequently reinforced by police officers themselves. It is the idea that equates "asking for help" with "personal and professional weakness." Secondary danger has been implicated in perhaps the most startling of all police fatality statistics, the frequency of police officer suicide

## The Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative
*Make it safe for officers to ask for psychological support*

**The Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative is a concerted effort to reduce the secondary danger of policing and thereby reduce the occurrence of police officer suicide.**

### The Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative seeks to:

(1) make it personally and professionally acceptable for officers to engage peer and professional psychological support services without fear of agency or peer ridicule or reprisal.
(2) reduce officer fears about asking for psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming job or other life difficulties.
(3) change organizational climates that discourage officers from seeking psychological help by reducing explicit and implicit organizational messages that imply asking for help is indicative of personal and professional weakness.

(4) alter the profession-wide law enforcement culture that generally views asking for psychological help as a personal or professional weakness.

(5) improve the career-long psychological wellness of officers by encouraging police agencies to adopt long-term and comprehensive officer-support strategies such as the Comprehensive Model for Police Advanced Strategic Support.

## How serious is police secondary danger? So serious that some officers will choose suicide over asking for help.

**Twelve elements of the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative. The Initiative encourages:**

(1) every officer to "self-monitor" and to take personal responsibility for his or her mental wellness.

(2) every officer to seek psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming difficulties (officers do not have to "go it alone").

(3) every officer to diminish the sometimes deadly effects of secondary danger by reaching out to other officers known to be facing difficult circumstances.

(4) veteran and ranking officers to use their status to help reduce secondary danger (veteran and ranking officers can reduce secondary danger by openly discussing it, appropriately sharing selected personal experiences, avoiding the use of pejorative terms to describe officers seeking or engaging psychological support, and talking about the acceptability of seeking psychological support when confronting stressful circumstances).

(5) law enforcement administrators to better educate themselves about the nature of secondary danger and to take the lead in secondary danger reduction.

(6) law enforcement administrators to issue a departmental memo encouraging officers to engage psychological support services when confronting potentially overwhelming stress (the memo should include information about confidentiality and available support resources).

(7) basic training in stress management, stress inoculation, critical incidents, posttraumatic stress, police family dynamics, substance use and addiction, and the warning signs of depression and suicide.

(8) the development of programs that engage pre-emptive, early-warning, and periodic department-wide officer support interventions (for example, proactive annual check in, "early warning" policies designed to support officers displaying signs of stress, and regularly scheduled stress inoculation and critical incident stressor management training).

(9) agencies to initiate incident-specific protocols to support officers and their families when officers are involved in critical incidents.

(10) agencies to create appropriately structured, properly trained, and clinically supervised peer support teams.

(11) agencies to provide easy and confidential access to counseling and specialized police psychological support services.

(12) officers at all levels of the organization to enhance the agency climate so that others are encouraged to ask for help when experiencing psychological or emotional difficulties instead of keeping and acting out a deadly secret.

**If law enforcement officers wish to do the best for themselves and other officers, it's time to make a change. It's time to make a difference.**