

IMPROVING CORRECTIONAL OFFICER WELLNESS THROUGH A MULTIFACETED APPROACH

Location:

Middlesex County, MA

Organization:

Middlesex Sheriff's Office, Medford, MA

Description:

County-wide sheriff's office serving 54 cities and towns with over 680 employees, operating a jail and house of corrections with an average daily population of 1,150 inmates.

Contact:

David Ryan

Policy Director,
Middlesex Sheriff's Office
dryan@sdm.state.ma.us

Office of Justice Programs
Diagnostic Center
(855) 657-0411
contact@OJPDiagnosticCenter.org

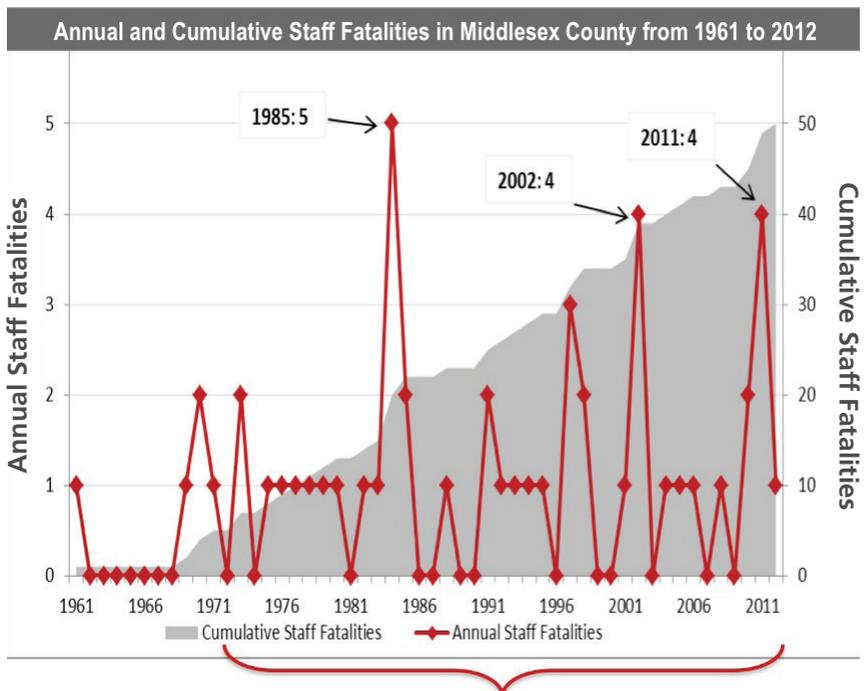
Data-driven Programs and Practices Recommended to Address the Issue

Empirical research on programs addressing CO stress and wellness is extremely limited. The Diagnostic Center conducted a literature review to identify effective programs and practices and recommended the following:

- Critical incident response teams
- Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)
- Peer support programs
- Training that addresses wellness and safety issues
- Organizational practices to improve officer wellness

Overview

Seven staff fatalities including three suicides in just three years (2010-2012). For professionals who operate correction facilities, stress can be a significant issue with fatal consequences. The Middlesex Sheriff's Office (MSO) had 45 staff fatalities over the past 30 years. Twenty-four percent of these deaths were suicide. MSO believes the other deaths are tied to stress and wellness related health issues such as heart attack, stroke, diabetes and high blood pressure.



Suicides have been the cause of 24.4% of MSO staff fatalities in past 30 years

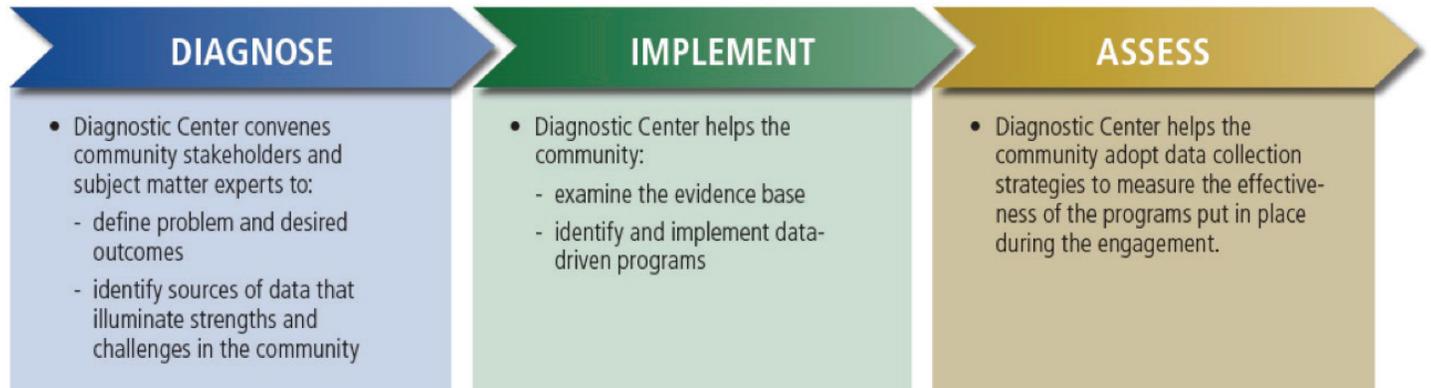
MSO Sheriff Peter Koutoujian assumed the leadership role at this time and focused on improving correctional officer (CO) wellness and safety. Working with the Bureau of Justice Assistance and the National Sheriffs' Association, MSO sponsored a conference on CO wellness and safety in December 2012. MSO sought to identify specific causes of job-related stressors and data-driven programs to help improve CO wellness and safety in their own organization and were unable to identify established national standards on the subject. In January 2013, MSO approached the Office of Justice Programs Diagnostic Center for assistance understanding the contributors to CO work-related stressors. MSO's goal was to identify and alleviate the causes of workplace stress to improve CO wellness and safety and reduce CO suicide through implementation of evidence-based programs and promising practices.

The Diagnostic Center

The Diagnostic Center is a technical assistance resource provider designed to build community capacity to use data to make short-and long-term evidence-based decisions about criminal justice and public safety. Diagnostic Center engagements enhance the ability of public safety executives to collect and use local data to understand the jurisdiction's issues, make decisions about programs and practices and support efforts to integrate data and evidence into policies. The Diagnostic Center invests in what works by bridging the gap between data and criminal justice policy at the state, local and tribal levels.

The Diagnostic Process

After being contacted by MSO, the Diagnostic Center began its three step process to help them better understand the contributors to CO work-related stressors.



Several subject matter experts were brought in to assist in the diagnostic process including a public safety psychologist, a corrections consultant and a mental health researcher. In addition, the Diagnostic Center brought in the Bureau of Justice Assistance, National Institute of Corrections and National Institute of Justice who provided access to research and input from other OJP public safety wellness and safety initiatives.

During the diagnose phase, the Diagnostic Specialists conducted 22 interviews, collected extensive local data and analyzed all of the information collected. That analysis uncovered six factors contributing to MSO's challenge in addressing CO wellness and five recommended data-driven programs and practices to help.

Six Factors Contributing to the Issue

1. Minimal Communication Systems

Communication systems have limited cross-organizational information sharing and messaging capabilities.

2. Practices Not Reflective of Policies

Practices diverge from written directives and create perceptions of inconsistent application of policies.

3. Targeted Employee Assistance Program

EAP services are limited to counseling and referral services provided by MSO which discourages the utilization of services.

4. Strained Leadership-Staff Relations

Past promotions have not been based on formal procedures.

5. Full Integration of Policies of Multiple Collective Bargaining Units (CBUs) Creates a More Complex Labor Environment

Overlapping policies from three collective bargaining units create ambiguity for employees.

6. Perceptions of Limited Employee Support Systems

Non-customer centric employee support functions, such as payroll, influence staff perceptions of the value and priority MSO places on their physical, financial and emotional well-being.

"The Diagnostic Center has been a partner every step of the way in assisting us in our efforts to provide a healthier workplace for our officers."

Sheriff Peter J. Koutoujian



Descriptions and Details of the Recommended Evidence-based Programs and Practices

With limited empirical research on programs addressing CO stress and wellness, the Diagnostic Center recommended a range of promising practices for MSO to consider. Following are descriptions and details on each of the five recommendations.

Peer Support Program

Peer support programs provide employees with emotional and tangible support during a crisis and help anticipate and address potential difficulties. The five key elements found in peer support program model practices are: social support, experiential knowledge, trust, confidentiality and easy access.



Critical Incident Response Teams

Critical incidence response teams offer support to staff exposed to trauma or involved in a violent encounter. Research indicates nine key components to critical incident response:

1. On-scene support
2. Demobilization or de-escalation
3. Defusing
4. Debriefing
5. One-on-one support
6. Significant other/family member defusing and debriefing
7. Line-of-duty death support
8. Referrals
9. Follow-up

Training Steps

While there is no single training program to address correctional officer wellness, research indicates the most successful programs include several key elements. These programs:

- Provide leadership training for newly promoted supervisors.
- Help organizational leaders understand and create an environment known to enhance officer wellness.
- Use a Field Training Officer program that promotes and formalizes the new staff assessment process and can remediate core competency skills and practices.
- Include a family orientation session during CO training at the academy to help loved ones understand the work environment and the associated stressors and provide information about available resources to support officer wellness.

Employee Assistance Program

A model EAP offers both internal and external services, a high level of confidentiality and is provided by trained professionals. A model EAP:

- Communicates and actively promotes services.
- Places high value on privacy.
- Focuses on early and timely problem identification.
- Uses constructive confrontation, motivation and short-term interventions.
- Includes services for diagnosis, treatment, assistance, case management and follow-up.
- Maintains relationships with service providers.
- Assesses the effects of EAP services.
- Encourages use of, and access to, health benefits.
- Ensures EAP staff have specialized training.
- Provides 24 hours a day, 7 days a week services.

Organizational Practices

Research identifies a number of organizational issues that are key to improving officer wellness and safety and reducing organizational causes of stress. These include:

- Emphasizing communication, both upward and laterally
- Showing appreciation
- Using employee satisfaction surveys
- Reducing involuntary overtime
- Improving the shift schedule
- Improving the promotion process
- Refining fairness and equity of an evaluation process
- Implementing training
- Updating facilities
- Reducing role ambiguity and clearly defining staff responsibilities

Diagnostic Center's Recommendations

Change Management and Communications

- Implement communications systems
- Align practices to policies
- Enhance EAP services

Leadership and Management

- Improve leadership and staff relations
- Implement a Field Training Officer Program
- Foster common interests with collective bargaining units and their leadership
- Utilize an employee-centric support service structure

Impact and Outcome

In the brief time since MSO began implementing the Diagnostic Center's recommendations, the organization is already seeing qualitative results, and expects to be able to document quantifiable outcomes. Actions MSO has taken include:

- Scheduling additional academy classes to help fill vacancies which, in the long run, should help decrease forced overtime.
- Expanding EAP services to include onsite presence of service providers.
- Announcement of an FTO program to coincide with current academy class.
- Peer exchange with the Ada County Sheriff's Office to discuss best practices
- Development of a communication strategy to help continue to improve information sharing.
- Facility improvements, most importantly closing of the antiquated jail facility
- Improved communication between management and staff and between the organization and the union line officers.
- Development of an employee satisfaction survey.
- Improved information sharing with employees when payroll issues are discovered.
- Scheduling of a supervisory training.
- Arranging for leadership development for executive staff.



"As part of our engagement with the Department of Justice, I had the opportunity to participate in a peer exchange with the Ada County Sheriff's Office... This experience has left a lasting impression on me and I look forward to implementing new ideas on the operational level."

Sgt. Christopher Foley

Community's Response

While implementation of the recommendations is a work in progress, MSO has already instituted several changes to improve officer wellness and safety. Implementation input was sought from the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, the Ada County, ID Sheriff's Office and University of Massachusetts-Lowell.

Change Management and Communications

- Established a transition committee to facilitate information sharing during the closing of one facility and construction of an addition to an existing facility
- Undertook a new EAP contract to include specialized services and data capture vehicle to track wellness activities
- Conducted suicide prevention training for managers
- Sponsored employee appreciation and recognition events

Leadership and Management

- Participated in a peer exchange to shadow employees of a neighboring county that adopted employee satisfaction as a core tenant
- Established regular communications with staff and union members to foster discussions on CO wellness and safety
- Co-located support services at an MSO facility to improve access
- Will launch the FTO program and family orientation session for upcoming academy class
- Employing additional scheduling strategies to alleviate the frequency of forced overtime

Insight Gained

Limited research exists for CO wellness and safety in a jail environment. Adaption of successful strategies used by other public safety organizations can lead to positive change.

Communication is at the center of any successful organizational change. Information must flow both vertically and laterally within an organization for it to be effective in reaching the employees.

Individual employee wellness can be improved by addressing an organization's operational and administrative effectiveness.