43659

Dealing with Police Stress*

Mark H. Furstenberg
Director of Personnel
Boston Police Department

In March, 1973, Patrolman Joseph Ravino, 45 years old with 18 years of service, went on his day off to Police Headquarters to speak to the new Director of Planning and Research. For ten years earlier in his career, Ravino had been an active alcoholic. After five of them, he lost his family and home, and drifted for five more as a fully matured alcoholic, assigned to a police district then reserved for alcoholics, permitted by the Department to use sick leave at will, to drink while working, rarely challenged by his supervisors.

In 1969, Ravino came under the influence of another patrolman who had himself been an alcoholic for 12 years, but had stopped drinking. Ravino converted to Alcoholics Anonymous, and, after defeating the habit, became, like many AA's, a crusader.

First, he began to take a special interest in drunk citizens who, as a police officer, he encountered in the Jamaica Plain area of Boston where he worked. Then people who had heard about him began to call for help, and he was invited to join the Jamaica Plain Advisory Council on Alcoholism. But, Ravino wanted to do something about the problems of alcoholism inside the Boston Police Department. It seemed to him that organizations in Boston -- Corporations, Hospitals, State Agencies -- had alcohol treatment programs for the employees. Why not the Boston Police Department?

So he began to write a program.

Ravino had heard that the new Planning and Research Division might be receptive to his idea. It was then compiling recommendations for improvement in the Department; and was studing problems, raising issues, and discussing them with officers at many levels. Ravino went to Headquarters to present his idea. It was not well developed and lacked details, but its appeal was knowledgeable and powerful. Even if there weren't 700 alcoholics in the Department as Ravino said, there were many. Anyway, he was presenting the dimensions of only one behavioral problem, and it was obvious that others existed in the Department. There were reports about habitual excessive use of force and stories of suicides; and besides those which one hears in every police department, there seem to be a magnitude of problems which did not exist in other, younger departments. So, because of Ravino's initiative, development of a

*Note: This paper deals not with the substantive issues of job stress, but with the process. It is the story of an effort to develop a stress treatment program in a police department. It cannot be called a model since the program was developed under highly adversarial conditions which do not exist in most police departments; but even though some of the difficulties encountered in Boston may not be faced elsewhere, our story does nonetheless offer some guidance to others.

238-571 O - 77 - 15

counselling program became one of the Police Commissioner's eighteen priorities for the first two years of his administration.

The Boston Police Department was not one accustomed to change. The average age of its sworn personnel was 45, the average age of its command staff 56. There was an old-fashioned quality about the Department which reminded visitors of policing in the 1930's, district personnel deeply immersed in their neighborhoods, an open quality uncompromised by the fear of attack which seized other departments during the Sixties, a firm belief that the purpose of the police department was service. Indeed, the Boston Police Department, like most other Eastern departments, had been relatively untouched by the era of "professionalization" which had dominated the field since the Thirties; and there was little to suggest that during the previous four decades many major departments of the country had concentrated on developing an efficiently managed organization, and had made great progress.

In Boston, the vehicle fleet had broken down, and there were not enough cars to go around. Radio communications could not be heard in "dead spots" around the city. There was no property control system, no preventive vehicle maintenance, and no manpower allocation system. The criminal records system of the Department had collapsed; people were buried in paperwork that was out of control; and the Department had a brand new IBM computer, but no use for it.

None of this distinguished the Boston Police Department from departments in some of the other older cities of the country. Some of Boston's problems were perhaps more aggravated; but the Department had managed to retain a degree of responsiveness to the public through the strongly identified neighborhood bases of the city and its firm political direction. But although the Department was responsive to the citizenry, it had become an organization utterly unresponsive to its own personnel.

There really were two Boston Police Departments. One was composed of police districts, presided over by captains more or less autonomously, and populated by patrolmen, the Hyde Park Police Department, Roxbury Police Department, South Boston Police Department, Dorchester Police Department, and so on. These little "departments" did police work, exercising police powers, delivering services to people who called for assistance whether they call the central emergency number or directly to their neighborhood station. Police officers thought of their district as the Boston Police Department; only very rarely were they reminded that there was another department downtown.

That other Boston Police Department. It was composed of managers who worked at Headquarters and who made decisions about budgets, contracts, purchases, and transfers. This was the bureaucracy, the corporate management, exercising significant organizational power, composed of people who had once been police officers, but all of whom had graduated from police work. Many of the most significant of those people were never seen and could not be recognized by the police officers serving in the "other department".

Over the years, these two departments had grown apart. Police who worked at the districts feared Headquarters, and tried to avoid going there. It was another world. The command staff at Headquarters, on the other hand, were contempuous of patrol officers; and, perhaps remembering the way in which they were treated, mistreated patrolmen, transferring them without warning or justification, discipling without due process, requiring overtime work without

compensation, and giving no status, little equipment, no support, and no organizational power.

For that reason and others, the Boston Police Patrolman's Association, founded in 1966 and given recognition in 1967, rose quickly to a position of great power. By 1972 it had become a virtual partner in organizational management; and in that year, the year Robert di Grazia became Police Commissioner, it elected its third leadership and its most radical. The BPPA began attacking di Grazia even before he arrived in the City; and by March 1973, the Commissioner and the union were adversaries on most organizational matters.

In November, Ravino was detailed to the Planning and Research Division to devote full time to the project's development. He began to learn as much as possible about treatment efforts in other police departments, to interview people involved in similar projects in other organizations, and to speak with many people in the Department, particularly patrolmen, to collect ideas and build support. But, inexperienced in research and frustrated by his wish to begin helping other police officers, Ravino made little progress.

In January, 1974, the Department assigned to work with him two other patrolmen, one of whom brought to the development effort research capacities badly needed. Whereas Ravino was action-oriented, the new patrolman was reflective; whereas he was interested solely in alcoholism, the new officer had gone through a searing personal experience which had acquainted him with broader emotional problems.

By March the project was developed. It was to be call the Stress Project, so named because, in the judgement of its authors, the work "stress" evoked tough, masculine feelings. Police officers are not entitled to have emotional problems, but it could be permissible for them to feel stress. It was based on the peer-counselling method, in part because that was the model being used for other purposes in other police departments, and partly because in the aggravated labor-management environment of the Boston Police Department, it seemed to be the only possible way to conduct a program like this one. To be even more reassuring, the project would be located outside the police department physically and organizationally, and its counsellors would be given protections against Department inquiry or interference.

Early in the year efforts were begun to prepare the Department for the program. The first of those efforts was intended to meet the suspicions of the command staff, of whom suspected that a counselling program would erode their authority to discipline patrolmen. By offering an alternative to discipline, the Stress Program appeared to be an attack on a prerogative of command which many members of the command staff regarded as essential to control. Further, in proposing a Stress Program the Commissioner appeared to be suggesting that the Department did have a large number of people with behavioral problems; and that was insulting. Privately many members of the command staff acknowleged that this was true, but most commanders felt that the publicity attached to a Stress Program would undermine public confidence in the Department. All police departments, they said, have people with problems, but they manage quietly to "take care" of people, isolating them where they will be of no harm to the Department.

To meet the resistance of the command staff, there were several meetings in which the proposed project was discussed.

The Department was attempting to improve its services, and to do so required finding more officers who could be on the streets answering calls for service. But the new administration had found that because of age, partial physical disability (heart, for example), and other kinds of disabilities including emotional ones, as much as 30 percent of the Department was not able to perform police services. Whatever rehabilitation efforts could be devised had to be tried. The Department could not afford to ignore treatable emotional problems. The Stress Program was offered as an alternative to discipilining people command officers were reluctant to discipline. It would give commanders some recourse when an officer was drunk or when a wife called to complain about the behavior of her patrolman-husband.

The second effort was directed at the Boston Police Patrolman's Association. The project's authors who were themselves patrolmen were so convinced of the righteousness of their cause that it seemed inevitable to them that the union would support the Stress Program. They began early in the year to meet with a committee of the Association to discuss their intentions. The BPPA's representative kept the project developing constantly off-balance. In one meeting, they argued that a manual of procedures was required; so it was developed. Then in the next meeting, called to discuss the draft manual, they denied having received it. In a third they pleaded for time to confer with their attorney. At a fourth, they said that their attorney had been too busy. And so it went with every issue.

Gradually it became clearer to Ravino and his colleagues that the people with whom they were meeting had no authority in the union. Their role was limited to discussing matters with management, and carrying management's requests back to the Chairman and Vice Chairman who alone could make decisions. Ravino met with the Chairman privately, but could learn little about the union's views or intentions. Finally, the BPPA notified the Department that since it was the sole representative of the Department's patrolmen, it considered inappropriate these discussions about a Stress Program conducted between the Patrolman's Union and "management's patrolmen," Therefore, in the future it would refuse to meet with any patrolmen on any issues.

Frustrated and angry, the Project's authors decided to move audaciously to demonstrate the usefulness of a Stress Program. A patrolman who had learned of the impending project was requesting help. He was in a desperate situation. A compulsive gambler with an alcoholic wife, he had gotten so deeply into debt that he had stolen the paycheck of a fellow patrolman, and had cashed it. The Department was proposing to suspend him for six months, depriving him of a livelihood. He was depressed, and without hope. The union would, of course, represent him in his Department hearing, but his pre-hearing meetings with the BPPA's counsel were not reassuring. He was being advised to accept the six-month suspension.

The Stress Program intervened. Arrangements were made for him to be counselled and for his wife to begin Alcoholics Anonymous. The Stress staff met frequently with the patrolman, negotiating an arrangement acceptable to him; and trying to persuade the Department to accept that arrangement. They prepared his case, and appeared at the hearing on his behalf. They were successful in persuading the Department that a rehabilitation effort was in the interest of the patrolman and the Department. Feeling triumphant, the staff believed that the BPPA would now understand the virtures of a Stress Program; but in fact their success deepened the union's suspicions.

Throughout the spring the project staff had been trying in one other way to win support for the project. The Department's regular in-service training was being held each morning, and nearly every morning patrol developing the Stress Program appeared to talk about their plans. Their appeal was direct and emotional. Ravino first spoke about his own experience with alcohol, complaining that when he was sick, the Department ignored his problem. He discussed reasons for police denial of emotional problems, the need to feel "strong" and therefore be unaffected by stress. Then one of the other patrolmen explained their plans, and stopped. At each class there were a few vocal supporters, one or two opponents, while most listened silently.

By summer all the development which, under the circumstances, could be accomplished before beginning a program had been completed. There seemed to be no reason to delay implimentation of the program. The project staff was created, and the Commissioner signed on July 1 an order creating the program.

The Program

The Stress office is located half a mile from Police Headquarters in a private building overlooking the Boston Common in the center of downtown. There are three counsellors, one of whom is a controversial, old-time alcoholic patrolman counsellor in the Department who, angry and suspicious, opposed development of the program, tried to sabotage it, and joined it under duress. Also working with the program is a patrolman who serves as the Department's hospital liaison and informally as a retirement counsellor to patrolmen.

Because the program is not institutionalized, referral is unsystematic, generally made by patrolmen under the programs's care, occasionally by wives who have heard about its services, by a few commanding officers who see virtures in the project, and, on two occasions, by a high union official who publically continues to oppose the program. Upon notification, one or more of the counsellors visits the officer to make an assessment. If he has been referred, the counsellor tries to learn if he believes he had a problem, and wants assistance. They give assurances of confidentiality, and talk about themselves and their difficulties.

If the officer is then willing to consider help, one of the counsellors visits his home to interview the family and assess the home life situation. If the patrolman's problem appears to have family roots or family consequences, as it nearly always does, the counsellor attempts to make arrangements for marriage or family counselling. If there are problems with drugs or finances, he begins arranging assistance on these. The counsellors are assisted informally by a small network of professions who are available to discuss cases, diagnose, and, to a limited degree, treat. They include an attorney, a psychologist, physician, and even a speech therapist.

To date the project has had contact with 91 alcoholics including 12 from police departments other than Boston. Most of them were referred by colleagues, wives, or themselves; and nine were sent to the program in disciplinary actions. Thirty-four of their wives have also sought assistance from the program on marital problems. In addition, the project has seen nine couples whose problems are not related to alcohol, one psychotic who eventually left the Department, and three officers depressed by deaths, two police officers who killed people and are suffering as a result. Three officers have been referred by the Department's Internal Affairs Division, two for threatening their families, and one for nonpayment of bills.

The typical officer under the care of the program is 47 years old, and has been in the Department 18 years. He is an active alcoholic who has been a problem drinker for 10 years, is a chronic abuser of sick leave, a lonely man with severe family and financial problems. He is well known in the Department to be alcoholic, has served in most police districts, and eventually has found a district in which people will not bother him. He comes to the attention of the Stress Program because one day his captain orders him there, because a colleague takes him there, or his wife, hearing about the Stress Program, calls it to ask for help.

If he agrees to try to let the program help him, the officer is sent for 12 days to one of the detoxification hospitals in the Boston area where he is visited by his counsellor each day. At the same time the counsellor begins visiting the officer's family. When detoxed, the officer returns to work and family, but is expected to attend AA meetings each night. He is called at least once every three days by his counsellor, and is seen by him at AA meetings.

Although alcoholism has been the focus of the treatment program to date, it has not been the only activity of the Stress Program. The staff is continued proselyting, speaking at in-service training.

Indeed, a good deal of the staff's work is intended to legitimize stress. They constantly say to police officers, "It is reasonable and not unmanly to feel; it is important for people to acknowledge their emotions. Failure to do so is dangerous to their health, family and general personal "welfare." The staff feel that their appeal has some value, and that as a result of it, police officers do come to talk to them and are able to speak about their feelings.

The staff have also developed a program for recruits and their spouses or fiances. They speak bluntly about the changes which occur in people who become police officers and things which cause them--marital strain, neighbor hostility, requests for favors, opportunities for graft and sex.

Some of the other activities undertaken by the program have been voluntary heart/blood pressure/cholesterol examinations, conducted outside the Department, a voluntary weight-reduction program in which 30 officers enrolled, a series of television, radio, and film appeals intended largely to increase public understanding of police stress, and dissemination activities including a conference held to encourage development of similar programs in other police departments, sponsored by the Massachusetts Chief's Association, and attended by 82 chiefs of police.

Perhaps the most important of the program's activities to date was a counsellor training class in which 20 patrol officers met weekly for 15 weeks. It was a program designed by the Department and the Boston University Counsellor Education Department. In the course, the students studied a variety of helping skills including non-verbal behavior, verbal behavior, establishing helping relationships, and so on. Didactic presentations, role-playing, video taping, "reaction papers," and stimulus films were all used to communicate and develop the skills; and throughout the particular problems of police officers were emphasized, including alcoholism and addiction, danger and fear, humiliation and anger, reactions to crisis and stress. All were dealt with from the perspectives of how the officer deals with the situation of himself and how he helps others while he himself is feeling stress.

The course was experimental, but because it was the first such course, the Department decided to treat it as a pilot, rather than an experiment, to see if such a course would be received enthusiastically by its students and whether they would perceive it as of value to them. The students were tested prior to the course and at the end of it; and did seem to respond to peer problems more openly and effectively after the course than they had at the beginning. A few of them demonstrated genuine promise as counsellors and most of them believe that the course has changed them as police officers.

As a result of the project, Boston University and the Department are preparing a new project design in which police officers would be trained under experimental conditions, and would be used by the Department in a variety of counselling roles--as case finders, peer counsellors both within the context of the Stress Program and in the context of patrol work in the districts, and teachers. In addition, there would be rigourous evaluation of the application of counselling skills to police work itself.

Assessment

It has been only a year since the Stress Program began, so assessing its activities is quite premature. But, looking back over the program's first year is worthwhile in two respects: First, although assessment may be premature, some issues have emerged clearly in the program, and are worthy of discussion; and second, the process of program development itself should be examined.

The achievements of the Stress Program are genuine. Police officers have been helped by its services, and are known in the Department to have benefitted from them. Fear of the program, inspired by the Patrolman's Association which believed that it would be a disguised effort to force out of the Department patrolmen with personal problems, has diminished. Some administrators are using the program, unconcerned that their acknowledgement of troubled police officers may reflect on their own abilities. There are even some signs that the program is beginning to be institutionalized by support from traditional command staff members.

It has made progress in other respects as well. Stress and its consequences are perceptibly more widely discussed in the Boston Police Department than was the case a year ago. Publicity given the program, once so fearsome to people in the Department, is now routine. In part, the diminuation of fear is due to the favorable attention given the program by police departments elsewhere in Massachusetts. It has been very difficult to regard the program as damaging to the Boston Police Department when departments elsewhere in the state have been speaking so highly of Boston's efforts and emulating them, often with our assistance.

There are other, even less tangible results. The existence of the Stress Program has effected the disciplinary processes of the Department, occasionally becoming a resource used by the Commissioner, and even more often used by others in the Department to dispose of matters before they become formal disciplinary issues.

But, if the program's achievements are real, a year after its beginning, the program's weaknesses are even more apparent. The first is that this effort which was supposed to have dealt with all sorts of police officers problems,

is an alcohol treatment project, dealing with family, financial, and other problems only incidentally to alcohol, and rarely getting involved with problems unrelated to alcohol.

It is true that the staff have made limited efforts to attract to the program people with problems other than alcoholism. But they have failed to do so. The alcohol orientation is a result of several factors. First, alcohol is genuinely a major problem of the Department. Because of the age of the Department perhaps, because of the culture of the City perhaps, or perhaps because drinking is an outcome of police job stress, alcoholism is probably the single biggest behavioral problem of the Department. So it is natural that it should have begun quickly to dominate the Stress Program.

A second reason for the alcohol orientation is that of all the problems police officers appear to suffer--marital conflict, psychosis, and suicide--including those unique to the police field--excessive use of force and reckless driving--alcoholism may be the least threatening and the easiest to acknowledge. Alcoholism is recognized by everyone to be a disease, even a tolerable and familiar one, whereas those other problems seem so difficult and frightening.

But the third reason for the program's alcohol orientation is the most disturbing: that is the orientation of the counsellors. In spite of their efforts to see human problems as broader than those caused by alcoholism, the counsellors, all of whom are reformed alcoholics, seem to have been unable thus far to do so. Their failure has confined the program, and has, on occasion, led them to misdiagnose and mistreat officers.

So, in spite of original intentions and objectives, the Stress Program is, so far, an alcoholic treatment program, and apparently a successful one.

A second major failure of the program is adminstrative. Thus far, the program is entirely informal and personal. Two of the three counsellors work as a team on every matter, and the third works only alone. Case records are practically non-existent, records of time are poor, liaison with professional back-up is weak and casual, and follow-up informal and referral is unsystematic. In the fact of this, the Department is relatively powerless to assist. For although the Department can suggest, urge, and cajole, it has little power to compel. In creating the program, the Department relinquished formal control over it.

But assessment of the program thus far, as I have suggested is unfair, since it is new and developing. It is important, however, to make some assessment of the way in which this program was created.

Stress research and treatment are quickly becoming in vogue in the police field. Two Federal government agencies are involved in research, and one private agency has given a large grant for a research-action program. It seems all but certain that during the next five years there will be stress treatment projects in most major police departments. And if the brief history of efforts to innovate in the police field offers any guide to the future, the projects will be created without much knowledge about what works and what doesn't.

Although the Boston program offers little guidance on this question, it does suggest that innovation under the conditions of adversity is very difficult and risky. The Department's administration and the patrolmen developing the

Stress Program devoted a great deal of time over a seven month period to winning the support of the Patrolman's Association. Ultimately, they failed to do so, although it is conceivable that their efforts to do so persuaded the Association not to oppose the program more actively than it did.

In any case, the project development process was based on a conviction that to have the union's support would have been immensely preferable to its opposition; and there is no reason to doubt this. Indeed, the importance of police unions in this field led the Police Foundation to fund a large project in which the International Conference of Police Association will conduct research on job stress, and ultimately establish treatment programs perhaps within individual police unions.

A second lesson of the project development effort is that patrolman innovation is difficult, risky, and on occasion, productive. Patrolman participation in change has been a theme of Robert di Grazia's administration in Boston. Patrolmen have been surveyed on equipment; they formed a majority on a task force created to rewrite the Department's rules and regulations; they staff the Planning and Research Division of the Department; they are called together in ad hoc groups for consideration of specific issues.

The Boston Police Patrolman's Association has opposed all of these patrolman involment efforts as subversive of its power; but on most occasions, its opposition has been futile. It was so in the case of the Stress Program. For the larger audience of patrol officers in the Department, participation in organizational change has become important, and even expected. It has spread throughout the Department as a way of making change, and even of doing routine business. For example, patrolmen serve on the ad hoc committee formed to review each use of a firearm.

To a Department like Boston, unaccustomed to innovation, the involvement of large numbers of personnel in making changes probably has made change smoother and easier. To a department like Boston's, non-bureaucratic and decentralized, it probably has been essential to involve large numbers of people in making change, since all significant changes can so easily be sabotaged. Indeed, on those few occasions in which the Department has attempted to make major changes without involvement, there have been clear failures.

Finally, the process of innovation in which Boston engaged does offer some guidance to other police departments which will consider establishing stress treatment programs during the next several years. Although the labor-management war fare of Boston is unique in the nation, job stress in policing is going to be a threatening matter everywhere and treatment programs are likely to be opposed. Changing the field reporting system of a police department or the manner in which man-power are allocated are complex and frequently difficult. But, they are changed without much emotional content.

Job Stress goes to the heart of police self-image. Merely to discuss it, much less creating programs to treat it, is to touch the emotions of police officers in very complex ways. It will require great understanding and sensitivity to create stress treatment without feeling "weak" and "unmanly." That Boston was able to do this is perhaps the most significant test of its process of innovation.

END