

# FIGHTING THE ENEMY WITHIN: HELPING OFFICERS DEAL WITH STRESS



By Rebecca Childress,  
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**"E**very year, correctional officers from across the country gather at a monument in Judiciary Square in Washington, D.C., to honor our brothers and sisters who have fallen in the line of duty," says John Carr, clinical supervisor of the Rhode Island Department of Corrections' (DOC) Stress Unit. "But a little-known fact is that correctional officers are three times more likely to commit suicide than they are to be killed on the job."

In fact, Rhode Island's Stress Unit owes its existence to the suicide of a local police chief 13 years ago. Several months after his death, a stress program was formed for correctional and law enforcement officers in the area. From that initiative, the Rhode Island DOC's Stress Unit evolved.

## CORRECTIONAL OFFICER WELLNESS

Correctional officers, much like police officers, operate in a work environment that is characterized by unusually high levels of stress. Although a great deal of research has been conducted concerning the causes and consequences of stress for law enforcement officers, there have been few examinations of the correctional environment. The existing studies of correctional officer wellness identify a number of factors, both environmental and organizational, that are potential stressors. These include, but are not limited to:

- Inmate demands and manipulation
- Low pay
- Overtime
- Poor public image
- Problems with co-workers
- Role ambiguity
- Role conflict
- Rotating shift work
- Threat of inmate violence

- Understaffing
- Unrealistic supervisor demands

The consequences of stress are varied and can include both physical and emotional symptoms. Correctional officers may become vulnerable to a variety of stress-related illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and gastroenterological problems.

Emotional problems also can surface, such as increased irritability, feelings of tension and depression. Addictive behaviors such as substance abuse, gambling and overeating may emerge as well. These problems can cause or exacerbate existing family problems. According to Francis E. Cheek's 1984 book, *Stress Management for Correctional Officers and Their Families* (American Correctional Association), the average divorce rate among correctional officers is higher than that of law enforcement officers and is more than the national average as well.

Carr's father spent his entire career in law enforcement and corrections. He died at the age of 54. "I feel that is too young, since I am 57 years old," says Carr.

According to Cheek's book, the average life span of a correctional officer is 59 years. If this holds true today, the life expectancy rate for correctional officers is significantly less than that of the general public and also is less than that of law enforcement officers.

Beyond the toll on the individual, occupational stress also is costly for correctional institutions. Officers suffering from stress-related medical or mental illnesses can greatly impact budgets. The financial losses incurred may include high staff turnover and the resultant loss of human resource recruitment and training investment, overtime, sick leave, early retirement due to job-related stress, and workers' compensation claims arising from avoidable injuries suffered or caused by a distracted employee.

## **NJ RESPONDS**

In 1994, the U.S. Congress authorized the Law Enforcement Family Support (CLEFS) program through Title XXI of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Assistance Act. This legislation authorized the exploration of methods to ameliorate the harmful effects of stress experienced by officers and their families. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the research, evaluation and development arm of the U.S. Department of Justice, was designated to award grants to state and local agencies and organizations to support research, demonstration and evaluation projects on stress intervention methods.

A year later, NIJ published *Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families*, which explored state-of-the-art practices for preventing and reducing the effects of police and family stress. Since the publication of this report four years ago, NIJ has solicited grant proposals from law enforcement and correctional agencies and the organizations representing these officers (i.e., unions or membership associations) to develop or examine a variety of subjects related to the causes, effects and solutions for job-related stress for officers as well as their families. To date, 24 grants have been awarded to correctional and law enforcement agencies and affiliated organizations.

The demonstration and training grants have included work in the following areas:

- Critical incident stress debriefing and management (CISD/CISM) techniques
- Peer support services
- Development of police psychological services referral networks
- Provision of police chaplaincy services
- Provision of rookie stress inoculation counseling
- Police organizational change and well-being
- Development of stress management training methods
- Development of train-the-trainer stress education programs

Grantees are now developing and demonstrating innovative stress treatment and training programs for officers and their families. Some also are researching the nature and causes of officer stress, as well as effective methods for its early detection. Through the NIJ-funded work of the grantees, knowledge is advancing in several key and previously understudied areas:

*The development, implementation and coordination of services.* We will have a greater understanding of the feasibility and impact of expanding services to families, including services traditionally offered only to officers.

*The feasibility and efficacy of various program elements/strategies.* We are developing knowledge on various program elements, such as mandatory vs. voluntary approaches; peer support vs. professional referrals; rates of use of various kinds of services (e.g., hotlines); the timing of interventions (e.g., during recruit training, in-service or following crisis); and the target of interventions (e.g., recruits, family members, supervisors).

*The efficacy of specific approaches.* Grantees are collecting and analyzing outcome data on a range of specific

## **TEN BEHAVIORS COMMON IN BURNED-OUT EMPLOYEES:**

- **Exhaustion**
- **Apathy or lack of involvement with job**
- **Inability to relax**
- **Bitterness or sour attitude**
- **Low morale**
- **Constant complaining about job or working conditions**
- **Frequently impatient or easily frustrated**
- **Always tense**
- **Frequently call in sick or leave work for the slightest reason**
- **Lack of interaction with co-workers**

*From Stressed Out: Strategies for Living and Working With Stress in Corrections, by Gary F. Dornelles, 1994, American Correctional Association.*

approaches to stress management and reduction; peer support; critical incident stress debriefings; anger management; and stress education. Although most are not carefully controlled outcome studies, they have yielded valuable information on approaches for dealing with specific stressors and target populations (e.g., state troopers, corrections personnel, tribal police, small and large departments, and university police departments).

*Basic understanding of officer and family stress.* Several data sets are being built. These data are coming from surveys, interviews and focus groups. We currently are developing a much-needed body of knowledge from a variety of departments regarding perceived stressors of spouses and other family members, new recruits, management, female officers and ethnic minority officers.

## **CONNECTICUT GAINS FOCUS**

In August 1998, the Connecticut DOC won a competitively awarded grant from NIJ. Funds from this grant are being used to support the DOC's "Families, Officers and Corrections" (FOCUS) initiative. Five correctional facilities in Connecticut, including the state's maximum security institution, were chosen to field-test FOCUS.

For free copies of NIJ's issues and practices report, *Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families* (NCJ 163175), write to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS), Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20848-6000. NCJRS also can be reached by phone at 1-800-851-3420 or via e-mail at [nljncjrs.org](mailto:nljncjrs.org).

To reserve a copy of NIJ's upcoming issues and practices report, *Addressing Correctional Officer Stress: Programs and Strategies*, contact Becky Sullivan, c/o Program Support, National Institute of Justice, 810 Seventh St. N.W., Room 7122, Washington, DC 20531; (202) 614-6000; fax (202) 307-6256; e-mail [sullivan@usdoj.gov](mailto:sullivan@usdoj.gov).

For information on NIJ's CLEFS grant opportunities, conferences and other correctional officer stress information, visit the NIJ Web site at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij).

FOCUS aims to help officers and their families learn how to better manage stress improve family communication skills, enhance coping skills and improve parenting skills. The following components were built into the program to help achieve these objectives:

- Introductory FOCUS and conflict resolution training during academy attendance with conflict resolution training provided on an annual basis thereafter;
- Workshops for both officers and their family members to cover a variety of topics related to stress, family relationships and parenting;
- Replicating a support group called Connections that already existed elsewhere in the state and was specifically designed to deal with the unique stressors of spouses and family members living with correctional officers;
- Provision of technical assistance to personnel officers to help them maximize employee and family participation in the existing Employee Assistance Program (EAP);
- Enhancement and expansion of EAP to permit a better response to critical incidents for both officers and their families, provide services for a greater range of incidents and include verbal harassment; and
- Dissemination of topical information on a variety of issues through upcoming workshops, available services, Connection group meetings and other venues.

Interventions provided by FOCUS are tailored to coincide with certain stages in the officer "career/life cycles." The premise is that officers generally follow a specific career path that requires them to negotiate several critical phases, all of which can be stressful. These critical junctures generally include graduation from the academy, eligibility to begin the promotional process, reaching a "career plateau," post-critical incidents, reassignment and retirement.

The interventions provided depend, in part, on the officer's progression through the career/life cycle. For example, an officer who recently has become eligible for promotion may receive brochures from FOCUS notifying him or her of available educational and training opportunities. Another officer who has been passed over for promotion may receive many of the same brochures in addition to a list of available support groups or information on how to obtain EAP assistance.

Thus far, the Connecticut DOC has administered a presurvey to all correctional officers to determine current stress levels and to identify potential stressors. This information has been used to focus curriculum development for the workshops in order to better meet the needs of the officers. Officer and family workshop training began in August.

## CORRECTIONAL OFFICER STRESS

Much attention has been given to the nature, causes and consequences of police officer stress, but few efforts have as yet been targeted toward corrections. We now are catching up and will be for some time. NIJ remains committed to the field of corrections and to developing the knowledge for evidence-based practice.

NIJ is completing a complementary, companion document to *Developing a Law Enforcement Family Stress Program for Officers and Families*. The publication, *Addressing Correctional Officer Stress: Programs and Strategies*, examines methods to mitigate correctional officer stress. It is scheduled for release at the end of the year.

To encourage corrections professionals to submit applications for funding (and thereby increase the number of correctional officer stress programs), NIJ sponsored a grant writing workshop in May. Forty-seven participants from 27 jurisdictions attended. The participants included administrators, researchers, counselors, EAP managers, and community and institutional correctional officers. As a result of this workshop, 25 of the 27 jurisdictions submitted proposals for CLEFS funding.

In addition, NIJ has invited researcher Dr. Robert Delprino to its staff as a visiting fellow. Delprino is examining the similarities and differences between police and correctional stress, expanding NIJ's current research portfolio and assessing the transferability of technology between the two professional groups. Delprino also will help conduct a national survey to assess the nature and extent of stress-related services available to correctional officers and their families.

NIJ recognizes the extraordinary demands of the corrections profession and the potential consequences to correctional officers and their families. It is hoped that this collective effort, supported by the CLEFS program, will not only expand the existing body of knowledge, but also will serve as a catalyst to heighten discussion about correctional officer stress and its effects.

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