



ADDRESSING SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN THE PUBLIC SAFETY POPULATION

Prepared by
Safe Call Now

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SAFE CALL NOW

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"Saving the lives of those who protect us"

The most potentially dangerous and seldom mentioned issue facing public safety personnel today is the existence of substance abuse and addiction among its ranks. With reported abuse rates over twice the national average for the general population, many of those entrusted to protect and serve the communities of America are struggling to hold their own lives together. For those public safety employees fighting the demons of substance abuse and addiction, they are also challenged by working within a professional culture that has historically discouraged them from asking for help. In fact, many public safety professionals who divulge their struggles to employers and seek assistance are given the option to quit their job or be let go. The result, they keep their substance abuse and addiction a secret. This dysfunctional way of doing business produces shattered lives for those personally impacted by the substance abuse and addiction, as well as a potentially perilous situation for the general public.

Safe Call Now[®], a non-profit organization, offers nationwide, comprehensive crisis referral services for all public safety employees and their family members. Established and managed by public safety officials, Safe Call Now[®] recognizes firsthand the stressors first responders encounter and offers a broad array of training, as well as a confidential, 24/7 crisis hotline staffed by current and former public safety employees. Additionally, Safe Call Now[®] is dedicated to erasing the stigma surrounding substance abuse and is committed to creating programs designed to save the careers and lives of those impacted by it. While Safe Call Now[®] is staffed to handle a wide array of crises, this document focuses on how the organization addresses substance abuse and addiction in the public safety population.

FACTS

- There are approximately 2.9 million first responders employed across America (U.S. Fire Administration, 2014) (United States Department of Labor, 2014).
- According to a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 8.2% of the general public suffer from an active alcohol or substance abuse addiction (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).
- The difficult nature of first responder work can create a higher-than-average risk for misusing substances such as alcohol, illegal drugs, and prescription medication (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).
- Studies tracking addictions in public safety professionals show the rate of abuse could be more than double that of the general population, impacting up to 23% of first responders (Hurrell, et al., 1984) (Violanti, Alcohol Abuse in Policing: Preventative Strategies, 1999).
- Substance abuse impacts mental capabilities and results in poor overall decision making, poor rapid decision making, poor attention, impaired concentration and blackouts (Florida Institute of Technology, 2015).
- Public safety professions are commonly listed among the most physically demanding and stressful jobs (ABC News, 2015).
- The first responder population is recognized as being at significant risk for developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to experiencing traumatic events and the extremely stressful, draining nature of their work (LaPierre, 2014).
- According to Dr. Laura Ferguson, Medical Director at Hazelden in Springbrook, Oregon, 52% of people diagnosed with PTSD during their lifetime were also diagnosed with alcohol abuse or dependence, which is two times more often than adults with no history of PTSD (Ferguson, 2014).

- Research indicates that a combination of alcohol use and PTSD produces a tenfold increase in the risk of suicide (Violanti, Predictors of Police Suicide Ideation, 2004)
- Substance abuse not only increases the likelihood that a person will take their own life, but is also used as a means for committing suicide (Ross, 2014).

OVERVIEW OF PROBLEM

Public safety professionals, otherwise known as first responders, are characterized as employees in the following occupations: law enforcement, firefighting, telecommunications (911 operators/dispatchers), Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel and corrections officers. Individuals in these job classifications are charged with providing services to communities and are expected to dedicate their lives toward safeguarding life and property. While some may perceive that working as a first responder is exciting and glamorous, the reality is that committing one's life to public safety can be psychologically damaging. First responders are exposed to a myriad of difficult circumstances throughout their careers which can be detrimental to their emotional well-being if not properly addressed. Examples of challenges public safety workers face include: coping with exposure to death and dismemberment; regularly processing extreme emotions, including anger, outrage and sadness during and after traumatic events (some of which involve the most vulnerable in society like children and infants); and coping with the fear and anxiety of responding to life or death situations with no certainty of survival. Additionally, some public safety professions, specifically law enforcement and corrections, have first responders frequently exposed to untruthful individuals. This negatively impacts the public safety professionals and their personal relationships as it leads to an inability to trust even those closest to them. Some public safety professions, primarily law enforcement, also face scrutiny from the public in the form of complaints or criticism from citizens, the media or their own administrators. Even when giving their best to protect and serve, many feel they are underappreciated and could never satisfy the masses. In their 2002 article, *Police Officer Attitudes and Community Policing Implementation: Developing Strategies for Durable Organizational Change*, Richard Lumb and Ronald Breazeale paint this picture:

Police officer stress leads to negative attitudes, burnout, loss of enthusiasm and commitment (cynicism), increased apathy, substance abuse problems, divorce, health problems and many other social, personal, and job-related problematic behaviors. Complicating these conditions is a police culture of silence and lack of direction in action to address individual problems before they escalate to disciplinary action, legal liability, or result in harm to others. Left unchallenged, the individual officer's effectiveness is hindered and the organization suffers from the aberrant behavior (Lumb & Breazeale, 2002).

The emotional trauma for first responders can be intense and similar to that faced by active duty military personnel and veterans returning from war. Due to the nature of their work, public safety professionals deal with inner turmoil that most in the general public could never understand or appreciate.

While some find healthy means to cope with the constant pressures of the job, for others, the stress of dealing with the worst that society has to offer is too much to handle. They find themselves mired deep in self-medication, using drugs, alcohol or other means to dull the pain, quiet the constant self-deprecating analysis of their actions or just to sleep. Oftentimes, the struggles impact more than just the individual; they affect family, friends, organizations and communities as well. Lacking confidence in their employer's ability or willingness to assist them and trusting no one will help, many first responders continue self-medicating until they are caught in the trap of substance abuse or addiction which typically leads to broken relationships, loss of employment or worse yet, death.

The accuracy and reliability of published suicide rates within the first responder population has been the impetus for much debate over the years. While some would assert those in the public safety professions commit suicide at a greater rate than that of the general public, others argue that contention is just a myth. Regardless, with research suggesting that the first responder population is at a high risk for PTSD, that a majority of those experiencing PTSD are prone to substance abuse and understanding a dual-diagnosis of PTSD and substance abuse together equates to a tenfold increase for suicide, it is imperative that steps be

taken to address the problem of first responders committing suicide. With 2.9 million first responders employed across America and with research showing up to 23% of them potentially suffering from substance abuse, the reality is that up to 667,000 public safety employees currently struggle with a potentially deadly condition.

Beyond the personal turmoil first responders face while struggling with substance abuse or addiction, the negatives also impact the communities they serve as well. Individuals suffering from substance abuse or addiction typically have impaired judgment and a diminished capacity to make quality decisions. Inherent to the job, many first responders are making split-second, life and death decisions on a daily basis and the effects of substance abuse or addictions may compromise their ability to impart sound judgment, resulting in citizens unnecessarily placed in harm's way. At best, the end result of an impaired public safety official responding to a critical incident is inferior service and, at worst, a potential catastrophe.

Safe Call Now®

Safe Call Now's® PROtect approach is a three-pronged, tactical plan for providing quality services for first responders in crisis while simultaneously taking action to impact the public safety professions' culture regarding substance abuse and addiction issues among its ranks. The strategic core of PROtect lies in the following:

1. **Proactive Training:** A comprehensive curriculum designed to educate all public safety officials on how to recognize the stresses of the job and to employ healthy support mechanisms to cope with the struggles resulting from the stress.
2. **Reactive Services:** A trustworthy, 24/7 crisis referral hotline dedicated to meeting the needs of public safety employees and their family members when they have nowhere else to turn.
3. **Occupational Mindset Modification:** Creating programs designed to change the cultural attitude in public safety professions regarding those struggling with substance abuse or caught up in

addiction. Championing changes regarding first responder certifications by lobbying for adoption of evidence-based models to give public safety employees in addiction the greatest chance for sobriety. Educating agency executives and lobbying legislative bodies for confidentiality laws and other proactive measures to reduce barriers to support services.

Through a dedicated group of employees and volunteers, Safe Call Now's® PROtect approach will make communities safer, enhance the well-being of first responders nationwide and most importantly, save lives.

PROACTIVE TRAINING

Safe Call Now® offers a wide variety of training aimed at providing quality instruction on how to recognize and address the various personal and professional issues that public safety employees and agencies face. Safe Call Now® staff and volunteers constantly analyze trends regarding the most difficult issues facing the public safety population and develop curriculum designed to mitigate the issues. Safe Call Now's® training focuses on personal wellness and, additionally, promotes professional health and emotional growth through innovative educational workshops that encourage participants to engage in individual and group dynamics while studying core areas of distress. The training also introduces cutting-edge methods and strategies for early intervention to avert individual, peer and family crises based on proven and effective remedies. Safe Call Now® has recognized the need to create customized trainings for line staff, labor representatives and administrators; offering a 360 degree solution to organizational and cultural deficiencies that lead to substance abuse and other distress issues.

REACTIVE SERVICES

Founded by public safety professionals, Safe Call Now® understands the first responder population and knows it is imperative to provide trusted resources. Whether an individual in distress is referred to a chaplain, financial coach, or treatment facility, public safety personnel or their family members contacting

Safe Call Now® can be assured that they will be connected with quality services that have undergone a vigorous vetting process. Regardless of their issue, individuals contacting Safe Call Now® for assistance can have confidence they will be provided with the highest level of care available.

Safe Call Now's® crisis hotline provides callers nationwide a safe place to turn for assistance without fear of reprisal, 24/7, 365 days a year. Protected by legislation in the State of Washington, those seeking help through Safe Call Now®, regardless of their location in America, can take comfort in knowing information divulged to the call-takers is protected by law and will not be disseminated without the caller's consent. This reassurance permits those in crisis the ability to openly discuss their struggles and find solutions without fear of recourse. Additionally, Safe Call Now's® hotline is staffed by current or former first responders that volunteer their time to support their colleagues. Understanding the cynical nature of most first responders and recognizing their resistance to talk to the general public, the philosophy of utilizing public safety personnel as call takers, otherwise known as Safe Call Now® Peer Advocates, is employed to bring a level of security to those calling in distress; creating the most comfortable conditions possible for those seeking assistance.

Safe Call Now® Peer Advocates are trained to respond to all types of crises, regardless of the severity. With a full range of services to offer, Safe Call Now® Peer Advocates develop a rapport with the callers before making a determination on how to best assist them. This initial service is offered at no charge to the person making the call. For those with issues that fall short of needing treatment or hospitalization, Safe Call Now® has partnered with Serve and Protect, a nationwide non-profit organization that has immediate access to over 3,000 chaplains across the United States dedicated to helping first responders resolve their issues. Those struggling with addiction or severe mental health issues will work directly with Safe Call Now® Peer Advocates to evaluate insurance options to provide the caller with the best possible referral to a trusted treatment or medical facility within the Safe Call Now® Treatment Coalition. Coalition members are vetted by Safe Call Now® staff and have met the rigorous standards set by the Safe Call Now® Board of Directors as acceptable to treat the first responder population. In order for

continuous acceptance into the Safe Call Now® Treatment Coalition or to be considered for any type of services, organizations must annually meet standards or face removal. This methodology insures the highest quality of care will be provided to the public safety professionals, no matter the severity of the crisis.

OCCUPATIONAL MINDSET MODIFICATION

Historically, many public safety employers have informally discouraged employees from reporting substance abuse issues and have received little to no training on how to address the growing issue within their professions. Where it is practiced, this traditional “just deal with it” mentality engrained in the public safety professions, coupled with a lack of information on how to handle employees in crisis, may contribute to the higher than normal substance abuse rates for first responders. In order to effectively impact the prevalence of substance abuse among first responders, a philosophical shift is required culturally throughout the public safety professions. Safe Call Now® is dedicated to affecting cultural change through the introduction of evidence based training and programs to the public safety professions which have proven effective to combat addiction, protect careers and save lives.

Safe Call Now® will champion reform in every state to tie sobriety to the certification of first responders. This endeavor will take lobbying efforts in every state as no nationwide certification program exists. If successful, the effort will allow those first responders with an identified addiction to be given the opportunity to save their career by submitting to 60-90 days of inpatient treatment followed by up to five years of case management. Failure to comply with the terms of the program would result in the certification to function as a first responder being revoked. The genesis of this model is based on the principles of the HIMS (Human Intervention Motivation Study) Program which was adopted by the airline pilots in 1974 after a study showed an 85% success rate of long-term abstinence for pilots completing the program (HIMS Program, 2014). The purpose of the HIMS Program is to effectively treat the disease of chemical dependency in pilot populations in order to save lives and careers while enhancing

flight safety. The HIMS concept is based on a cooperative and mutually supportive relationship between pilots, their management, and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Trained managers and peer pilots interact to identify and, in many cases, conduct an intervention to direct the troubled individual to a substance abuse professional for a diagnostic evaluation. If deemed medically necessary, treatment is then initiated. Following successful treatment and with comprehensive continuing care, the pilot is eligible to seek FAA medical re-certification (HIMS Program, 2014). Similar success stories are found in the model used by physicians which includes at least 60 days of treatment and five years of follow-up. A March 2009 article published in the *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* commented that the extended treatment and case management afforded to physicians could be employed more broadly and should improve the outcomes of standard addiction treatments (DuPont, McLellan, Carr, Gendel, & Skipper, 2009). Using proven models, Safe Call Now® will advocate for certification requirements tied to sobriety, working with first responders, public safety employers and state certification bodies to enact programs and processes already shown to be effective in other professions.

CONCLUSION

The substance abuse and addiction rates among the first responder population are concerning and traditionally little has been implemented to combat the problem. Safe Call Now® is the only nationwide crisis referral program offering trusted, confidential resources dedicated to first responders and their families. Through the PROtect approach, Safe Call Now® has the strategy and means to offer hope to those struggling with substance abuse or addiction while simultaneously enacting cultural change upon the entire realm of public safety. The end result, improved services, healthier employees and safer communities.

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