Chapter 1
Assessing Needs: Using a Wellness Survey to Guide Interventions

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ABSTRACT
For law enforcement agencies and the mental health professionals who serve them, one question is always foremost: How can we provide the right services to improve officers’ wellbeing? These decisions are typically made without any data about what officers want. This chapter details one agency’s attempt to solicit such feedback with an anonymous online survey about mental health and overall wellness. A brief background describes the context of the survey, which occurred at the same time as other mental health initiatives in the department. The authors discuss the choices involved in developing and promoting the survey, in hopes that readers will make better informed choices should they survey their own first responders. The survey results are reviewed, many of which (including the high response rate) were surprising, and the changes the department has begun to make in response to this feedback. The responses from 14 other public safety agencies throughout Virginia are also summarized.

INTRODUCTION
For law enforcement agencies and the mental health professionals who serve them, one question is always foremost: how can we provide the right services to improve officers’ well-being? Agency leaders must struggle to apportion their limited budgets in the most efficient manner possible; psychologists struggle to advise their agencies about what will do the most good for the greatest number. These decisions are

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typically made without any data about what officers want. Officers, meanwhile, know what they want but do not feel empowered to speak up: not only is there stigma about asking for help, there is also typically no reliable way to give such feedback.

This chapter details one agency’s attempt to solicit such feedback with an anonymous online survey about mental health and overall wellness. A brief background describes the context of the survey, which occurred at the same time as other mental health initiatives in the Department. The authors discuss the choices involved in developing and promoting the survey, in hopes that readers will make better informed choices should they survey their own first responders. The survey results are reviewed, many of which (including the high response rate) were surprising, and the changes the Department has begun to make in response to this feedback. The responses from fourteen other public safety agencies throughout Virginia who decided to conduct the survey themselves are also summarized.

BACKGROUND

The Fairfax County Police Department (FCPD) is a large suburban agency outside the nation’s capital. Approximately 1,400 officers police a county of 1.4 million residents, supported by approximately 300 civilian personnel.

FCPD is fortunate to have the budget to provide a wide variety of supportive resources to its officers and staff. A robust and well-trained Peer Support program includes approximately 50 officers spread throughout the agency, and there is a Police Chaplain assigned to every station and specialty unit. The County also provides an Employee Assistance Program to all county employees. Finally, FCPD contracts with a small group of police psychologists to provide comprehensive services: therapy, trainings, 24/7 critical incident response, and annual wellness checks. The supportive resources, known collectively as Incident Support Services (ISS), share a commander and often respond to critical incidents together. A separate psychologist conducts FCPD’s pre-employment screenings and fitness for duty evaluations. The department’s leaders, from the Chief down, are progressive in their thinking and supportive of mental health services.

Like most agencies, however, FCPD has known its share of tragedy. The Department has suffered from 15 suicides of active and retired officers in the last 30 years, five of which were in the last six years. Finally, in August 2017, an officer died by suicide in the parking lot of the station where he worked. Amid the shock and grief throughout the agency, many individuals felt called to act. For example, the Chief of Police began speaking openly at roll calls and to other agencies about trauma, making unprecedented individual efforts to destigmatize the effects of trauma and the benefits of seeking help.

The Department approved the survey in early 2018 as part of a coordinated response to an officer’s death by suicide. The overall goals were to raise awareness and reduce stigma about psychological health, trauma, and suicide. A team of Peer Support officers and psychologists, including the three authors, developed and promoted an educational video (“Consequences of the Badge”) that featured sworn personnel from local public safety agencies speaking openly about their intensely personal experiences with trauma and with their own suicidal ideation. Peer Support and two of the psychologists presented the video at every roll call throughout the Department. The survey was developed and conducted during this time period, which may help explain the high response rate (see below).
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