



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

WORKING THE BEAT: Law Enforcement and the Stress of Community Work

Law enforcement officers fill many roles in the community. Often community members expect a great deal of law enforcement—perhaps more than can be done by any one person or even a group. Movies and TV may give unrealistic expectations of what can be done and at times reinforce fears and prejudices about law enforcement professionals by depicting them as over-reactive or corrupt. Crimes are solved and perpetrators apprehended within 60 minutes on television and in the movies. Most of the public are unaware of the constraints that law enforcement personnel face. The high-cost, high-tech forensic labs of TV are not part of most communities. Members of communities also have conflicting viewpoints as to the priorities of law enforcement. Some are more concerned about nuisance crimes (i.e., drunkenness, rowdiness, or abandoned vehicles) within their neighborhood, whereas others are focused on stronger measures to curb serious and violent crimes. This distance between the public's views and hopes for law enforcement and the actual tasks, jobs, priorities and resources of our law enforcement forces creates tension, can lead to conflict, and can diminish community-law enforcement partnerships for the joint goals of a safer community and nation.

What can law enforcement professionals do to decrease stress and increase community support and involvement in policing and law enforcement to protect our communities?

- Provide brief informational presentations and reports for local radio, television stations, and newspapers. This will help give communities a clear understanding of the role of law enforcement.
- Inform yourself of the concerns of your community. Make attempts to address even apparently minor situations that cause concern within the community.
- Be aware that police goals of maintaining the peace and providing security may be experienced as impinging on personal rights. When you are working a challenging shift it may be tempting to believe you do not need to explain your actions to the public. Taking a moment to listen can go a long way in building trust.

- Recognize the disparity between critical law enforcement objectives and public concerns which may be in conflict these objectives--particularly in times of disaster or large-scale emergency.
- Ally yourselves with young persons at every opportunity. Participate in after-school programs for youths within the neighborhood to develop relationships and familiarize yourself with their struggles.
- Volunteer to speak at local schools and community events. The more the community is aware of the identities and concerns of its officers, the more community relations will improve.
- Remember that we must all be on the same team when confronted with threats to national security, the proliferation of illicit drugs, and violent predators. Focus on the task at hand and avoid negative thoughts of blame or guilt.
- Educate the community on what its members can do to reduce crime and help with ongoing investigations
- Be aware not only of your skills but also your limitations. Holding unrealistically high personal or team expectations can lead to unproductive interactions and compromise your efforts.