Sergeant Rich Stringer

Taking Care of Coworkers: The Effect of Line-of-Duty Deaths on Officers

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In 2007, tragedy struck the Glendale, Arizona, Police Department when Officer Anthony “Tony” Holly was shot and killed on February 19. He was just 24 years old and had served with the department for two years. Officer Holly received his training at the department, in part, by Sergeant Rich Stringer, then an 11-year veteran of the Glendale Police Department.

Sergeant Stringer admits he didn't cope well with the first line-of-duty death of a colleague that he had experienced. When he first heard the news, he was understandably devastated. After calling his own family members, Sergeant Stringer went straight to the hospital where his fallen friend had been taken, despite knowing that Officer Holly had died. Afterward, he went to a bar,
where Officer Holly's classmate from the academy asked why he (the classmate) got to live when Officer Holly had to die. Sergeant Stringer didn't have a good answer for the young officer, but he still felt responsible for trying to lead others even while he struggled deeply with the loss himself.

In the days and weeks following, Sergeant Stringer says he cried every day in his office when no one was looking and took to drinking alcohol every night.

> It went on for a year before I reached out and got help. I finally met with a counselor who helped me get back on track, but I learned later I never really let go.

Like many police officers, the sergeant had very little trust in confiding in anyone to help him through his grief.

In 2011, tragedy struck again when the Glendale Police Department lost Officer Bradley Jones in the line of duty. Rich did not know Officer Jones as well as he had known Officer Holly, which made it a bit easier to cope.

> This slight separation from knowing Brad and his family at the level I had known Tony allowed me to step in and be a resource to others. I went in and worked patrol that night and was able to be there for the officers that were hurting. I was able to provide guidance, comfort, and resources to his sergeant and squad.

However, although Sergeant Stringer was able to help his colleagues through this second tragedy—and even played a role in persuading Officer Jones’ sergeant to attend a retreat for officers who had lost a coworker in the line of duty—he did not take advantage of the same resources for his own grief.

In 2016, the line-of-duty death of Phoenix, Arizona, Police Office David Glasser hit Sergeant Stringer the hardest, as he had also trained Officer Glasser in the academy. Soon after, Sergeant Stringer lost yet another colleague who was experiencing post-traumatic stress and died in an unexplained single-car crash. In that case, Sergeant Stringer was tasked with telling his friend's wife and daughter, whom he knew from his work as a high school coach, that the officer had died.

His emotions after the fourth loss finally convinced Sergeant Stringer to attend the Co-Workers Retreat hosted by Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.).
While I never turned back to alcohol after all that 2016 brought, I could not overcome the feeling of anxiety every time I put on the uniform to go to work.

Sergeant Stringer was pleasantly surprised to discover the peaceful setting of the retreat (a YMCA lodge) and the various experiences, from the challenge of successfully climbing the Alpine Tower to the therapeutic relaxation of arts and crafts to the many laughs he shared with new friends from around the United States.

While at the retreat, one of the counselors, Dr. Kathy Thomas, introduced Sergeant Stringer to EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) Therapy, which immediately removed all feelings of anxiety. He learned that the grief he suffered in 2007 and again in 2016, coupled with the additional deaths and normal stresses and trauma he experienced throughout his career, had led to his anxiety. Following EMDR, he felt immediately better. Since that one-hour session with Dr. Thomas, Sergeant Stringer has not experienced anxiety.

As Sergeant Stringer points out,

*We as officers are bombarded with a lot of pain, trauma, heartbreak, and negativity in society that certainly impacts our outlook. It is usually not just one trauma, but the culmination of all of the trauma in our careers that changes us. However, through the resources available, we can learn to process our feelings and emotions in a healthy manner in order to do our jobs. More importantly, we can process our feelings in order to be good spouses and parents.*

Sergeant Stringer is the first to say that it took too long for him to take advantage of the help he should have been using all along. As a well-educated sergeant whose assignment had included training more than 250 sworn officers from across the state of Arizona, he still fought the same fight that most officers fight. They will do anything to provide a service to others, but they struggle when it comes to getting help for themselves.

**Make Getting Help a Cultural Norm**

What can law enforcement leaders do to make sure their officers get the help they
need, even when they might not want it? Make it the cultural norm of your agency through these four steps.

1. Create a trained peer support team. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Peer support works, and free resources are available for agencies to help them train and set up a team.

2. Provide access to a mental health provider who is specifically trained to work with law enforcement. Don’t make the mistake of failing to screen potential providers to ensure they understand the law enforcement culture. Ensure the confidentiality of the officers or they will not use this resource.

3. Mandate annual, confidential mental health “check-ins” with a mental health provider for every sworn officer in the agency, with follow-up as necessary. If everyone has to do it, there is no stigma. Treat it like a physical with a doctor. Leaders should go, too. It is often surprising how the officers who say they will “never talk” in one of these meetings end up talking the most.

4. Don’t be afraid to use outside resources, such as C.O.P.S. or other qualified organizations. Many programs are offered free of charge, and these organizations’ counselors and instructors have usually been fully vetted by law enforcement officers.

**Conclusion**

Losing a coworker in the line of duty is a life-changing experience. Because law enforcement officers work in a culture where having each other’s backs can viewed as the most important thing, the grief and trauma associated with the loss of a coworker can be personally and professionally harmful if not addressed. The relationships between officers often mirror family relationships, and the dynamics of losing a law enforcement coworker can be similar to the stress and trauma of losing a family member. However, as demonstrated by Sergeant Stringer’s experience, if actively managed, grief and trauma can be worked through to allow for positive results.

More information about C.O.P.S.
C.O.P.S. HANDS-ON PROGRAMS

C.O.P.S. knows that in the wake of a line-of-duty death, many lives are affected. Whether you are the spouse or child of an officer, a parent or sibling, an aunt, uncle, or significant other, even a co-worker or close friend, there is an inherent need for a safe space to grieve and to process the feelings and memories surrounding that loved one. C.O.P.S. programs are designed to allow participants to do just that. With 11 Hands-On Programs designated for each group, C.O.P.S. provides retreats specifically formatted to support the survivors as they learn to cope. **The programs are free to survivors to attend.** The only cost to the survivors is their travel to and from the program. The C.O.P.S. Hands-On Programs include:

- Co-Workers for Couples Retreat
- Adult Children's Retreat
- Young Adults Camp
- C.O.P.S. Kids Camp
- Outward Bound Adventure
- Finances & Significant Others Retreat
- Siblings Retreat
- Spouses Retreat
- Co-Workers Retreat
- Extended Family Retreat
- Parents Retreat

**Click to learn more about these programs, including the dates and locations of upcoming retreats and camps.**