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# STAYING HEALTHY IN THE FRAY

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*Family Wellness Guide*

SEPTEMBER 2022



AN OFFICER SAFETY AND WELLNESS RESOURCE GUIDEBOOK



This report was prepared by the National Policing Institute (NPI). The National Policing Institute is the oldest nationally known, non-profit, non-partisan, and non-membership driven organization dedicated to advancing policing through innovation and science.

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The internet references cited in this publication were valid as of the date of publication. Given that URLs and websites are in constant flux, the National Policing Institute cannot vouch for their current validity.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FAMILIES

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First responders, including law enforcement personnel, often refer to their work as a “calling.” Law enforcement officers place high value in protecting and serving their communities. The responsibility and the challenges that police officers take on impacts the officers, their families, and their friends. Families and friends of officers regularly experience stress related to their loved ones’ work.<sup>1</sup> It is important to recognize the stress and anxiety that officers’ families endure and provide them appropriate support and resources.<sup>2</sup> Employee and family wellness should be part of the overall culture of a given department. If wellness exists as part of the organization’s culture, where employees and their families are supported every day, it may need to simply be heightened, more assertive attention during times of significant stress. Building and offering a program only in times of crisis or acute stress is ineffective.

While acknowledging that officers’ families are not immune to the impact and challenges of law enforcement, agencies must also understand that families are a critical part of an officer’s wellness and job performance. Therefore, providing law enforcement families with reliable tools and information helps them create a stable environment that fosters resiliency for their law enforcement family members.<sup>3</sup> As discussed previously in the guide, *Staying Healthy in the Fray*, the current environment – including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, negative mainstream and social media attention, civil unrest and attacks directed at law enforcement officers<sup>4</sup> – has significantly contributed to the stress that officers and their families continue to face.<sup>5</sup>

In many ways, families serve as the first detector in an “early warning system” when determining whether an officer is struggling. Families know their officers best – they are with their officers at their most vulnerable times, and officers may show their families things that no one else sees. This guide provides resources that will help officers and their families forge relationships grounded in wellness and provide practical approaches to wellness at home and at work.

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1 International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2021). Family Matters: Executive Guide for Developing Family-Friendly Policies, Procedures, and Culture. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

2 VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Program. (2020). Kick Stress to the Curb. VALOR eLearning-Kick Stress To The Curb - VALOR for Blue. Retrieved July 11, 2022, from <https://www.valorforblue.org/eLearning/KickStressToTheCurb>.

3 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Executive Guide for Developing Family-Friendly Policies, Procedures, and Culture. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

4 Tucker, E. (2022, January 14). Intentional killings of law enforcement officers reach 20-year high, FBI says. CNN. Retrieved May 12, 2022, from <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/13/us/police-officers-line-of-duty-deaths/index.html>

5 Sherry, A. (2022, March 21). ‘This really took a toll’: Boulder Shooting is why many officers left their jobs last year. Colorado Public Radio. Retrieved May 12, 2022, from <https://www.cpr.org/2022/03/18/boulder-shooting-is-why-many-police-officers-and-911-workers-left-their-jobs/>



# HOW COMMUNICATION CAN PROVIDE SUPPORT TO OFFICERS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

Communication between the officer and their family members provides a foundation for the health and wellness of them all. Setting expectations and boundaries, discussing emotions, and preparing for anticipated higher-stress situations can be incredibly impactful for both the family members and the officer.

Officers and family members should work together to set expectations of when and how they would like to communicate in order to best meet everyone's needs. It is essential for spouses and partners to understand how officers prefer to decompress after a rough shift. This can help manage expectations and facilitate a communication strategy that considers each person's coping mechanisms. If a loved one usually needs time to decompress, allow some time to pass before engaging them in conversation, or expecting them to engage with or take care of household chores and childcare duties. Establish that boundary before it becomes a point of contention. This process helps to maintain a healthy and open dialogue, without increasing stress.

Officers can maintain open lines of communication such as discussing the feelings or emotions experienced while responding to a certain call, while excluding the details of the call which might cause more stress for family members. Talking about feelings and the meaning behind them can be just as cathartic as completely debriefing an event. Often, officers believe they should "leave work at work," and not "bring it home." For most people, officers included, it is not possible to remain unaffected by daily work experiences.

## SETTING EXPECTATIONS

Officers should be clear and honest by letting their family members know what type of support they need. While this may not be easy, without communicating these needs, family members may attempt to provide support in counterproductive ways or communication may deteriorate. One way to discuss things that might be difficult is to simply tell loved ones how you felt or how you are feeling, and they can provide support by actively listening and being understanding. It is important to establish boundaries and appropriate courses of action for when the conversation or support needed goes beyond what the officer or family member is equipped to provide. Family members need to have established resources to turn to as well. Find out if department benefits extend to family members, such as utilizing an EAP provider, mental health clinician contracted through the department, or peer support team. If a department does not offer these types of programs, family members can look for a therapist or counselor through their health plan, or a referral from a primary care physician.

If periods of extended, or particularly dangerous and difficult, assignments can be anticipated, officers and their families should work together to identify and prepare for each family member's preferred styles of communication. It is perfectly acceptable for an officer or a family member to say, "I may not be able to talk about this right now, but I will." The acknowledgement that stress from an event exists, steps are being taken to manage this stress, and validating family members' desires to know more can help relieve the sense of urgency that some may feel surrounding particularly stressful events such as protests and mass demonstrations.



# CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN

Communication with children is more nuanced and complicated. Officers can help prepare their children for extended shifts and increased time away from home if these details are known in advance. There are several things officers can discuss with children to help alleviate the feelings of doubt or fear they may be experiencing:

- How the officer, the people they work with, and the department are working to keep everyone safe while responding to these crisis events<sup>6</sup>:
  - This can be done by taking the time to explain the value and utility of safety equipment, such as police radios, safety vests, ballistics vests, the layout of a police vehicle, and the fact that there are “back-up plans” in place to keep everyone safe
  - Consider the possibility of the agency hosting a family night where family members, and particularly children, can tour the department (including specialized units such as K9, and SWAT), or dispatch center
- What the child can look forward to doing, and sharing, once the officer is home<sup>7</sup>
- What the child can make for the officer or give them to carry while the officer is at work<sup>8</sup>

## MANAGING CHILDREN’S STRESS LEVELS

Managing stress in children is of the utmost importance in fostering a home environment that conveys a sense of security, confidence, and openness. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) has developed several resources for discussing a family member’s job in law enforcement with children; these resources can be found in Appendix A of this guide. Some of the suggested topics, which can be discussed in addition to those listed above, are:

- Detailing the nature of the officer’s job, how they keep people safe, and perhaps providing details of a typical day in law enforcement<sup>9</sup>
- Explaining the unconventional schedule, and how it may cause the officer to miss certain events<sup>10</sup>

6 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

7 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

8 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

9 Helping Your Young Child Understand Your Job. International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2018, February 22). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/Axon%20Family%20Wellness-Young%20children.pdf>

10 Helping Your Young Child Understand Your Job. International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2018, February 22). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/Axon%20Family%20Wellness-Young%20children.pdf>



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- Expressing that it is neither the child's, nor the family's responsibility to defend the officer, or the law enforcement field should people in the community, or the media (traditional news or social) portray law enforcement in a negative light<sup>11</sup>
  - Encouraging the child to keep an open line of communication with the officer or their spouse/partner regarding any feelings of stress or uncertainty they may be experiencing<sup>12</sup>
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It is imperative for children to understand that policing is often not the way it is typically portrayed on television shows, in the news, and in movies. Officers are responding to a myriad of calls that can include directing traffic, finding lost children, or helping members of the public. Breaking down typical day-to-day activities can be helpful in conveying that officers are not always in a dangerous situation, thereby alleviating some of a child's concerns. It is also helpful to emphasize the difference between possibility and probability, as an infographic created by the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program (SAFLEO) states.<sup>13</sup> Let the child know that while there is a possibility of an officer getting injured, it is not likely. For some, information can often be the best way to relieve anxiety surrounding the unknown. Knowledge is power and managing expectations is one way to provide a sense of security.

Give children as much information as will help in addressing the uncertainty they may feel when the officer responds to certain events or goes out on their shift. This information should always be provided in an age appropriate manner. For additional guidance on how to best do this, consult with an EAP provider, a police psychologist, the child's pediatrician, or school guidance counselor. Keep in mind that some wellness programs and/or EAPs will also cover an officer's family for therapy or telehealth.

## WARNING SIGNS OF STRESS IN CHILDREN

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) discusses ways children might react when an officer returns home:

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- Acting shy<sup>14</sup>
  - Expressing anger at the officer's absence<sup>16</sup>
  - Withdrawing from the officer and/or the spouse or partner, or family activities<sup>15</sup>
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11 Discussing Your Job with Your Teen. International Association of Police Chiefs. (n.d.). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from [https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Officer%20Family%20Wellness\\_Teen.pdf](https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Officer%20Family%20Wellness_Teen.pdf)

12 Discussing Your Job with Your Teen. International Association of Police Chiefs. (n.d.). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from [https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Officer%20Family%20Wellness\\_Teen.pdf](https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Officer%20Family%20Wellness_Teen.pdf)

13 National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers (SAFLEO) Program. (2020, December). Nine Ways to Build Strength in Relationships. <https://safleo.org/api/ResourceLibrary/Resources/f8abel64-a9fa-423a-9c08-08da39a76081/3295a746-61e7-47ce-3b6c-08da39a76084/9%20Ways%20Infographic%20Digital.pdf>

14 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

15 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

16 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>





In the same way family should be patient with an officer once they return from an extended assignment, officers and adult family members must also be patient with children as they reacclimate to the officer being home.

It is often underestimated how much children can and do comprehend what is going on around them; they understand and internalize mannerisms, attitudes, and even when people around them are stressed.<sup>17</sup> For example, babies can pick up on emotions, and use these perceptions as a guide for how they should react to certain situations.<sup>18</sup> Long-term exposure to stress for children can have negative implications for their overall health, both physical and mental, and can even impact their brain development.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it is extremely important to address a child's stress as soon as it is identified.

Some children may not express stress in ways one would expect. They may internalize these feelings and, instead, their manifestations of stress may present themselves through physical ailments, such as:

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■ Headaches<sup>20</sup>

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■ Stomachaches<sup>21</sup> or changes in appetite<sup>22</sup>

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■ Changes in sleep habits<sup>23</sup>

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■ Changes in behavior<sup>24</sup>

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■ Avoiding social situations<sup>25</sup>

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■ Acting angry, defiant, or hostile<sup>26</sup>

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■ Ignoring or forgetting their responsibilities<sup>27</sup>

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■ Getting sick more often<sup>28</sup>

Officers and adult family members should be mindful and cognizant of any changes they may notice in children. Being the child of a police officer is a unique position to be in when compared to their peers, particularly in this day and age. It is imperative to approach children from a place of understanding and acceptance. Parents and family members can take the opportunity to talk to their children about their experiences, and emotions,

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17 Ellis, R. R. (n.d.). Effects of parents' stress on a new baby. WebMD. Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.webmd.com/parenting/baby/features/stress-and-your-baby>

18 Is stress contagious? study shows babies can catch it from their mothers. University of California San Francisco. (2014, February 6). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2014/02/111661/stress-contagious-study-shows-babies-can-catch-it-their-mothers>

19 Kehoe, M. (2017, January 12). Can Babies Tell When You're Stressed? It May Be Time To Breathe. Romper. Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.romper.com/p/can-babies-tell-when-youre-stressed-it-may-be-time-to-breathe-29245>

20 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

21 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

22 Alvord, M., & Halfond, R. (2019, October 24). How to help children and teens manage their stress. American Psychological Association. Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.apa.org/topics/child-development/stress>

23 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

24 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

25 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

26 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

27 Alvord, M., & Halfond, R. (2019, October 24). How to help children and teens manage their stress. American Psychological Association. Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.apa.org/topics/child-development/stress>

28 Alvord, M., & Halfond, R. (2019, October 24). How to help children and teens manage their stress. American Psychological Association. Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.apa.org/topics/child-development/stress>



at age-appropriate levels, and help guide their children through processing these experiences.<sup>29</sup> Being able to label one's feelings is extremely empowering, and parents and family members can help children do this by offering vocabulary and explanations for what they are experiencing.<sup>30</sup>

## WHEN OFFICERS RETURN HOME

When your loved ones are preparing to return home from their shift, or from a protracted policing event, such as responding to civil unrest or mass assembly, you and your family can do a lot in terms of easing the potential stress of the coming days for your loved one.

To prepare, family members may consider these tips from the SAMHSA:

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- Keep social commitments to a minimum; give the officer time to decompress at home with family first<sup>31</sup>
  - Maintain or resume regular routines as much as possible; this is “a return to safety, security, and ‘normality’”<sup>32</sup>
  - Avoid discussing graphic details in front of those who might be sensitive to this type of information, especially children; and avoid asking the officer more questions – grant them the space to discuss events once they are ready<sup>33</sup>
  - Allow the officer to reintegrate themselves into homelife and habits<sup>34</sup>
  - Be patient and set reasonable expectations<sup>35</sup>
  - Encourage the officer to seek help through peer support or a mental health professional if needed
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The American Psychological Association (APA) offers several more strategies to help families navigate the effects of trauma and stress together:

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- Recognize that every person, and each member of the family, may deal with trauma and stress differently<sup>36</sup>
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29 Pelini, S. (2021, February 3). An age-by-age guide to helping kids manage emotions. The Gottman Institute. Retrieved September 19, 2022, from <https://www.gottman.com/blog/age-age-guide-helping-kids-manage-emotions/>

30 McLean Hospital. (2020, April 30). 4 ways to help children manage emotions. 4 Ways to Help Children Manage Emotions. Retrieved September 19, 2022, from <https://www.mcleanhospital.org/essential/4-ways-help-children-manage-emotions>

31 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

32 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

33 A First Responder Spouse's Guide to Post Critical Incident Support. Cordico. (2022, March 21). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.cordico.com/2020/08/21/a-first-responder-spouses-guide-to-post-critical-incident-support/>

34 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

35 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

36 DeAngelis, T. (2008, January). Helping families cope with PTSD. Monitor on Psychology, 39(1). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/jan08/helping>





- Acknowledge that a traumatizing event impacts everyone in the family and not just the person who experienced it firsthand<sup>37</sup>
- Agree on how the traumatizing event will be discussed or treated with individuals outside the family unit<sup>38</sup>

## PREPARING FOR UNFORESEEN EVENTS

One way that families can feel more secure and in control of their situation is by being prepared; there is empowerment in controlling the things you can, as a family, to prepare for events which might be out of your control. The best resource a family can have is one they can create for themselves. Families should develop a plan to prepare in case of emergency (such as a fire or gas leak), manmade or natural disaster, public health crisis, or prolonged periods of shiftwork for their loved ones. Families can prepare by:

- Having a plan of action or a plan of care for each family member (elderly, children, pets, etc.) in various types of emergencies<sup>39</sup>
- Compiling kits for different types of emergencies:
  - Medicine, disinfectant, and personal protective equipment (such as masks) in case of illness<sup>40</sup>
  - First aid kit<sup>41</sup>
  - Flashlights, batteries, battery-powered phone charger<sup>42</sup>
  - Emergency fund, if possible<sup>43</sup>
  - List of important contact information<sup>44</sup>
- Have a household evacuation plan:
  - This can include a previously agreed upon “meeting place,” in the event that you get separated while out with the family, or if something unexpected takes place, for example: everyone knows to meet at the family car

37 DeAngelis, T. (2008, January). Helping families cope with PTSD. *Monitor on Psychology*, 39(1). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/jan08/helping>

38 DeAngelis, T. (2008, January). Helping families cope with PTSD. *Monitor on Psychology*, 39(1). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/jan08/helping>

39 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

40 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

41 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

42 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

43 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

44 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.



# PREPARING FOR UPCOMING MAJOR EVENTS

In the days or weeks leading up to events where major events, such as periods of civil unrest, are expected, families can prepare by:

- Avoiding mainstream news or social media, which may heighten emotions
- Reviewing the family's agreed upon communication style, which should incorporate individual coping mechanisms and decompression periods for officers when returning home from shiftwork
- Having additional childcare in place, if needed
- Asking for additional support from family members and loved ones
  - For example: Coordinating with family or friends to pick up groceries, to drop off or pick up the kids from school, to take them to sporting events or extracurricular activities. This can help maintain a sense of normalcy while providing additional support for the officer's spouse or partner.

## ONLINE SAFETY

Finally, families can also take steps to safeguard themselves and their online and personal information. Protecting the personal information of the officer and family members can be done by:

- Request to blur images of the home on Google Maps<sup>45</sup>
- Contact the tax office to see if officer's address can be removed from public record
- Practice online safety when posting to social media:
  - Avoid posting photos of children's faces
  - Be aware of who followers are
  - Ensure any photos that are posted do not contain identifying information such as license plate numbers or home addresses
  - Make social media accounts private

Some of this may seem extreme, but there have been instances of doxing and other electronic intrusion such as individuals locating and coming to officers' homes.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Google. (2022). Blur or remove 360 photos with the Street View app. Google maps help. Retrieved May 20, 2022, from <https://support.google.com/maps/answer/7011973?hl=en&co=GENIE.Platform%3DDesktop>

<sup>46</sup> Lee, J. (2020, August 3). Protesters show up at Seattle police chief's home in Snohomish County. FOX13 News Seattle & Western Washington. Retrieved May 20, 2022, from <https://www.q13fox.com/news/protesters-show-up-at-seattle-police-chiefs-home-in-snohomish-county>



# WARNING SIGNS OF STRESS IN OFFICERS

Signs of stress in officers with which law enforcement leaders, supervisors, and colleagues should be familiar include increased sick days, avoidance of home (such as voluntarily taking on more overtime, or a side job), and increased anger and irritability. Ultimately, family members know their loved ones best, and know how they handle stressful events – what is “normal” in their coping process, and what is not.

Here are some general signs of stress to be aware of when a loved one returns home from high-stress events, to include policing demonstrations and other events:

- Heightened feelings of anxiety, agitation, resentment, grief, guilt, self-doubt, hopelessness, sadness, or depression<sup>47</sup>
- Increased isolation, pulling away, or need for “alone time”
- Drastically decreased communication with family members or friends
- Increased or decreased religiosity or spirituality<sup>48</sup>
- Increased sense of paranoia or hyper-vigilance<sup>49</sup>
  - Paranoia could be directed at bad actors but also toward the department itself; officers may have a fear of being retaliated against for seeking help, or may question if their caseload is more or less than their peers
- Troubled sleep including nightmares, insomnia, or fatigue<sup>50</sup>
- Intrusive thoughts<sup>51</sup>
- Change in appetite<sup>52</sup>
- Increased use of substances, drugs, or alcohol, to include prescription medications<sup>53</sup>
- Having intense reactions to minor events<sup>54</sup>

47 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

48 Normal, S. B., & Maguen, S. (2020, April 20). Moral Injury. Va.gov: Veterans Affairs. Retrieved May 20, 2022, from [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral\\_injury.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral_injury.asp)

49 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

50 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

51 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

52 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

53 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

54 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>



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- Impaired decision-making<sup>55</sup>
    - This could include driving while intoxicated, aggressive conduct, instances of domestic violence, increased complaints at work
  - Decreased immune response including frequent colds, coughs, or other illnesses<sup>56</sup>
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Immediately following high-intensity police activities, family members should keep a close eye on their loved one and trust their instincts. Everyone's reactions and responses to stress and trauma differ, these signs and symptoms could begin to dissipate over time, or symptoms may present themselves several weeks or months after a traumatic event. If a family member has cause for concern, seek help for the officer.

Several signs, however, require immediate medical attention, including:

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- Confusion, disorientation, or memory loss<sup>57</sup>
  - Pervasive feelings of isolation, depression<sup>58</sup>
  - Acute symptoms which might indicate a psychiatric episode (auditory or visual hallucinations)<sup>59</sup>
  - Obsessive fear or anxiety<sup>60</sup>
  - Overall decline in personal hygiene<sup>61</sup>
  - Dangerous use of substances or alcohol, to include prescription medications<sup>62</sup>
  - Any signs of abuse toward others<sup>63</sup>
  - Suicidal thoughts or tendencies:<sup>64</sup>
    - This can include veiled threats, such as:
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55 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

56 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

57 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

58 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

59 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

60 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

61 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

62 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

63 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>

64 Tips for families of returning disaster responders. SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, September). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4872.pdf>



- “You and the kids would be better off without me”
  - “I just want the pain to end”
  - “I’m worth more dead”
  - “I’m never going to be good enough, why bother?”
- While some of these expressions can seem as though they are intended to be taken as sarcasm, they can be a cry for help.

**IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS STRUGGLING OR IN CRISIS, HELP IS AVAILABLE. CALL OR TEXT 988 OR CHAT 988LIFELINE.ORG.**

## HOW FAMILIES CAN SUPPORT THEMSELVES

One of the best ways to ensure a healthy household for officers is for each family member to be able to recognize and manage his or her own stress. Finding one’s own support network is crucial to avoid projecting stress onto family members. This support could mean individual therapy, or a family or spousal program offered by the officer’s agency.<sup>65</sup> Many times, however, officers and their families forget that therapy and mental health services are provided through a referral from their primary care physicians as well. Unions and community groups can also offer support services.

Spouses and partners provide emotional support behind closed doors for their loved ones serving on the frontlines and are often their greatest defenders, and most trusted confidants. Often, they see the struggles that no one else sees. However, this places an unimaginable burden on partners of law enforcement officers, on top of the usual tasks they must deal with in their households and daily lives. It is critical for spouses and partners to take care of themselves first, to be able to best support their loved ones and families. Self-care is different for each person; the important thing is to find ways to address physical and mental health to prevent illness.

### PRACTICE SELF-CARE

While this guide discusses multiple methods for managing stress, and self-care techniques in the *Staying Healthy in the Fray* guide, in the section titled “Recommendations for Frontline Officers,” many of the approaches are also important for members of an officer’s family. Some of these techniques include maintaining healthy nutrition, exercising regularly, finding one’s own sense of community, and engaging in a hobby or recreational

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<sup>65</sup> A First Responder Spouse’s Guide to Post Critical Incident Support. Cordico. (2022, March 21). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.cordico.com/2020/08/21/a-first-responder-spouses-guide-to-post-critical-incident-support/>



activities. Self-care might also include meditation, taking time alone, walking in nature, or even journaling.

It is important to recognize and acknowledge the stress that many law enforcement officers and their families are under. Internalizing struggles may perpetuate feelings of isolation and diminish opportunities to find solidarity and support in others, some of whom may also be experiencing similar challenges.

## HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN SUPPORT OFFICERS' FAMILIES

Law enforcement agencies can support officers and their families by acknowledging the current environment and the impact it may be having on their workforce. Law enforcement leaders should establish programs that support their sworn and civilian staff, as well as their families. Supportive programs include, for example, employee benefits such as offering family leave (including maternity and paternity leave), health and wellness programs for family members, family peer support groups, spouse or partner groups, financial planning, retirement programs, physical fitness programs (use of the department's facilities or gym membership reimbursement for the officer and his/her partner), and offering overtime.<sup>66</sup> All of these allowances can help to alleviate some of the practical issues that might contribute to officers' stress, which in turn impacts their families. Additionally, it is more common to see agencies offering private spaces for breastfeeding or pumping, and meditation or sleep rooms which can all contribute greatly to family health overall.

The *Staying Healthy in the Fray* guide discusses multiple methods organizations can use to support the emotional, mental, and spiritual health of their employees, which can contribute to a healthier home and family life. This can be done through:

- Employee assistance programs (EAPs)
- Peer support programs
- Family or spousal support programs
- Specialized personnel on staff such as a mental health provider, or a chaplain<sup>67</sup>
- Automatic regular wellness visits with a licensed, qualified mental health professional
- Automatic critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) protocols with peer support and/or a licensed, qualified mental health professional

Police unions can provide support as well. While organizations should do everything within their power to uphold employee wellness, the same can be said for unions. Mental health providers and contractors should be thoroughly vetted to ensure that families are covered by holistic wellness programs, including having

66 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. *Family Matters: Executive Guide for Developing Family-Friendly Policies, Procedures, and Culture*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

67 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. *Family Matters: Executive Guide for Developing Family-Friendly Policies, Procedures, and Culture*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.





access to EAP, and knowing how to get help for their loved ones, while still being protected by confidentiality and mandatory reporting requirements. Law enforcement executives should make it a point to fully explain Informed Consent and discuss it with family members as well.<sup>68</sup> For more options, see the “Recommendations for Executive and Senior Leadership” section of the Staying Healthy in the Fray website or corresponding guidebook.

Department-hosted “family wellness nights” can be a great opportunity to engage families and immerse them in the officers’ daily lives. The department could offer to provide dinner and childcare to include everyone in this process. Events may feature a guest lecturer, and materials could be provided to family members that help guide. Helpful resources can include printouts which contain an overview of the department’s wellness program, contact information for appropriate personnel (such as a licensed, qualified mental health professional, or the peer support team), descriptions of each facet of the wellness program, and EAP information.

The IACP also offers additional guidance for organizations in establishing a family support group, which includes strategies such as:

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- Establishing a forum to post information about the group and where resources can be readily searched and obtained<sup>69</sup>

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  - Reinforcing a principle of privacy and confidentiality<sup>70</sup>
    - Some states have statutory obligations governing confidentiality in Peer Support Programs; it’s helpful for departments to be aware of privacy regulations

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  - Designating a trusted liaison to facilitate communication between the group and the department<sup>71</sup>

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  - Providing various support mechanisms and educational opportunities<sup>72</sup>

To finalize a well-rounded employee care system, organizations should establish programs and practices to support family members through secondary trauma, issues with substance use and abuse, and even managing childcare challenges.<sup>73</sup>

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68 American Counseling Association. (2014). 2014 code of Ethics - American Counseling Association. American Counseling Association. Retrieved May 20, 2022, from <https://www.counseling.org/resources/aca-code-of-ethics.pdf>

69 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2019. How to Start a Law Enforcement Family Support Group: Insights and Considerations. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

70 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2019. How to Start a Law Enforcement Family Support Group: Insights and Considerations. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

71 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2019. How to Start a Law Enforcement Family Support Group: Insights and Considerations. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

72 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2019. How to Start a Law Enforcement Family Support Group: Insights and Considerations. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

73 International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2021. Family Matters: Executive Guide for Developing Family-Friendly Policies, Procedures, and Culture. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.



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# FINAL THOUGHTS FOR FAMILIES

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Families of first responders may often feel like their struggles are unseen, or that they cannot voice them for fear of worrying their loved one in law enforcement. Families are the support system behind the badge. Every family member in this support system, however, needs a strong foundation for themselves, a form of selfcare, an outlet for their emotions, and a sound communication strategy that conveys their preferred coping mechanisms and boundaries. It is incredibly important to recognize the stress and anxiety that officers' families endure and provide them appropriate support and resources. Providing resources which help officers and their families forge connections grounded in wellness and offering practical approaches to wellness at home and at work will result in healthier minds, relationships, households, and communities.



# APPENDIX A: VALOR INITIATIVE PARTNER RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

## BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE (BJA) RESOURCES

- Law Enforcement Officer Safety and Wellness Resource Page: <https://bja.ojp.gov/program/law-enforcement-officer-safety-and-wellness/overview>
- VALOR Initiative Page: <https://bja.ojp.gov/program/valor/overview>

## INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHIEFS OF POLICE (IACP) RESOURCES

- IACP Officer Safety and Wellness Resource Page: [www.theiacp.org/OSW](http://www.theiacp.org/OSW)

## CAREER RESILIENCY

- Enhancing Officer Wellness and Resiliency in Policing: [https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/Enhancing%20Officer%20Wellness%20and%20Resiliency%20in%20Policing%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/Enhancing%20Officer%20Wellness%20and%20Resiliency%20in%20Policing%20(1).pdf)
- Mastering Work-Life Balance: <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/Mastering%20Work%20Life%20Balance.pdf>
- Supporting Officers after the Badge: Considerations for Officer Retirement: [https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/246191\\_IACP\\_Officer\\_Retirement\\_p5.pdf](https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/246191_IACP_Officer_Retirement_p5.pdf)
- Supporting Officers after the Badge – The Impact of Retirement on Law Enforcement Families: <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/Officer%20Retirement%20Impact%20on%20Family.pdf>

## INFOGRAPHIC SERIES

- Helping Your Young Child Understand Your Job: <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/supporting-officer-safety-through-family-wellness-helping-your-child-understand>



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- Discussing Your Job With Your Teen: <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/supporting-officer-safety-through-family-wellness-discussing-your-job-with-your-teen>
  - Injury Reduction: <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/supporting-officer-safety-through-family-wellness-injury-reduction>
  - Financial Literacy: <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/supporting-officer-safety-through-family-wellness-financial-literacy>
  - Estate Planning: <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/supporting-officer-safety-through-family-wellness-estate-planning>
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## REPORTS, GUIDES, AND TOOLS

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- Employee and Family Wellness Guide: <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/employee-and-family-wellness-guide>
  - Mental Wellness, Resilience, and Suicide Prevention Brochure: <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/Suicide%20prevention%20brochure%202020.pdf>
  - Comprehensive Framework for Law Enforcement Suicide Prevention (NOSI Resource): [https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/NOSI\\_Framework\\_Final%20%28002%29.pdf](https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/NOSI_Framework_Final%20%28002%29.pdf)
  - Strategies for Safe and Positive Messaging (NOSI Resource): [https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/244736\\_IACP\\_NOSI\\_Messaging\\_p7.pdf](https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/244736_IACP_NOSI_Messaging_p7.pdf)
  - Law Enforcement Agency and Officer Resilience Training Program (VALOR Resource): <https://www.theiacp.org/projects/law-enforcement-agency-and-officer-resilience-training-program>
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## INSTITUTE FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL RESEARCH (IIR) – BJA VALOR OFFICER SAFETY AND WELLNESS PROGRAM RESOURCES

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- VALOR Program Website: <https://www.valorforblue.org>
  - Agency Planning and Support for Employee Crisis: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1071/Agency-Planning-and-Support-for-Employee-Crisis>
  - Behind Closed Doors: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/497/Behind-Closed-Doors>
  - Building Resilience: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/567/Building-Resilience>
  - Critical Incidents and Post-Traumatic Stress: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1217/Critical-Incidents-and-Post-Traumatic-Stress>
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- Debriefing Trauma: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1328/Debriefing-Trauma>
  - Got A Minute? Let's Talk About PTSD: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1352/Got-A-Minute?-Let%E2%80%99s-Talk-About-PTSD->
  - Post Critical-Incident Stress Management: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1225/Post-Critical-Incident-Stress-Management>
  - Reduce Stress: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/571/Reduce-Stress>
  - Seven Ways to Alleviate Stress: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Blog/25/Seven-Ways-to-Alleviate-Stress>
  - Some Wounds Are Invisible: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/14/Some-Wounds-Are-Invisible-Poster>
  - Stress Reduction - 3 Things You Can Do to Reduce Negative Impacts of Stress: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1349/Stress-Reduction%E2%80%943-Things-You-Can-Do-to-Reduce-Negative-Impacts-of-Stress>
  - Surviving Organizational Stress: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1218/Surviving-Organizational-Stress>
  - There is Hope: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1386/There-is-Hope->
  - Understanding the Cycle of Stress and Its Associated Risk Factors Within the Law Enforcement Profession: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/669/Understanding-the-Cycle-of-Stress-and-Its-Associated-Risk-Factors-Within-the-Law-Enforcement-Profession-Poster>
  - While We Have You...Let's Talk About PTSD: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1357/While-We-Have-You-Let%E2%80%99s-Talk-About-PTSD->
  - While We Have You...Let's Talk About Stress: <https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/1356/While-We-Have-You-Let%E2%80%99s-Talk-About-Stress->

## UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA (UCF) RESTORES RESOURCES

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- UCF RESTORES provides guidance on coping with stress, healthy sleeping, sadness and depression, and stress and anger management: <https://ucfrestores.com/resources/stress-management/>



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## APPENDIX B: ABOUT THE NATIONAL POLICING INSTITUTE

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The National Policing Institute (NPI) is a non-partisan and non-membership 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to advancing the impact and delivery of police services through reforms and enhancements guided by innovation and science. For the last 50 years, the Institute has led the development of research on all aspects of policing and leads the way in promoting and sharing evidence-based practices and innovation among law enforcement. The Institute works with communities across the U.S. and internationally to provide research, training, and technical assistance relating to community engagement and problem solving, promoting safety, and healthy organizations and officers, the reduction and prevention of violence, and equitable and fair justice for all. For more information, please visit the National Policing Institute website at [www.policinginstitute.org](http://www.policinginstitute.org).





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## APPENDIX C: ABOUT THE BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE

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The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) helps to make American communities safer by strengthening the nation's criminal justice system. Its grants, training and technical assistance, and policy development services provide state, local, and tribal governments with the cutting-edge tools and best practices they need to reduce violent and drug-related crime, support law enforcement, and combat victimization.

BJA is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office for Victims of Crime, and Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking. To learn more about BJA Programs, follow us on visit [www.bja.gov](http://www.bja.gov), or follow us on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/DOJBJA](https://www.facebook.com/DOJBJA)) and Twitter ([@DOJBJA](https://twitter.com/DOJBJA)).