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Working for You: Burnout, Stress, and Fatigue: How the
Vicarious Trauma Toolkit Provides Public Safety Agencies
National Resources and Promising Practices

IACP Working for You: Burnout, Stress, and Fatigue: How the Vicarious Trauma Toolkit Provides Public Safety Agencies National Resources and Promising Practices

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After twenty years in law enforcement, I have seen the personal effects of the transition from well-meaning rookie to cynical cop to a fully jaded human being. And I see the same thing in many others around me. Far too many public safety professionals are losing themselves to the profession they love. Any training and awareness tools and resources that can be added to their careers will keep our people happy and productive longer. Thanks for doing this research and thanks for trying to make a difference.

—Anonymous law enforcement survey respondent

One of the most significant challenges law enforcement leaders face is the need to develop and implement effective policies and practices to support agency members. Police work is often stressful; proactive inclusion of policies and practices that recognize the impact of acute and long-term stress and trauma on agency members goes a long way in reducing negative consequences and increasing overall resilience of individual officers; the agency; and, ultimately, the community served.

Identifying the Issue

Police work exposes agency personnel to traumatic and potentially lethal incidents that can inflict physical and psychological harm and negatively impact officers' health and well-being. The impact of exposure to the trauma of others is often referred to as vicarious traumatization, burnout, compassion fatigue, critical incident stress, or secondary traumatic stress. No matter which term is used, the individual exposed to the trauma may struggle with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, suicidal ideations, increased use of force, marital and familial issues, and other challenges.

If these psychological threats to personnel are left unaddressed, not only will individuals be at risk for such consequences, but the effectiveness of the entire organization and public safety can also be undermined. Organizations may see reductions in productivity, abuses of leave, and adversarial interactions with coworkers, family, and the public. These reactions exist on a spectrum from manageable to tragic; law enforcement executives' leadership in implementing relevant policies, practices, and programs can mitigate or prevent negative impacts to the individual, agency, and community.

It is imperative that law enforcement agencies comprehensively understand the current internal and external department climate in order to identify the department's strengths, as well as gaps and areas for improvement to best support members. Leaders must be prepared to address the influences that negatively impact effectiveness and efficiency and begin a dialogue about mental health and wellness. These changes will shift values and attitudes within the agency.

Even for leaders who are eager and motivated to update their agency's practices, determining where to start can be a daunting task. Methods such as surveys, interviews, and other organizational assessments are useful in identifying department strengths and needs. Once these are identified, successful evidence-based and industry-wide promising practices can be utilized.

Vicarious Trauma Toolkit

Through an interdisciplinary and collaborative effort, law enforcement agencies now have an evidence-informed and discipline-specific resource to help them address the impact of the work on their members through key organizational responses.

Since 2013, with funding from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), Northeastern University's Institute on Urban Health Research and Practice in Boston, Massachusetts, has led the effort to create the Vicarious Trauma Toolkit (VTT).[1] The VTT, which was released in 2017, is a first-of-its-kind online toolkit developed by a multidisciplinary team of first responder organizations, including those representing law enforcement, victim service providers, emergency medical services, firefighters, and researchers. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) contributed a visiting fellow to the team. The toolkit moves beyond the usual focus on what the individual can do for "self-care" and attends to the duty and responsibility of professional organizations to sustain their staff using evidence-informed approaches. The interactive, online platform provides first responder organizations with a "Compendium of Resources" that contains nearly 500 items: policies, practices,

and program descriptions; research literature; and links to websites, podcasts, videos, and testimonials from each discipline. Additionally, new tools created just for the VTT fill gaps in currently available resources, including an organizational assessment tool. Each item in the compendium has been vetted and sorted by discipline.

For the Field by the Field

The VTT project partners provided guidance and subject matter expertise throughout the process of creating the toolkit. In addition to the IACP, partners included the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the National Association of State EMS Officials, the National Center for Victims of Crime, the National Children's Advocacy Center, the Center for Violence Prevention & Recovery at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center, and the Northeastern University Institute on Urban Health Research and Practice.

The toolkit's creation was the result of intensive collaborations among the project team members and its intended users—first responders and victim service providers. This collaboration was accomplished through a variety of methods including national surveys and calls for materials, expert summits to review and guide the VTT's development, and pilot testing of a rudimentary toolkit by seven pilot site teams each comprising the intended disciplines: law enforcement, emergency medical, fire, and victim services. The pilot sites were chosen for their diversity in geography and demographics. They included government, nonprofit, and tribal agencies. The pilot site locations were Allegany and Cattaraugus Counties, New York; Austin, Texas; Buncombe County, Asheville, North Carolina; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; Glendale, Arizona; and Great Falls, Montana.

The VTT—A Resource for Organizations to Become Vicarious Trauma–Informed

The VTT recognizes that exposure to the trauma of others is an occupational challenge for first responders and victim service providers. The VTT also recognizes that organizations can mitigate the negative impacts of vicarious trauma and that it is their duty and responsibility to do so. In addition to the personal health and well-being of employees, the organization will benefit from reductions in absenteeism, workers' compensation claims, costs of overtime for fill-back, and low morale.

To see these benefits, organizations must become vicarious trauma–informed, and the VTT helps organizations chart a course toward achieving this goal. The first step is to use the *Vicarious Trauma Organizational Readiness Guide (VT-ORG)*, an evidence-informed organizational assessment tool created and field-tested specifically for this toolkit.

The *VT-ORG* assesses an organization's current capacity to address vicarious trauma in five areas that organizational and relational psychology research identifies as key to healthy organizations: Leadership and Mission, Management and Supervision, Employee Empowerment and Work Environment, Training and Professional Development, and Staff Health and Wellness. The *VT-ORG*, designed to be disseminated and filled out at every level within an organization, has a series of questions in each of these categories to help agencies recognize and appreciate organizational

strengths regarding vicarious trauma–informed policies, procedures, practices, and programs already in place and identify gaps that deserve attention. The VT–ORG then assists organizations in navigating the toolkit's Compendium of Resources to help them address their identified gaps.

Success and Impact of the VTT

The reality is that raising awareness about vicarious trauma and promoting organizational change regarding this issue are difficult. The logistics of implementing training and new practices occur in an environment where law enforcement agencies are asked to do more while receiving fewer resources. Leaders are tasked with finding innovative ways to navigate the expectation to "do more with less," while internal and external needs, policy and procedure revisions and additions, and competing fiscal priorities require attention and strain resources. Agency improvement efforts also take time, people power, and fiscal ability; all of this must be balanced with maintaining quality services and programs.

The experience of one law enforcement agency demonstrates here how addressing vicarious trauma was integrated into ongoing operations. Like other agencies using the VTT, it not only found resources to address gaps identified by the *VT-ORG* but also identified other ways to improve its organizational response.

After completing the *VT-ORG* for law enforcement, this agency identified a need for formal peer support services for officers experiencing trauma as a result of responding to a critical incident. The agency then used the Compendium of Resources to find relevant, existing policies and literature on the subject, including the following resources:

• *Denver Police Department Peer Support Program,* which offers a standard operating procedure for a peer support team and includes a history of the team, policies, and job descriptions

• *Police and Sheriff Peer Support Team Manual* by Jack Digliani, with several resources for setting up and maintaining a peer support team

Although the initial search was for general resources on peer support, in exploring the compendium the agency leaders discovered another dimension they had not considered: the need for specialized peer support services specific to integrating and reintegrating military veterans into their force. This specific agency employs a number of officers who are active reservists and deploy regularly.

The VTT search evolved into a search for literature and training specific to veterans. This expanded search exposed potential liabilities the agency could face if adequate resources were not provided for this community within their ranks. The search also yielded an operational directive that was being used by the Roanoke, Virginia, Police Department and could be modified for implementation in this agency.[2]

As the agency continued to identify resources and promising practices, leaders identified an additional issue not currently addressed: catastrophic long-term illness. Agency leaders were aware of the inherent exposures to trauma by their officers on a day-to-day basis, but, through the availability of tools in the VTT, they came to realize that more support could be provided to officers battling catastrophic long-term or terminal illnesses. Over the past few years, several officers within the agency

were diagnosed with varying types of cancer. A diagnosis does not preclude an officer from working, so these individuals were working while battling a disease. Similar to the agency's new practice of focusing more closely on support services for veterans, agency leaders also researched available resources for officers facing potentially fatal illnesses. As demonstrated by this agency's experience, a tangible need exists to remain vigilant in identifying the myriad issues employees face. The VTT is a place to find resources to address these issues and more.

The *VT-ORG* gives agencies a starting point to see where they need to go to become more informed about vicarious trauma. As demonstrated by the example discussed herein, once gaps in an agency's ability to address vicarious trauma are uncovered, departments can use the toolkit to find sample policies and practices, training curricula, and PowerPoint presentations to address these gaps and enhance capability. Additionally, the VTT offers guidelines on key topics such as how to gain buy-in from agency leadership, entitled "Making the Business Case" and "Talking Points for Leaders," which use the IACP Message Box format to outline how agency leaders can use the VTT to address vicarious trauma in their agency.

What's the End Game?

The success of any law enforcement agency is directly associated with the wellness of their employees. Ensuring employees are healthy sets the stage for enhanced productivity and better community relations.

Law enforcement as a profession is inherently dangerous, and repeated exposure to trauma can be devastating if left unaddressed. Most first responders believe they entered this profession well aware of the risk, but soon realize they were not as alert to the adverse effects of the job as they previously thought. Line-of-duty deaths, suicide, substance abuse, failed relationships, and financial hardships add to an already tremendous load that officers carry as a part of their day-to-day duties. It is imperative that law enforcement agencies and administrators do everything in their power to ensure that the adverse effects of the job are addressed swiftly and with compassion. The key to success for any agency is balancing the needs of the organization, the employees, and the community.

The VTT provides agencies with a means of discovering current practices that can be readily implemented. It is a much-needed and long overdue evidence-informed resource that will enhance the effectiveness of any agency willing to take an unobstructed view of themselves. ♦

Notes:

[1]Office for Victims of Crime, "The Vicarious Trauma Toolkit," Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

[2]Roanoke Police Department, "Peer Support Team," Operational Directive: 84.2.2, February 10, 2014.

Positive Comments from the Field

These comments by individuals in different law enforcement agencies are representative of the VTT's reception in the law enforcement field.

Taking full advantage of the VTT's Compendium of Resources is one way agencies can approach the challenge to "do more with less" by building on the work of other agencies before them rather than "re-inventing the wheel."

—Anonymous Law Enforcement Pilot Site Team Member

I was able to pull really excellent policies from the Denver PD and other organizations, and I said to myself, "You do not have to reinvent the wheel … You can find all these samples." So I sent those to [my supervisor] and he was so excited, saying, "That is exactly what I needed."

—Anonymous Law Enforcement/Mental Health

I am a part of NCLEAP, which is the North Carolina Law Enforcement Assistance Program, and I have basically described it as a resource guide that has hopefully a lot of the best practices and up-to-date materials in it. It is also occupation specific, whether fire, EMS, or police or it is specific to all. It will be something that hopefully anybody can go onto that is interested in this and pull up the best information that is out there.

—Anonymous Law Enforcement

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