



DODGE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Dale J Schmidt Sheriff Scott Mittelstadt Chief Deputy

February Sheriff's Column – Employee Mental Health

Have you ever wondered how a law enforcement officer manages the emotional weight of seeing traumatic scenes we are forced to see every day? I'd ask you to consider how you would manage emotions of responding to the types of incidents I am about to describe.

Imagine responding to a fatal crash involving a family of four who was struck head-on by a semi on a slippery winter road. You are the first on scene and find three of them are alive. However, of those three, a seriously injured wife lost her husband and two young injured children lost their father, forever.

How about responding to a crash where a young boy was struck by an automobile while riding his bike and you arrive to see EMS working hard to save the little boy's life as the mother watched praying for him to survive. You then try to maintain your composure to comfort that mother, as they are unable to save him.

Could you imagine your feelings going to a house where a child has died at the hands of their parent? You see the child has injuries all over their body and you know that the child died in agony.

These are a small sampling of real situations I have responded to in my career. As I write this, tears return to my eyes. My prayers continue to be with these families as their pain obviously far exceeds mine. However, that does not diminish the collective weight these horrible incidents have on those who respond. Our first responders see more tragedy in a couple of shifts, at times, than most people see in their entire lives. Multiply that by a 30-year career and imagine the toll it can take emotionally.

At the sheriff's office, we recognize the need to ensure our staff are mentally healthy. If our staff are not healthy, how can they help others? For years, our agency has led critical incident debriefings, which include any first responder at a critical incident including Fire, EMS, and hospital staff. This allows responders to talk about what they saw in hopes of helping manage the stress and emotions that come with these serious incidents. It has been an excellent first step.

In 2018, our staff took this to another level by forming a peer support team. Our staff took on the task and the program has been very successful. It is a confidential support team available to any first responder who may need to talk. They are peers trained to listen and help staff through difficult times related to work or even non-work-related stress. It has been a highly successful program and is used regularly.

We have a third piece to this employee assistance that is a new partnership with Church Health Services in Beaver Dam. We have entered into an agreement with them to provide zero-cost counseling services

to sheriff's office staff at any time they need, for any reason. This is professional services by a trained counselor in a confidential setting to ensure our staff remains mentally healthy.

Finally, in my position as VP of the Badger State Sheriff's Association, I have been fortunate to partner with the Wisconsin Chiefs of Police Association as we worked to get legislation passed last year allowing for law enforcement officers with PTSD to be taken care of under the worker's compensation provisions in Wisconsin.

When my staff serves you they need to be mentally healthy or you will not receive the best service possible from my staff and I must provide for them. In doing so, it will help us to more effectively keep Dodge County a safe and enjoyable place to live, work and visit.

Sheriff Dale J. Schmidt