

SAFLEO Issue Brief Series #1

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Spotlight on

# How to Help Your Law Enforcement Loved One

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Law enforcement officers are often reluctant to seek mental health treatment for a variety of reasons, including the perceived stigma associated with accessing therapy or other services and fear of risking their employment if they are unable to perform their duties at an optimum level. Those closest to the officer hold a special kind of influence when trying to convince them to seek help.

This brief lays out steps that may help family members, friends, and others support an officer that they love and shares practical strategies for providing assistance.

## Communication strategies for broaching the subject of treatment

When communicating with your loved one about seeking treatment for a mental health or substance abuse issue, it can help to approach it from the aspect of care and a concern for their safety and well-being. Officers are highly trained in personal protection (e.g., use of force, de-escalation techniques, etc.). They likely are less trained in managing their own emotional responses to the job and all they experience during their career, or in ways to deal with the inevitable impact that the job has on their family and private lives.

Phrases such as “I love you, and I want you to be safe and healthy” can have an impact.

Find a time that you can have a serious discussion that is not stressful or hurried. This is probably not immediately after a shift or when you are in the middle of an argument.

1. Start by telling your loved one how much you care about them, that they matter, how important they are and how you want to keep them safe.
2. Share examples of what is worrying you and why. Keep the language first person and positive: “I am worried because,” instead of, “You are such a mess.” Ensure that you avoid both verbal words and body language that could cause the individual to feel like they are being judged or attacked.
3. Talk about how you want to be there for them and help them get help. Suggest helping them make an appointment with their primary care doctor, going with them to talk to a therapist, or calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline together.

## Ways to find appropriate treatment options

It is sometimes difficult to find treatment options for officers when they are going through a crisis. Your loved one’s department might have internal mental health services, wellness/peer support programs, or an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that includes therapists who are contracted to help with mental health. Some EAPs allow a certain number of visits for officers and family members each year. If you need additional help excluding those visits, the EAP can provide referrals.

Another good place to start is to link with your loved one’s local union or Fraternal Order of Police. They can often provide a list of resources for mental health treatment and may even be able to help with paying for services. In addition, it may be helpful to reach out to an agency chaplain, peer support group, local clergy, or a network of mental health providers such as a local society for clinical social work or association of psychologists. There is often a “word of mouth” network established among these agencies where clinicians skilled in working with law enforcement can be identified.

# ● ● ● How to Help Your Law Enforcement Loved One

## **Collaborating with the law enforcement agency to provide the best care**

Many law enforcement agencies are now housing wellness programs and wellness coordinators. Every program is different, but in general, these programs can help officers and their families develop resilience and provide support during times of mental health need. When it is feasible, try to develop an understanding of what is available at your loved one's agency and encourage your loved one to use these resources.

There are times when mental health treatment may be mandated by an agency. As policy and procedure allow, families should be a part of the discussion about what steps need to be taken for an officer to remain on duty or to return to duty.

## **Accessing community resources**

Law enforcement officers may need more than just outpatient mental health counseling. It is helpful to identify resources that address the unique experiences and needs of law enforcement. Advocate for your loved one to utilize these resources. It is important to connect with other community resources, including support groups or twelve-step programs. Look for resources that will allow family members to be an integral part of the treatment.

## **Self-care and self-advocacy while supporting your loved one**

It is vital that you take care of yourself while trying to assist your officer in getting help. Navigating the mental health system can be unwieldy and frustrating for anyone, and especially for those who are trying to seek competent services for officers. Take time to rest and put things in perspective. Engage in self-care activities, such as exercising, reading, meditating, practicing your hobbies, taking breaks, and managing your time to allow for rest.

## **Addressing issues of suicidal thoughts, substance misuse, and other crises**

Each year, more officers die by suicide than are killed in the line of duty. If an officer is talking of suicide or has made suicidal gestures, it is vitally important that they get the help that they need. The same is true for officers who may be abusing alcohol or drugs. Family members and friends should support their loved one and reach out to resources, including the agency, to make sure that the officer is safe and has access to help.



## My Local Resources

## Resources

- Primary care physician
- Culturally competent clinician (in person or online)
- Professionally led support group
- Peer support group
- Employee Assistance Program
- Agency chaplain
- Clergy
- Supervisor
- Human resources
- Trusted colleagues
- Friends or family members
- Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: call 988
- Crisis Text Line: Text "BLUE" to 741741

## SUICIDE IS PREVENTABLE, AND IT STARTS WITH YOU!

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