

# Family Matters

Emergency Preparedness Considerations  
for Law Enforcement Families



**COPS**  
Community Oriented Policing Services  
U.S. Department of Justice



## *Introduction*

When a disaster or crisis strikes, law enforcement personnel are often the first to respond to protect their communities. These officers often leave behind family members who may experience stress and uncertainty. This toolkit will help law enforcement families and officers prepare for an emergency. By being proactive and prepared, officers can report for duty feeling better about their own family's level of safety.

## *Before an Event*

Emergency preparedness planning is not a one-time activity. It involves gathering and replenishing supplies, updating documents, and adapting safety plans. These plans should be updated every few months and at the first indication of a potential crisis.

### **Types of crises and how to prepare for them**

It is important to consider that different emergencies require different responses when building a family emergency preparedness plan.

### **Natural or man-made disaster preparedness**

Check out the emergency kit checklist in the appendix on page 7.

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Wide-scale disasters such as tornadoes, floods, toxic chemical spills, or wildfires can force families from their homes with little notice or time to prepare. Consider the following so you can quickly and safely evacuate or shelter in place:

- Build an emergency preparedness kit with essentials such as first aid equipment, medications, and a nonperishable food supply.
- Consider how the special needs of family members will be incorporated into a preparedness plan. This includes the following:
  - Elderly individuals or those with disabilities requiring assistance with mobility and communication
  - Infants and young children requiring their own food supply or formula
  - Pets requiring their own food and necessary documents such as vaccination records
- Determine the safest, innermost place in a home or building to go to should you need to shelter in place, such as a basement or bathroom.
- Take a moment to identify reliable news sources that you can access during an emergency event.

### **Virus or pandemic response preparedness**

As the coronavirus pandemic of late 2019 and 2020 has shown, global health emergencies can develop quickly and remain unpredictable. Consider taking the following steps when everyone is well so you can respond effectively next time a flu pandemic or widespread illness strikes:<sup>1</sup>

- Discuss a care plan for taking care of family members if someone becomes ill.
- Have at least a two-week supply of food and water on hand. If popular items are in short supply, purchase only what you need so that resources will be left for others.
- Have on hand pain relievers, cough medicine, disinfectant cleaning supplies, and other necessities.
- Identify a designated bedroom and bathroom that would be used to isolate a sick family member.
- Identify a designated decontamination area for the officer to safely remove and sanitize gear upon returning home, and stock sanitizing supplies to keep in that area.
- Speak with your insurance provider about how to obtain 90-day amounts of any necessary prescriptions during a crisis.
- Visibly practice good hygiene upon entering the home to model good behavior for children.

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1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Get Your Household Ready for Pandemic Flu* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017), <https://www.cdc.gov/nonpharmaceutical-interventions/pdf/gr-pan-flu-ind-house.pdf>.

## Financial preparedness

Protecting important documents and building a safety net can ensure that your family remains financially secure during an otherwise overwhelming event. Consider the following actions:<sup>2</sup>

- Build an emergency savings account that is easily accessible in a crisis.
- Consider insurance options available in your area for flooding or other natural disasters.
- Keep cash and smaller bills in your emergency supply kit.
- Store copies of important documents and government-issued identification such as birth certificates, social security cards, driver's licenses, deeds, wills, trusts, and bonds in a fire-proof and water-proof place.
- Take an inventory of your valuables, record their estimated value and serial numbers, and take pictures of each item. Keep this inventory in a safe place with other important documents.

## Communication plan

Communication is vital during a crisis, but options may be limited because of outages or busy phone lines. Take precautionary steps to ensure that your family can reach one another:

- Consider joining or creating a family support group that can communicate via social media during an emergency.
- Create a list of other essential contact information such as local hospitals, family doctors, and your law enforcement officer's duty partner and direct supervisor. Be sure to include department contact information and any hotlines set up for information as it becomes available.
- Designate a meeting location in the event that you are separated.
- Have alternative child care plans in place if both parents are required to respond to the emergency.
- Sign up for department newsletters, mailing lists, or phone trees if available.
- Sign up for digital alerts from local and state emergency management agencies.
- Talk with and record contact information for local and out-of-state family members or friends that your family could potentially evacuate to.

Consult the IACP guide *How to Start a Law Enforcement Family Support Group: Insights and Considerations* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2019, <https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0879>) for tips on creating a support group in your agency.

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2. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, *Your Disaster Checklist* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019), <https://www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-03/cfpb-disaster-checklist-worksheet.pdf>.

## *During an Event*

While preparedness is crucial, law enforcement officers and their families should also consider the following guidance during an event:

### **Officer limiting household exposure**

During a pandemic or disaster involving contaminants, officers can take proactive steps to protect themselves and their families from illness.

- Families should monitor changes in behavior or possible symptoms of sickness in family members.
- Officers should immediately shower upon entering the home or immediately after a shift at the precinct before having physical contact with family members.
- Officers should remove their duty belt and uniform before entering the home or in a designated area to avoid bringing in any outside contaminants.

### **Managing emotions during a crisis**

Law enforcement family members may experience prolonged stress and worry about their officer out in the community, adding to the existing fear of the unknown in an emergency. Be proactive in practicing the following wellness strategies with family members before a crisis occurs:

- Maintain valuable social connections to reduce feelings of isolation.
- Practice gratitude, patience, and compassion for those around you.
- While it is important to stay informed, avoid constant exposure to television and media reports about the event as it can lead to increased worry and anxiety.

For more mindfulness resources, visit the IACP Officer Safety and Wellness webpage that includes the Mindfulness for First Responders webinar series. (<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/officer-safety-and-wellness>)

### **Stress and anxiety in children**

Stress and anxiety may present differently in children than in adults. It is important to watch for unusual behaviors and offer ways to cope with these emotions.

When children experience and internalize stress, it might not be obvious that stress is the cause. In children, stress may present as stomachaches, unusual behavior, or excessive (or reduced) sleeping or eating.<sup>3</sup>

In teens, stress may present as avoidance or excessive hostility.

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3. "Identifying Signs of Stress in Your Children and Teens," American Psychological Association, last modified September 5, 2019, <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress-children>.

Children will likely experience fear and uncertainty in times of crisis. This uneasiness can grow when an officer leaves the family to report for work or overhears potentially upsetting conversations. Consider discussing the following with your child:

- Any precautions the officer may be taking to ensure their own safety while on duty
- How valuable the parent is to the community's safety and well-being
- Low-energy activities the child and parent can do together when the officer returns home such as sharing a healthy meal
- Tokens of appreciation a child can make for the officer such as a card or drawing

### **Officer well-being and support after a shift**

Families can be a vital source of support for an officer following emergency response.

- Be considerate and avoid overwhelming them with questions about the event.
- Follow social cues and understand when an officer wants time alone to process what they may have experienced during their shift.
- Offer compassion and empathy.

## *After an Event*

Although the threat has passed and your family is safe, your response to the emergency is not over.

### **Immediate response**

- Check on the well-being of friends and family.
- Mark yourself as “safe” on social media platforms that identify you as being in a location experiencing an emergency. This will let everyone you are connected to on the site know that you are okay. You may be prompted to mark yourself “safe” the first time you open the platform after an event occurs.
- Take time to debrief the event and answer any questions a child may have.

### **Long-term response**

- Consult with your officer about available EAP or family support services offered by the agency.
- Discuss all the positive aspects of emergency response and how the family can address any challenges in preparedness together.
- Reiterate current support systems and safe environments for children and family members to express their feelings.
- Replenish any supplies that may have been used.
- Seek out professional counseling or medical opportunities if children or other family members continue to exhibit signs of stress.

## Officer support after an emergency

Emergencies such as a natural disaster or mass casualty event may result in physiological responses to stress.<sup>4</sup> This response can manifest as physical and emotional symptoms long after the event is over.

- Families can support officers by demonstrating optimistic behavior and being effective listeners.
- Families should be aware of unusual changes in behavior, irregularities in sleep, isolation, or substance misuse and understand that while these may be temporarily normal, prolonged symptoms may be addressed by a medical professional or various support services.

Members of law enforcement are vital to the community after an emergency or disaster. When families of officers are prepared for a critical event, officers can report for work with less worry for their own family and better focus on maintaining public safety.

## *Additional Resources*

- “COVID-19: Health and Safety for Law Enforcement Families,” IACP, last modified March 26, 2020, <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/covid-19-health-and-safety-for-law-enforcement-families>.
- “COVID-19: Staying Healthy as a Police Officer,” IACP, last modified March 26, 2020, <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/covid-19-staying-healthy-as-a-police-officer>.
- “Employee and Family Wellness Guide,” IACP, last modified February 1, 2018, <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/employee-and-family-wellness-guide>.
- “Law Enforcement Information on COVID-19,” IACP, last modified March 9, 2020, <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/law-enforcement-information-on-covid-19>.
- “Officer Safety and Wellness,” IACP, last modified July 1, 2020, <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/officer-safety-and-wellness>.
- IACP, *How to Start a Family Support Group: Insights and Considerations* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2019), <https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0879>.

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4. David M. Benedek, Carol Fullerton, and Robert J. Ursano, “First Responders: Mental Health Consequences of Natural and Human-Made Disasters for Public Health and Public Safety Workers,” *Annual Review of Public Health* 28, no. 1 (2007), 55–68, <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.28.021406.144037>.

## *Appendix*

### **Emergency kit items**

While this list is not exhaustive, it contains common items found in most home preparedness kits. Consider sitting down with family members and brainstorming additional items you might need.

- Battery-powered or solar phone charger
- Battery-powered, solar, or hand-crank radio
- Books or activities for children
- Cloth face coverings
- Copies of personal documents
- Disinfectant wipes and sprays
- Duct tape
- Emergency blanket
- Extra batteries
- First aid kit
- Flashlight
- Food: nonperishable, easy-to-prepare items
- Manual can opener
- Matches (in a waterproof container)
- Medications (seven-day supply), copies of prescriptions, and any necessary medical items
- Meet-up plan and designated locations for family members
- N95 or surgical masks
- Rain gear
- Sanitation and personal hygiene items
- Scissors
- Water: one gallon per person per day, water purification tablets
- Whistle

## *About the IACP*

The **International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)** is a professional association for law enforcement worldwide. For more than 120 years, the IACP has been launching internationally acclaimed programs, speaking on behalf of law enforcement, conducting groundbreaking research, and providing exemplary programs and services to members across the globe.

Today, the IACP continues to be recognized as a leader in these areas. By maximizing the collective efforts of the membership, the IACP actively supports law enforcement through advocacy, outreach, education, and programs.

Through ongoing strategic partnerships across the public safety spectrum, the IACP provides members with resources and support in all aspects of law enforcement policy and operations. These tools help members perform their jobs effectively, efficiently, and safely while also educating the public on the role of law enforcement to help build sustainable community relations.

## *About the COPS Office*

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing professionals, develop and test innovative policing strategies, and provide training and technical assistance to community members, local government leaders, and all levels of law enforcement. Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than \$14 billion to help advance community policing.



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