

Chief's Checklist – Responding After an Officer Suicide

As the leader of your department, you have an important role to play after an officer suicide death occurs. If your department is dealing with the tragedy of a suicide loss, consider these tips:

1. Be honest and transparent.

How you respond will send a message to other officers about how supportive your agency is of officers who may be struggling emotionally. Use the opportunity to reassure your officers that seeking help is a sign of strength and that the department encourages officers to do so. Communicate directly, without assuming officers have heard something and without minimizing complexities like what may have contributed to a suicide death. Only disclose information about the death that is necessary to communicate the loss. Consider the deceased officer's family, and ensure fellow officers understand the commitment to prioritizing family notifications. For additional suggestions on talking to your officers after a suicide loss, please see starting the conversation.

2. Normalize the grieving process.

Individuals may respond to the loss of a fellow officer with a range of emotions including guilt, anger, and sadness. When communicating with your officers, stress the validity of any emotions they may be feeling, including feeling numb or detached, and that the way one person experiences grief may not be the same way they, themselves, experience grief. Understand that all pieces and phases of grief are okay, and leadership should be trained to respond in an appropriate way and at an appropriate time. Share information about the grieving process and equip supervisors with information about how to support officers who may engage in unhealthy coping mechanisms. This is also an opportunity to reiterate and reinforce the agency's philosophy on wellness. See below for resources.

3. Provide a variety of resources.

It is important to plan ahead. Implement a variety of wellness resources for your officers to access before, during, and after a tragedy occurs. People need to be able to connect with resources that resonate with them. Some may want help from the department; others may want to talk to someone anonymously. Some might prefer to connect with peer support, while others might appreciate a chaplain reaching out. Provide officers with numerous ways to get support whether internal or external to the department. Ensure officers have names and contact information for the available resources. Be specific with details so they have a person to contact when they are ready to do so.

4. Support your Public Information Officer (PIO).

Make sure they understand procedurally what to do; if the department is going to release a statement, the officer's family should always know and approve first. Defer to the officer's family regarding how to proceed.

The PIO may be fielding difficult questions while also dealing with the death of someone they knew. Empower them with resources to help others who may struggle. Ensure they are provided with resources and support as well.

5. Reach out to key people.

People appreciate having layers of support. As appropriate, reach out to surviving family members, the direct supervisor, and partner of the deceased. Ensure your communication is positive, supportive, and genuine. It does not need to be extensive; just checking in on someone can mean a lot.

6. Take care of yourself.

It may be easier to focus on being there for your officers and surviving family members and to forget that you have experienced a loss too. Do not forget that taking care of the department includes yourself and that is not selfish—it is smart. By taking care of yourself, you set a good example for your officers to do the same.

7. Continue to follow up.

Suicide death can have a lasting impact on those who are affected. Make sure to continue following up—especially after the funeral, at anniversaries, birthdays, and other significant times—with affected department members. Also follow up with the officer’s family, where and when possible, so that they know they have not been forgotten.

For more information about suicide prevention messaging and steps to take after one of your officers dies by suicide, please check out the following resources:

After a Suicide in Blue: A Guide for Law Enforcement Agencies



Strategies for Safe and Positive Messaging



National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide Resource Directory



Additional IACP Officer Safety and Wellness Resources

<https://www.theiacp.org/osw>



- **The National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide Toolkit**
- **Grief and Loss in Law Enforcement: Helping Officers and Agencies Recover and Heal**
- **Preventing Problematic Alcohol Use Among Police: Creating a Culture that Encourages Health Help-Seeking**
- **Prescription Drug Use Among Police**

BJA VALOR Officer Safety and Suicide Prevention Resources

<https://bja.ojp.gov/program/law-enforcement-officer-safety-and-wellness/preventing-suicide-among-officers>

National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program

<https://safleo.org/>

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For more officer wellness resources visit: www.theIACP.org/OSW

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