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Healing in the Wake of Harm

The IACP Mass Violence Advisory Initiative

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ACTS OF MASS VIOLENCE PRESENT UNIQUE CHALLENGES FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT LEADERS TASKED WITH KEEPING THEIR COMMUNITIES AND OFFICERS SAFE DURING A TIME OF INTENSE PRESSURE.

Police have numerous responsibilities, such as coordinating response, securing the scene, ensuring the safety of the community, responding to the media, communicating with families and victims, and investigating the incident. Law enforcement leaders are often taken aback by these unprecedented complexities, as well as the intense scrutiny that often envelops the agency and the community following a mass violence tragedy.

With few national resources to provide guidance to police leaders in the hours, days, and months following a mass violence tragedy, the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) have partnered to launch the Mass Violence Advisory Initiative (MVAI). The MVAI provides peer-to-peer assistance to law enforcement leaders in the aftermath of a mass violence event to maximize the safety and wellness of officers and other first responders and to help the community heal. The MVAI shares promising practices for communicating with community members; effectively engaging with the media; and collaborating with local, state, and federal partners.

"No community wants a tragedy like this; but with the Mass Violence Advisory Initiative, communities will not have to face this alone and will have the resources they need to begin the healing process," said IACP President Dwight Henninger, chief of police, Vail, Colorado, Police Department.

Through the MVAI, the Mass Violence Peer-to-Peer Advisory Team—composed of subject matter experts with firsthand experience of acts of mass violence—will deploy upon request to provide ongoing assistance and resources at no cost to help law enforcement leaders and their communities heal following a mass violence incident. These experts include police chiefs, sheriffs, public information officers, mental health and victim services professionals, chaplains, and community leaders. These individuals use a trauma-informed approach to help guide law enforcement agencies and their communities toward healing in the wake of harm. Due to the complex, unique, and urgent nature of these incidents, law enforcement leaders will benefit from the knowledge of other law enforcement personnel who have experienced a similar tragedy.

"The members of the Mass Violence Advisory Initiative were chosen, at least in part, because we have a shared experience

no law enforcement leader wants. Many of our communities were the targets of a mass shooting. For me, that was the 2016 Pulse Nightclub tragedy,” said Orange County, Florida, Sheriff John Mina. “I am honored to be part of this team, where each of us will use our firsthand experience to provide assistance to law enforcement leaders working to help their communities heal from mass violence.”

Mass violence events can cause deep and long-lasting trauma to families, first responders, and community members. Dr. John Nicoletti, a psychologist who has responded to several mass violence tragedies dating back to the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, serves as a subject matter expert for the Mass Violence Peer-to-Peer Advisory Team. He shares that when mass violence events occur,

Our basic assumptions about the world become shattered and intense emotional reactions can occur. These intense emotions and trauma responses can then become a permanent part of our being through the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD then leads to a decrease in the quality of life, followed by a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, with thoughts and feelings that these events and reactions cannot be prevented.

Understanding the psychological impact that these events can have on individuals, the MVAI prioritizes the well-being of those affected by mass violence. Through the IACP’s extensive officer safety and wellness and vicarious trauma catalogs,

along with its partnership with the Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center, the MVAI streamlines the availability of—and connection to—valuable resources to assist in the healing process of communities affected by these tragedies.

“The first step in trauma recovery is realizing that the recovery should start in the middle of the crisis. The more individuals feel that their symptoms are normal, the faster the healing process becomes,” explains Dr. Nicoletti.

Along with providing the knowledge and expertise of subject matter experts to agencies directly, the MVAI also hosts an online community to help law enforcement leaders connect with others to gain knowledge and access to best practices and resources so they can better prepare for the obstacles they may face following a mass violence incident. In the coming months, the MVAI team will also be publishing several new resources to guide law enforcement leaders through these incidents. ♡

The IACP and BJA want law enforcement leaders to know that the MVAI is here to help. To learn more about the initiative and resources, or to request assistance, visit the MVAI page at www.theIACP.org/MVAI.



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