

Our Brother's Keeper:

Army Law Enforcement Program Helps Those Who Serve

By Mr. Colby Hauser

Stress is a monster. And few professions are as stressful as that of law enforcement or military service during periods of conflict. The exposure to traumatic or horrific events is an ever present reality; yet, there are still men and women who answer the call to service. But what happens when these traumatic events are over?

A *critical-incident stressor* is an event or combination of events that have the potential to create an overwhelming emotional reaction in an individual to the extent that the individual is unable to function during or following the event or is unable to psychologically cope with the event.

According to Mr. Russell Strand, chief of the Family Advocacy Law Enforcement Training Division, U.S. Army Military Police School (USAMPS), Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, “. . . our special agents, military police, and our first responders . . . don't have the luxury of deciding what type of scene they will respond to. On any given day, they can be responding to a child death scene, a domestic violence scene, or even a mass murder incident like the one in November at Fort Hood.” “We ask a lot from our people,” he added, “so we need to take care of them and each other—not just physically, but in all ways.”

After several years of exhaustive research into steps that could be taken to assist Soldiers, special agents, and first responders in dealing with the stress associated with a critical incident, USAMPS developed the Critical-Incident Peer Support (CIPS) Course. The focus of the five-day course is on the recognition of signs and symptoms of critical-incident trauma and on intervention strategies. Subjects covered by the course include the critical-incident stress debriefing process, psychological effects of critical incidents, symptoms of stress, crisis intervention, peer support functions, coping skills, and communication. Students also learn to develop CIPS standing operating procedures for platoon- through brigade-sized elements. According to Ms. Donna Ferguson, branch chief and course manager for the CIPS Program, “When Soldiers are trained in this area, commanders begin to see less family violence, greater retention, and less medical difficulties as a result of psychological trauma.”

“CIPS has been preparing Army law enforcement professionals for responses to catastrophic incidents and assisting with follow-up with Soldiers after a response to an incident to fill the shortage of psychologists, counselors, and combat stress teams,” Ferguson explained. “The course is not designed to replace Mental Health or the chaplaincy, but to support the process,” she added. “Mental Health operates strongly on intervention, whereas this course is

designed on prevention. Most Soldiers don't seek Mental Health until their situation has become overwhelming [or] unmanageable or they receive a command referral.”

Due to their ability to recognize stress-related problems among their peers, special agents who have completed the CIPS training are better prepared to respond to critical or traumatic incidents. According to Army law enforcement professionals who have been involved with the CIPS Program, the healing process begins immediately for groups who receive a debriefing/defusing within 8 to 24 hours following an incident.

While the CIPS training is considered quite successful by Army law enforcement agencies at all levels, the program is also useful for any Soldier who has been subjected to a crisis situation or endured repetitively stressful circumstances, such as multiple deployments. “We have found over the last two years, after incorporating other [military occupational specialties] into the training, that the same successful results are yielded as with special agents and [military police],” Ms. Ferguson said.

But Ferguson cautions that, to combat any problems, the total problem must be examined. “The Army has specific training in the areas of PTSD [post traumatic stress disorder] and suicide; however, what most people do not realize is that suicide and PTSD are only two of the impacts of CIPS,” she said.

Strand, a leading expert in child abuse and sexual assault investigations, agrees. He stresses the importance of the “whole person approach” in dealing with critical-incident stress. “Not everyone reacts to stress the same way,” he said. “Even not reacting is a reaction, so when we respond to an incident, we try to frame the incident and kind of recreate the event in a way that everyone can understand.”

Although the CIPS Program is peer-based, USAMPS can deploy a quick-reaction team to assist with major incidents, such as the shootings that occurred at Fort Hood, Texas, on 5 November 2009.

“The program has been and continues to be a proven asset to the Army—both in garrison and [while] deployed,” Ferguson said. “This program is saving lives.”

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