

STAR NEWS ARTICLE - "FROM THE DOCS"

Will YOU Roll Backup?

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Sworn personnel would not hesitate to help a colleague who was being physically assaulted by a citizen or suspect, even if it puts their own life at risk. Radio car partners will move to protect each other if there is even a hint of danger. A unit rolling by a sister car making a traffic stop will check for some informal signal or sign that everything is Code 4. So cops "roll backup" for cops when there is a clear threat. They also roll back up as a precautionary measure whenever there is a potential threat. We protect our own! But there is one situation when even good cops may become paralyzed, even though the threat is very real and very lethal. That situation is when a peace officer expresses thoughts of suicide.

There is a brutal truth in law enforcement that a peace officer is more likely to be a victim of suicide than homicide. Our best estimates indicate that out of our 9,000 plus sworn personnel, 1-2 will commit suicide this year. Retired personnel are even more vulnerable. We spend thousands of dollars and hours of training to help protect our personnel from being shot by a suspect - but what about protecting them from "eating their own gun." No one even wants to talk about it unless it is part of a joke.

Cops commit suicide because they are depressed or anxious. They commit suicide because they have experienced a loss they can't bear (such as a marital breakup) or because they are facing a problem that causes them incredible psychological or physical pain. Often alcohol is involved, which makes a bad situation worse, and increases the risk for suicide significantly. Suicide has a devastating effect on family, friends, colleagues, and the Department as a whole.

So how do we "roll backup" and provide emotional support and assistance to a colleague who is contemplating suicide? Rolling backup has three components: 1.) watching for signs and symptoms of suicidal ideation, 2.) not getting side tracked by myths and misinformation about suicide, and 3.) taking action to protect the person.

Sign and Symptoms - Although few behaviors by themselves “prove” that someone is considering suicide, 85% of people who commit suicide have communicated their intentions ahead of time through their words or their actions. Look for signs such as:

- ▶ a recent loss or problem
- ▶ sad appearance
- ▶ sleep or appetite problems
- ▶ irritability
- ▶ withdrawal
- ▶ sudden drop in job performance
- ▶ increased risk taking
- ▶ increased consumption of alcohol
- ▶ talk that sounds hopeless and rigid (everything is ruined, nothing can fix it)

As people get closer to the idea of suicide, they may:

- ▶ prepare for death (give away possessions, make a will, check insurance)
- ▶ begin to plan how they will commit suicide
- ▶ practice or rehearse their death
- ▶ begin to make statements that imply they won't be around any more
- ▶ mention suicide (even if jokingly)

Rolling backup means paying attention to signs and symptoms and taking them seriously.

Myths and Misinformation - Most people thinking about suicide do not want to die. They want the pain to go away. Suicide is seen as a solution to a problem. If you know someone is thinking about suicide, you can help him or her find a better solution. But in order to know what they are thinking, you have to ask the scary question! Despite the myth, asking people if they are thinking about hurting themselves will not give them a new idea! Many people, when confronted directly, will admit to suicidal ideation. It may even be a relief for them to finally talk about it. And feeling suicidal is not a death toll for a career in law enforcement. Many individuals feel suicidal, obtain confidential help from a trained counselor, and continue in their career without the Department ever knowing what happened. A psychologist will only breach confidentiality if a person is imminently suicidal and uncooperative. Since an involuntary hospitalization will put a peace officer's career in

jeopardy, mental health professionals who work with law enforcement populations will do everything possible to avoid such an extreme step.

Take Action - Rolling backup for a coworker in distress means taking action to keep them alive. Trust your instincts. Cops are rarely wrong if they get a feeling that somebody is suicidal. Reach out to the person and ask the question "Are you thinking of hurting yourself?" If they say yes, don't keep it a secret. Stay calm. Your calm demeanor helps the person feel secure and engenders hope. Immediately contact Employee Support Services Bureau (ESSB). ESSB has a psychologist available 24 hours a day. Do not leave the person alone. Find out if the person has a plan. Since most law enforcement personnel use a firearm to commit suicide, ask permission to hold their weapon(s), including backups. ESSB can arrange for a same day appointment or for an emergency roll out for LASD personnel contemplating suicide. In addition to ESSB, there are many other resources for sworn and civilian personnel - including LASD Chaplains, LASD Peer Support Personnel and outside suicide hotlines. Rolling back up means you hang in there until the situation is Code 4 or until you have been relieved by somebody who will handle it from there.

Employee Support Services Bureau can be reached at (213) 738-3500. During evenings, weekends and holidays, you will have the option of paging the emergency on-call psychologist. Just as you would protect your partner from a suspect, inmate, or other threat, protect your partner from harming him or herself. **ROLL BACKUP!**