Identifying Risk and Protective Factors

Having completed the first two steps, defining the problem of suicide and resources available to combat it, an agency must identify the causes of suicide, which entails identifying risk and protective factors.  Risk factors are those conditions that lead to suicide; they are associated with a higher risk of suicide among law enforcement.  Protective factors reduce the likelihood of suicide; they enhance resilience and can counterbalance risk factors.

It is recommended that law enforcement agencies examine and consider the risk factors from different perspectives for more effective suicide prevention program implementation.  In this regard, the scholarly literature is fairly clear on what are potential risk factors. Consider, for example, the biological, psychological and social influences that generate significant risk for suicide.  Such risk factors include alcohol and other substance abuse (which are involved in more than 30% of suicides), mental health conditions (which are involved in more than 90% of suicides and include depression and anxiety disorders), impulsive and/or aggressive tendencies, personal history of trauma or abuse, exposure to critical incidents (particularly when not debriefed), major physical illness and a family history of suicide.  A previous history of suicide attempt is a critically important risk factor. Law enforcement agencies can more effectively intervene with suicide when isolating and targeting these specific risk factors.

Environmental risk factors shed light on law enforcement suicide from a different perspective.  Such risk factors include job loss (including planned retirement), financial loss, and relational or social loss (e.g., separation, divorce).  Anecdotal evidence suggests that in law enforcement, the separation or divorce from a spouse/significant other may be the “tipping point” in generating the necessary distress and energy to follow through and commit suicide.  Therefore special attention should be paid to the care and nurturing of these relationships.  This may be truer for individuals in specialized assignments where there can be added work-related stress.  Healthy interpersonal relationships at home allow for greater shock absorption to stressors at work and elsewhere in life. Social and cultural risk factors provide a third major perspective when considering the risks for suicide.  Such risk factors include lack of social support, a sense of isolation, stigma associated with help-seeking behaviors, and barriers to accessing needed mental health or substance abuse treatment.

Despite the threats associated with suicide, law enforcement’s resilience can be enhanced and risk factors counterbalanced.  Protective factors for suicide play an essential role in preventing suicide. They include effective treatments for psychological and physical conditions and substance abuse.  Employees need easy access to confidential care and support for help-seeking.  They need to know that their careers will not be negatively impacted by seeking treatment.  Support from strong family and friend connections, their respective religious community, and both the medical and mental health community is critical.  It is often connections with other law enforcement personnel, family and friends that saves lives.  These connections serve as an emotional bulletproof vest protecting the employee’s life.  The more threads that are interwoven, the stronger the support nets will be to catch and hold them during adversity.  Beyond treatment and support it is important for law enforcement personnel to have skills in problem-solving and non-violent conflict resolution; fortunately these skills can be taught.  While restricting access to guns and other lethal means of suicide is critical in the general population, this protective factor is generally unrealistic among law enforcement but still a focus of good precautionary intervention.

Identifying the risk and protective factors for suicide allows law enforcement agencies to develop, test and implement effective interventions.  Studies of suicide prevention have found that training that facilitates the development of protective factors has been an effective means to reduce suicidal behavior.  At the Los Angeles Police Department, key stakeholders, from peer support personnel to senior command staff, were engaged and interviewed about their perceptions of protective factors. The Department found that access to confidential mental health services, having leaders they could trust, maintaining strong emotional connections with family and friends, having a religious/spiritual connection, and finding meaning and purpose in life were all protective against suicide. In addition, feeling that people in their life deeply care about them was also protective.  The LAPD’s Behavioral Science Services then incorporated these findings in the development of a comprehensive suicide prevention program which can systematically meet the needs of distressed personnel and save lives.