

## **The Difficulties of Maintaining a Spousal Support Group**

I once overheard an officer talking about a law enforcement spousal support group. He said, "My wife is tough; she doesn't need a group like that." I wondered if the officer had told his spouse about the group meeting, or if they had even discussed whether she needed support.

A few years ago, myself and another LEO began a spousal support group for the police department my husband was working for. After keeping it running for a bit, the interest dwindled and the attendance at the meetings was meek at best. I wondered if it was a disinterest, a fear or a belief from the officer that going to a group like that could stir up some trouble.

I began to speculate whether or not this was a common sentiment among officers? Would this be the common challenge in trying to maintain a law enforcement spousal support group? Are officers encouraging their spouses to seek support at all? Do officers acknowledge that the role of a law enforcement spouse is difficult, unique and sometimes lonely? These comments and questions motivated me to reach out to the families of the law enforcement officers in our area, because spouses do need support. We secured some email addresses, phone numbers and Facebook friends and started to ask some questions. These questions may look different depending upon your agency, your city, your culture - but, rest assured these spouses do have something to say.

Do you have time for self care, can we help connect you and a local LEO for childcare needs?

Is communication lacking with your LEO, can we help with conversation starters?

Do you have questions about shift work, meal planning, financial issues?

Are you seeing signs of PTSD....do you know the signs?

These and many more questions are pondered during our meetings or Facebook chats. People need each other, and those who face similar challenges often understand each other more deeply. As LEOs, often only fellow law enforcement spouses can deeply understand the daily stress caused by canceled dinner dates, sleeping alone, missed birthday parties, or soccer games that had to be filmed because our officers were called in at the last minute.

Law enforcement officers often build emotional barriers to keep their work lives and home lives separate. While officers think they are protecting their spouses, their barriers may have the opposite effect. These barriers can drive wedges of miscommunication between spouses. They can also create feelings of isolation and could convey the message that our feelings should be kept to ourselves to not compound our officers' stress.

By sharing experiences together, law enforcement spouses that they are not alone. A spousal support group should be available to provide a safe outlet for spouses and other family members of law enforcement officers to talk about the commonalities of a life in police work. In addition to meeting regularly, a spousal support group could communicate via email or a private Facebook page, building a groundwork of trust and adding an avenue of safe conversation for spouses who need support.

### **FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN**

One of the obstacles these groups may experience is a lack of awareness of the group's existence. For officers to do their jobs appropriately and command the proper amount of respect, they are taught not to show weakness. Officers are anxious about their spouses attending such a group because they don't want their families to appear weak, they are afraid of gossip, and they don't want their private home matters to be shared. As a result, many officers simply don't tell their spouses about the information that may come their way via department notifications. They want to keep themselves safe, but the spouses need to keep themselves sane...and any attempt to get a group together can feel like you're beating your head against a wall.

To help with these fears and strengthen the confidentiality of the group, you may want to open all meetings by reiterating the main focus: *how to cope with all the additional stressors of being a law enforcement spouse and family; and how to support one another in times of need.* Additionally, the spousal support group may consider supporting police-sponsored service projects, first responder events, trauma support teams, management, and police chaplains to demonstrate the passion the group has for the department as a whole.

### **MEET AND GREET**

A spousal support group could begin by meeting once per month to socialize and once per quarter to discuss topics that can benefit everyone. By attempting to meet in this manner, you may see most spouses approximately twice per year, which will begin the work of building rapport and eventually earning trust. Officers who work in your agency, however, may live miles away, sometimes an hour or more. This will make it difficult to find a location that works for everyone, and if there are little ones at

home it can be difficult to find a good time to meet and childcare can be an issue. To try to alleviate these attendance problems, meeting times and locations should vary.

Do you have a "Police Cadet" program at your agency? This is usually comprised of college kids gaining more exposure to a career in law enforcement. You may ask the department if the cadets could do childcare in another room at the department, which would allow the young moms to attend your meetings more easily.

Also, consider sending any meeting invites to the department via the Peer/Trauma Support Team, who should willingly place the invites on a board where other information is located, possibly in the break rooms of each floor of the building and send the invites via email so all officers have the opportunity to see and notify their spouse. If a spouse is not already plugged into the group, these communication channels are how the group could acquire new members.

Going forward and becoming strong as a group may entail creating a Facebook Live platform so that your meetings can be broadcast in a way which allows everyone to participate from the comfort and privacy of their own home. Getting everyone together for monthly meetings is tough, but it is good to continue seeking new ideas and new ways to offer meetings to entice new members to join.

Although many difficulties may arise, be committed to supporting and strengthening the families that surround law enforcement officers, because families are the best safety nets.

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More information at: [www.peaksandvalleys.life](http://www.peaksandvalleys.life)