

Peer Support: Does it work?

The Efficacy of Law Enforcement Peer Support

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Peer support teams within law enforcement agencies have existed for many years. Although many law enforcement officers and police psychologists have advocated for peer support programs, there has been surprisingly little research providing evidence for the efficacy of peer support.

To gather information about the use and outcome of agency peer support, the peer support experiences of employees of three northern Colorado law enforcement agencies, Fort Collins Police Services, Larimer County Sheriff's Office, and Loveland Police Department, were assessed utilizing the *Peer Support Team Utilization and Outcome Survey*. The peer support teams of each agency are well established, similarly structured, and function under the oversight of a licensed mental health professional. Each member of the peer support teams was initially trained within the Police Peer Support Team Training program.

The applied methodology for Survey distribution and collection produced a return of 644 surveys. This represented approximately 77.9% of the survey-eligible population. Of the 644 surveys collected, 631 were returned completed (76.3% of the survey-eligible population).

The rate of return and the resulting data is sufficiently robust to reasonably conclude that had all survey-eligible employees completed the Survey, there would not be meaningful differences in outcome proportional values. The likelihood of this improves confidence in the extrapolation of survey results to all law enforcement agencies with similarly trained and organized peer support teams. The extension of survey results to law enforcement agencies that maintain peer support teams with alternative training and structure, and to non-law enforcement first responder and other agencies, can only be done with confidence limitations.

Use of Peer Support

Nearly one-half of surveyed employees reported participation in peer support interactions. Of the 631 employees that completed the survey, 305 (48.3%) reported having participated in peer support.

Reasons for Non-use of Peer Support

The most frequently identified reason for the non-use of peer support was "I have not had a need for peer support" (77.1%). This was followed by "I'm not the kind of person that asks for peer support from peer support team members" (13.7%). Several respondents cited both of the above reasons. There were no meaningful associations between the reasons for non-use of peer support and years of service.

These findings suggest: (1) that years of service is less a factor in the utilization of peer support than the perceived need for peer support, and (2) personality and personal perceptions are a factor for some employees that choose not to engage peer support.

Survey Findings

1. Peer support is helpful for a remarkable majority of those that have used it. Nearly 9 out of 10 employees that reported peer support interactions stated that peer support was helpful to very helpful in addressing the issues discussed or managing the stress associated with the issues. Nearly 8 out of 10 employees reported that they would seek peer support again in the event of future stressful circumstances, while nearly 9 out of 10 employees reported that they would recommend peer support to co-workers known to be dealing with stressful circumstances. Over one-half of those that participated in peer support reported that it had directly or indirectly helped them to better perform their job and/or improve their home life.

2. Nearly 6 out of 10 employees that reported not having participated in peer support interactions stated that they would be likely to very likely to seek peer support should future stressful circumstances arise. This finding reflects the positive standing of the peer support teams within their agencies - even with those that reported not having used peer support.

3. There is significant employee confidence in the confidentiality peer support team interactions. This is likely the result of three factors: (1) agency peer support policy, peer support team operational guidelines, and Colorado statute CRS 13-90-107(m), which provides for peer support team member confidentiality, (2) the consistent exemplary behavior of peer support team members and their adherence to the above mentioned documents and the peer support team code of ethical conduct, and (3) the steadfast support of agency administrators and supervisors.

4. Greater consistency is needed in the area of advising or reminding peer support recipients of the limits of peer support confidentiality before engaging in peer support. Disclosing or reviewing the limits of peer support confidentiality is an ethical obligation of all peer support teams wishing to do the best they can for recipients of peer support.

5. The peer support teams have done well with reaching out to employees and offering peer support when appropriate. However, survey results revealed that about 2 in 10 employees reported that they had experienced work-related circumstances where they felt they should have been contacted by the peer support team and were not contacted. This information suggests that peer support teams may need to reexamine their "threshold" for peer support outreach. It is possible that some employees are more stressed by their involvement in particular events wherein neither the event nor their involvement would normally generate a peer support contact. It is also possible that the event never came to the attention of the peer support team or that individual employees, especially if on the "periphery" of an incident, were simply missed and not included in peer support efforts. Special attention in any threshold and outreach reexamination should be given to civilian employees, particularly agency dispatchers, evidence and lab technicians, and records personnel.

The present study supports the use and efficacy of agency peer support. Peer support provided by trained and clinically supervised members of peer support teams has been shown to be a significant resource for those that use it. It has also been shown to be a significant potential resource for those that have not used it. Law enforcement agencies without a peer support team would be well advised to consider developing one.

Agency peer support programs have become an integral part of "best practices" for sustaining employee wellness. To help employees better manage the unavoidable stressors of policing, the cumulative effects of work-related stress, and the trauma frequently associated with law enforcement critical incidents, there is simply no substitute for a well-trained, appropriately structured, clinically supervised peer support team.

Why peer support? Peer support teams occupy a support niche that cannot be readily filled by either health plan counseling services or an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). This is because well trained peer support teams provide support that is qualitatively different than that provided by health insurance therapists or EAP counselors. In fact, peer support teams provide support that is qualitatively different from the counseling of even the best police psychologists. The difference? The *power of the peer*. The power of the peer is the factor that is a constant in the support provided by peer support team members. It is the factor that is not present in other support modalities. If an agency wishes to do the best it can to support its employees, a peer support program is necessary.

For more information and to view or download the complete survey report visit www.jackdigliani.com.