

# Keeping Your Boots Clean

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*A police officer sits in his cruiser, in the back lot of the police station, just beginning his eight hour shift as the dispatch radio crackles to life. The dispatcher advises the officer of a reported suicide in the south sector and he immediately responds. Upon arriving at the scene, he discovers the body of an individual who apparently, as a result of a self-inflicted gunshot wound, committed suicide. The officer attempts to calm the very distraught family while securing the scene. Hours later, night has fallen and he returns to his cruiser to leave the area and handle the next call. As he closes the door to his darkened police cruiser, he is overwhelmed by the foul pungent odor surrounding him. With the faint lighting radiating from his dashboard the officer is able to glimpse the dog-doo on his boots and covering the cruiser floor board. He immediately knows he must have stepped in it as he exited the residence and knows that it is going to be a long shift this evening. The officer begins to reflect on the emotional toll the suicide has taken on him and begins to realize he "Has Really Stepped In It". The stress from witnessing the death scene, the cumulative effect of hyper vigilance and the handling of violent offenders for so many years comes crashing down on the officer as he sits in his dark, rancid cruiser. What can the police department and mental health professionals do to "Clean These Boots"?*

The Amherst Police Department is located in Amherst, Massachusetts and is home to the University of Massachusetts, the flagship campus of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in addition to Amherst College and Hampshire College. The town of Amherst is a diverse community which offers educational and cultural opportunities that rival larger surrounding cities. Our population is comprised of students, retirees, professionals as well as blue collar workers. Amherst has many agricultural and open areas in addition to industrial and educational districts. The Amherst Police Department is responsible for patrolling all of these sectors in addition to the residential areas within the town. The residents of Amherst all seem to have dogs giving the Amherst police officer plenty of opportunity to "step in it."

One indication of stress within our profession is the fact that police officers are three times more likely to die from their own gun than by the firearm of a felon. The cumulative effect of stress takes a toll on their marriages and other relationships as well. Higher divorce rates and rampant chemical abuse are just a few symptoms of a larger problem. Police officers have historically hid their vulnerability for reasons that may include the fear of losing a potential promotion, appearing weak or losing control of situations which could endanger their lives or others. The unique culture of police work makes them reluctant to seek help.

Recognizing the need for the department to have a resource for police officers and their families to address emotional and physical stressors that are a part of the law enforcement profession the Amherst Police Department developed a Peer Support Program. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) and peer support provide assistance to officers and at the same time provide an environment where they can safely discuss their stress and fears without the concern of losing their job. It provides an avenue for cops to confront issues that haunt them from exposure to societal ills and death. Chief Scott P. Livingstone implemented, through the department's policies and procedures, the Amherst Police Departments CISM/Peer Support Program to alleviate the number of officers leaving work with unresolved issues due to the stressful demands of the job that might result in pursuing self-destructive behaviors.

The Amherst Police Department upon reviewing the current *Employee Assistance Program (EAP)*, found major flaws with the contracted mental health agency that is used to assist officers and their families. Police officers are frequently required to send people, either voluntarily or involuntarily, to the hospital for psychological/mental problems related to suicide attempts or ongoing psychiatric issues. The contracted Mental Health Agency that the county and town use for the general public is one in the same that the EAP utilizes to assist cops. Officers who are looking to speak to a mental health professional could find themselves sitting in the same waiting room as a person who they had earlier in the day forced to go to the hospital for psychiatric help. To resolve this issue, the Amherst Police Department has, in essence, developed its own EAP within the department staffed by peer support officers with its' own contracted mental health professionals and agencies. The health professionals and agencies specialize in working with law enforcement and the unique issues that police work brings. R.C Stevens of PSII in Hadley, Massachusetts, a retired state trooper, is our licensed clinician, working in conjunction with Dr. Jerry Lewis of Compass Associates in Framingham, Massachusetts. The Brattleboro Retreat located in Brattleboro, VT reaches out nationwide to uniformed personnel to assist them with addiction and stress issues related to their employment as police officers. The clinicians have the support and trust of the members of the CISM/Peer Support Team thus eliminating the general distrust cops often feel toward the general public due to their job. TRUST is the most critical component in getting cops to talk openly and honestly about what haunts them and make them receptive to the assistance they may need.

Peer Support Team members of the Amherst Police Department contacted the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation and the CISM/Peer Support Team was sent for training at the 10<sup>th</sup> World Congress. The team was trained in individual crisis intervention / peer support and group crisis intervention. The information provided a guide and model for diffusing, debriefing and peer support. The peer support is the nuts and bolts of the program because it allows cops to talk on a one to one basis.

At the Amherst Police Department trainings are conducted to give information to officers, their families, and emergency dispatchers concerning the warning signs of post traumatic stress disorder, career burnout, coping techniques, and the options available for help with these issues.

The department also recognized the need and initiated a policy and procedure that integrates returning men and women from combat back into a law enforcement mentality. Seemly innocent occurrences, such as seeing trash by the side of the road, may be viewed as a threat by returning military personnel as in combat zones trash may hide potentially life threatening IUDS. Upon patrolling the streets, trash day may result in increased levels of anxiety for a returning veteran. All returning veterans for a two week period, or longer if needed, ride along with a fellow officer so they can become reacquainted with the town and any new departmental policies. The department also has an officer liaison in contact and available to the significant other or family members of the actively deployed officers to assist with the daily maintenance of their homes including lawn cleanup, car maintenance and snow plowing.

In addition, the Amherst Police CISM/Peer Support Team recognized that another area of concern was retired officers who often felt abandoned and disconnected. These officers while receiving their monthly check from the retirement board often feel disconnected and greatly miss the camaraderie that comprises the law enforcement community. In response to this concern, a quarterly newsletter was developed to provide updates and general news to retired officers thus enabling them to stay informed on what is going on within the department. Retired officers are also encouraged to provide information on what they are doing in retirement which provides an opportunity for new officers to get acquainted with senior retired officers, many who have given a lifetime of service to the field of law enforcement.

Integrating mind, body and spirit, Chief Livingstone created an on duty work out program that provides each officer one hour per shift for physical exercise to help alleviate stress on the job and carrying that stress home to their families. An additional benefit of this program is that it has reduced the amount of sick time used by officers.

The Amherst Police Peer Support Team and Chief Livingstone will probably not help officers clean the actual dog-doo from their boots or the floor boards of their cruiser but we do guarantee that the Amherst Police Department will do our best to assist them with the emotional burdens they carry responding to the calls, and ghosts that can haunt them for a lifetime.

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