



POLICE DEPARTMENT

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January 19th, 2016

**Executive Summary:
Outagamie County Peer Support
Team**

The Outagamie County Peer Support Team:

Country wide peer support for law enforcement officers, their peers and their families

In 2004, Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) came to the greater Appleton area. Within a few years, as the steering committee assessed the training outline it was discovered that an area was emerging that needed to be incorporated into the training week. This need and topic was officer wellness, specifically mental wellness as it pertains to job burnout and suicide. In 2007, a training block was introduced into the CIT entitled Suicide Risk Assessment for First Responders. And so we began on the journey to raise awareness about PTSD and Suicide in first responders including law enforcement officers in Appleton.

As the training continued it became obvious that talking about it in our CIT classes was not enough. The word wasn't getting out. Other CIT training locations in WI that were mentored by the Appleton Police Department also added this block to their week long trainings. Slowly, the word was getting out. Then one day Sgt. John Wallschlaeger received a phone call from one of his CIT officers. He asked John about the symptoms of PTSD. After John described some of the signs and symptoms of PTSD it sounded to him like the cell call had been dropped. Moving to a quieter office location John could hear his CIT partner crying. He heard the fellow officer utter words he heard at Police PTSD training "John, my cup is full. It can't take any more". So it began, a successful "code blue" intervention for an on duty officer. Since that time a behind the scenes effort was started by a few officers to bring structured peer support to the Appleton Police Department. Meetings were held, discussions were had and obstacles were encountered. There was limited support from the City; we already have an EAP was the response. Time passed. Other officers went out on family leave to get psychiatric assistance. Some made it back and some did not. It remained obvious there was a need and it was not being served.

In late 2012 a meeting was held between Investigative Sgt. Polly Olson and Sgt. John Wallschlaeger. It was agreed that overcoming the resistance from the City HR department would be unlikely and that one other option was to anchor the peer support team with LEO volunteers from throughout the County. It was something that was being done in another county on the eastern edge of WI and was working well. One agency took lead on the organization, training, etc., but the effort was distributed across all of the participating agencies. The next step was to take this concept to the Outagamie County Chief's Group. John and Polly got a spot on the agenda for the January 2013 Chief's meeting. The concept of having a county wide peer support was moving from discussion phase to becoming a realistic possibility.

By late 2013, Polly, now a lieutenant, was given the green light to proceed with building a team from across the nine (9) law enforcement agencies to form the Outagamie County Peer Support Team (OCPST). A call went out to all of the Outagamie County Chiefs to notify their agencies of the formation of the Peer Support Team and to issue a memo or order endorsing the Team. A steering committee was formed and planning meetings were held. A Board or Steering Committee was formed with representatives from six of the agencies and planning meetings commenced. Over the next few months the policies procedures and documents were finalized. In addition, the two-day training outline was finalized and scheduled. In September 2014, the first County Wide Peer Support Team training was held. More than forty (40) LEO from nine (9) agencies were interviewed and thirty (30) were selected to participate in the training. The Outagamie County Peer Support Team went operational on October 1, 2014. The OCPST was now the conduit to professional assistance and it was just a phone call away. In its first year OCPST handled 28 documented peer support contacts and numerous "unofficial contacts". The majority of the contacts were self-referred and the reason was work stress related. More than 30% were referred to professional resources. The breaking down of stigma and normalizing the concept of seeking help has begun in Outagamie County, Wisconsin.



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Project Narrative:

Outagamie County Peer Support Team

Outagamie County sits in the north east portion of Wisconsin. It has a population of roughly 180,000 people and covers 644 square miles. There are fifteen (15) municipalities (Cities & Villages not including townships) and nine (9) law enforcement agencies including the Outagamie County Sheriff's Department, the City of Appleton Police Department (County seat), City of Kaukauna Police Department, City of New London Police Department, City of Seymour Police Department, the Fox Valley Metro Police Department (cover Villages of Combined Locks, Kimberly, and Little Chute), Village of Hortonville PD, Village of Shiocton PD, and Village of Wrightstown PD. Most of the smaller townships are served by the Outagamie County Sheriff's Department. The combined employee total of sworn, non-sworn, civilian, full-time, part-time, community service officers, clerical, corrections, dispatchers, etc., total approximately six hundred (600) people.

Recognizing the need:

In 2004, Crisis Intervention Team training (CIT) came to Appleton and WI. CIT is a week-long training designed to give officers a basic understanding about mental illness and the skills to recognize the signs and symptoms of it on a call. In addition to understanding special populations like the young and old but Veterans and those with developmental disabilities, a special emphasis is placed on de-escalating a person in crisis. These new skills help an officer distinguish between violent and non-violent posture and help them understand how non-verbals play an important role in how we do our job. In the course of the first couple years of CIT the comparison between Veterans and vicarious trauma they accumulate in combat to that of the vicarious trauma officers accumulate in their career. Similar discussions took place during discussions about PTSD and Suicide risk. In 2007 a specific block was added to the Appleton CIT class addressing the stressors of policing. It was titled "Suicide Risk Assessment for First Responders". It was later changed to "Taking Care of Our Own". The evaluations for the segment were outstanding, some of the highest for the week. It was not unusual for the presenter to be approached by students after the training looking for direction and guidance. The presenters, Mary Van Haute, a

nationally recognized presenter on the topic, and more recently, Mr. Chris Prochut, a retired Illinois officer who lost his career path due to being placed on an emergency detention, would often find themselves being approached right after their presentation and were looking for support resources. The need was becoming clear and was being validated not just at the Appleton CIT trainings but also at the other WI CIT training locations that received their “Memphis Model” CIT training in Appleton.

Too close to home:

In 2010 Appleton PD Sgt. John Wallschlaeger received a call on his cell phone and in a tearful conversation heard the words he had heard at a presentation from retired Louisiana State trooper Bobbie Smith; “John, my cup is full. I can’t take it any more”. So John, after advising others he was going to a meet at one of the local parks, went and met with the on-duty officer. He assessed the officers’ risk factors and helped him outline a plan to recovery. The officer agreed to call the Chief and make arrangements for the medical leave of absence. By the time John got back to the PD the Chief called him and asked for an update. The first structured “Code Blue” intervention had begun and it would not be the last. The officer, after connecting to resources and passing a fit for duty evaluation, returned to duty a few weeks later and was embraced by his fellow officers. Others would follow. Were it not for the training, were it not for the connections to law enforcement friendly mental health resources, it is likely a career would have come to an end prematurely. Within a year, another APD officer, a gulf war veteran, disclosed to his fellow officers that he was taking medical leave to get the help he knew he needed to deal with the vicarious trauma he brought back with him the war. He strongly and openly encouraged others to do the same. It became even more obvious that there was a need and it was not being served through the available means. Something more needed to be done. Talking about it at CIT training twice a year was not soon enough for the officer on the street. Since a few other agencies in Wisconsin had structured Peer Support it seemed like the logic next step.

Taking the next step – formalizing organized peer support:

In late 2012, Sgt. Polly Olson and Sgt. John Wallschlaeger met to discuss taking structured peer support to the next level. We all know that untrained peer support goes on every day on the street. Often times it's car to car after a call for service or maybe after roll call. We vent, we let off steam and we look for some sort of assurance that we are going to be ok. Nothing really changes, nothing really gets better. Instead, we stuff our emotions a little deeper inside believing we aren't alone. For John & Polly that was never going to be good enough. With the resistance from the HR department at the City it wasn't likely they were going to allow the PD to develop a structured peer support program. The City felt the existing EAP was adequate and did not see the need for anything more. John was aware of some agencies that had banded together to form a County-wide Peer Support Team. The results and feedback were positive and better yet, it wasn't confined within the confines of any one agency. It was by and for the officers and the other employees of the County. It was decided to take the concept to the Outagamie County Chiefs Group. With sample documents in hand, John & Polly made a proposal at the January 2013 Chiefs group meeting. What had been years of discussions about peer support was finally moving from the talk to the implementation phase. It was proposed that Appleton PD would be the anchor or organizing agency and that all law enforcement agencies in Outagamie County and of their employees would be able to utilize the program. Law enforcement agencies from other nearby counties also attended the Chief's meeting. They wanted to gauge the Chief's reaction so they could evaluate their own efforts to organize the same sort of peer support program in their county. Polly & John attended a second follow up meeting in March 2013 to answer the Chief's remaining concerns about confidentiality and a few other minor points. The meeting was also attended by another Chief, well known around the state for his advocacy for peer support. He gave a short presentation identifying the costs associated with police burnout, PTSD and suicide. He asked the other Chief's one simple closing question; "If this isn't our problem gentleman, than whose problem is it? This one is on us and we need to own it". With

no more discussion the Chief's group granted their support and approval to proceed and the organization and implementation phase began.

The proof is in the results

By the fall of 2013 Sgt. Olson became Lieutenant Olson and she was formally given the green light and small budget to move County Wide Peer Support forward. Polly asked all Chiefs to notify their employees about the effort and encourage the Chiefs to contact her if they were interested in having someone on the steering committee. Polly also asked each agency to formally issue an email, memo, order or whatever their agency protocol was signifying the agency's support for the peer support team and the approval for their employees to get involved with and utilize the program. A steering committee was formed representing six (6) of the counties nine (9) agencies. In addition more than forty (40) employees from the agencies either applied or were referred to the steering committee for consideration as Peer Support Team members. While the interview process was being done by the Steering Committee, the committee also met regularly to finalize policy, forms and procedures of the Team as well as outline the two day training. In September 2013, thirty (30) members of the law enforcement agencies in Outagamie County attended the first ever Peer Support Team training. A handful of officers from adjacent Winnebago County were also allowed to attend the training as they wanted to model their training after Outagamie's training in early 2014. That became an important and timely decision for Winnebago County officers and other LEO employees as their Peer Support Team proved to be a valuable resource when they experienced a mass shooter in May of 2015. On October 1st, 2014, the Outagamie County Peer support Team (OCPST) went operational. A trifold brochure and posters were distributed to all the agencies in the county. The phone started to ring. Officers and other agency employees' started to reach out for help. After one year, using a simple on-line generic data collection form, the OCPST reported twenty eight (28) documented "hard" contacts and numerous "soft" contacts. More than 58% of the contacts were self-referred.