

Herndon (VA) Police Department 2023 Officer Wellness Summary

The Town of Herndon is the third largest incorporated town in Virginia, comprised of 4.25 square miles. It is situated in western Fairfax County, just minutes from Dulles International Airport and approximately 25 miles from Washington, DC. The town has 11 parks. HPD is nationally accredited through the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies. Under the leadership of Chief Maggie Deboard are 54 police officers and 18 civilian personnel.

The Herndon Police Department became the law enforcement liaison for a critical public safety mental health survey that was conducted in 2021 and led by the U.S. Marshal's Service and was developed to collect mental health data tailored towards first responder mental health (law enforcement, fire and rescue, corrections, and dispatchers), to assess levels of PTSD, anxiety, and depression among participants. The HPD received an agency summary quickly due to their lead role in the project. The survey results were in line with national and state results that showed a significant number of officers were experiencing moderate to severe levels of anxiety and depression. Also alarming from the survey results was a snapshot of those with levels of PTSD and suicide ideation. HPD has implemented several wellness programs since.

The HPD has developed a comprehensive wellness program for department members that has greatly improved the mental health and wellness of their personnel, and improved safety and working conditions. The goal of this program is not just to react to wellness issues as they arise, but to proactively provide the programs, resources, and tools necessary to prevent physical and mental issues from becoming personally disabling or interfering with law enforcement performance and responsibilities.

Police psychologist services were contracted to assist Herndon officers and dispatchers who were struggling with exposure to traumatic events, as well as the daily stresses of the job. Having a known contract psychologist who is available for call out during critical incidents proved invaluable last year when officers responded to an apartment complex for a welfare check of a family, only to discover the murdered bodies of two young children and their mother. The psychologist, who had her own emotional support dog along with her, met with every officer and dispatcher involved in the incident prior to the end of their shift and upon leaving the station. The psychologist also provided follow up sessions with those who needed it.

The department has also added its own dedicated facility dog to the HPD family to assist our personnel with daily stress and trauma exposure. A non-profit organization based out of Portsmouth, VA, (Mutts With a Mission), who trained and placed dogs with veterans suffering from PTSD began to place some of their dogs with law enforcement agencies as facility dogs, where they could serve an entire group of first responders as opposed to one individual with PTSD. In April of 2020, Canine Bragg joined the HPD family and had an immediate positive impact on personnel. Bragg and his handler have also visited some of our local schools for various special events, which has helped break down barriers between the police and our community.

Annual wellness educational sessions are mandated for both sworn and professional staff, as well as command staff, as part of HPD's wellness program. Mandating these sessions through policy removes the stigma of having to talk with a mental health professional. These sessions were conducted virtually with the police psychologists and done in complete confidence. Follow up sessions were conducted with personnel as needed or as requested.

HPD has a total of seven officers trained in peer support. A retired police officer is also trained, as is one assistant supervisor in the dispatch center. Peer supporters are used to respond to the scenes of critical incidents. When incidents exceed the ability of HPD, peer teams from other jurisdictions in the region are called to assist our department. In 2022, the department also formed a partnership with the Herndon United Methodist Church and started a formal police chaplain program with two of their pastors. The pastors have come to roll calls and introduced themselves to the officers and have begun to conduct ride-alongs to learn more about the department and the officers. They will be used to assist officers with difficult incidents in the community, as well as be another resource for officers who wish to talk privately about difficulties they may be having.

The department recognizes that poor performance and behavior often has a root cause that can be addressed successfully if discovered early. As a result, the department has established an Early Warning System to identify officers in need of structured intervention measures to address problematic behavior or other potential issues. The objective of an Early Warning System review is to recognize incidents, practices, or patterns of behavior that negatively impact the department's mission or the officer's performance, and provide structured intervention through monitoring, training, counseling, or other productive means to improve performance.

HPD has also developed Critical Incident Reporting System by which personnel and supervisors are asked to document their on duty exposures to traumatic incidents after they encounter them. Incidents include traumatic incidents such as child deaths, officer involved shootings, etc. to document the officer's or dispatcher's involvement to help support future workers comp claims of PTSD, depression or anxiety. These forms do not go up the chain of command or to HR, but rather they are kept in a file in the administrative lieutenant's office. This file is given to the officer upon his/her separation from the department.

A Restoration and Recovery Room, or "nap" room was established in HPD to provide officers and dispatchers a safe place to take a 20-30-minute power nap, meditate, or otherwise use as a quiet space to decompress. Officers and dispatchers work long, varied shifts and are routinely working in states of sleep deprivation. Recliners, dim lighting, dark paint, and a sound machine contribute to a soothing environment. Before this room was created, officers would routinely catch short naps in their cruisers when sleep deprived or while waiting to go to court or drive home after an extended shift. This nap room creates a safe place for officers to take a short nap without judgment. The room is also used for meditation by staff and can be utilized as a private space for female employees to lactate after the birth of a child.

The department has also established contacts with the David Lynch foundation who donated instructors to teach transcendental meditation to its officers.

HPD has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which offers counseling and support services for personnel at no cost. The EAP can assist with a variety of problems whether personal or job-related. Any employee or family member may initiate a request for help by calling EAP without going through the chain of command and the services provided are strictly confidential. Supervisors also can make employee referrals to EAP when they determine someone needs services. If a work performance problem continues and the employee does not voluntarily consult with EAP, the supervisor can initiate a formal referral for the employee. The department also provides suicide prevention training to their staff.

Department personnel have 24-hour access to a well-equipped gymnasium that contains functional fitness, strength, and cardio equipment and personnel are provided one hour to work out on duty each shift. The Town of Herndon also has its own Community Center with an indoor pool, gymnasium, strength and cardioequipment, tennis courts, and fitness classes. All personnel have free access to this facility and the classes that are offered, on or off duty. In addition, the Town's golf course is free to all employees.

Starting January 2023, the department instituted a mandatory fitness program for all sworn officers that involves three components: monthly to bi-monthly squad workouts, annual fitness assessment, and annual wellness education. The purpose of this program is to promote morale and personal well-being by promoting individual health and fitness, strengthen officers' ability to respond to increasing physical demands of the law enforcement profession, and increase resilience and the ability to manage emotional and physical stress, enhance mental alertness, and reduce tension. The program is optional for all non-sworn staff.

Medical physicals are mandated every 1, 2, or 3 years through the Public Safety Occupational Health Center (OHC), depending on the age of the officer. The physical examination for sworn personnel is conducted only to determine the employee's continued fitness to perform the tasks of a police officer and to inform them of their general physical condition. In addition to regular medical tests, exams, and blood work provided by the OHC, officers are also given stress tests, vaccines, and chest x-rays at various stages in their career. Officers are encouraged to drop in at the OHC to have blood drawn a week before their scheduled physical so the doctor can go over the results with them at the time of their medical exam.

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COVID vaccines and flu shots are made available through advertised locations in the County or are provided free of charge through Town insurance at local pharmacies within our jurisdiction.

The Town offers access to financial planning resources to all personnel for their Town 457 plans. Employees can work with the Town's Investment Advisor or use the online Web Education Portal to get assistance.

Last year this agency submitted in the award categories of Comprehensive Safety, Officer Wellness, Officer Safety and Officer Traffic Safety and was a finalist in Comprehensive, Wellness and Officer Traffic Safety. The agency has made some improvements to all of their programs and is submitting in each category again this year.

**** This summary is only a brief overview of many of the agency's programs. In the actual submission you will see that the agency has other programs and incentives to benefit its members. Please review their entire submission and its associated documents to gain a complete understanding of their program.**