

# McHenry County (IL) Conservation District Police Department

## 2023 Officer Wellness Summary

The McHenry County Conservation District Police Department patrols approximately 40 square miles in McHenry County, Virginia. They are a department of 11 sworn officers and headed by a chief of police, Dr. Laura King, who holds a doctorate degree in psychology. She began the department's comprehensive wellness program when she became chief in 2019. What is unique about this program she and her staff implemented their programs with extremely limited financial resources.

### Submission for 2021 Award

Upon Laura King becoming chief in 2019, the department's wellness program consisted of providing officers with a stipend to offset the costs associated with health club membership, offered an annual wellness fair, provided employees with flu shots and vaccines, and offered an employee assistance program. Upon taking over she held a meeting with department members introducing the concept of a comprehensive officer wellness program and asked for input on what that program would look like. She felt by hearing what officers wanted, would be able to create a program that would meet the needs of the officers and create buy-in. A committee was created to guide the program building process. Core elements of the program were identified; physical fitness, stress management, nutrition, and mental health.

One of the first things the chief did was identify an area at the police department that could be converted to a workout room. The room started out with limited equipment but the entire cost to convert the room and provide the equipment was \$500. The chief then obtained gym equipment from a local high school and allowed their officers time to work out while on duty. Within nine months, 73% of the officers were using the gym regularly.

A peer support program was also added to ensure officers had police specific resources to support their mental health. An active suicide awareness/prevention campaign was also undertaken utilizing resources from the BJA VALOR for Blue and SAFLEO programs. In addition to the attendance at the trainings, the VALOR App was downloaded on all department issued cell phones and officers being encouraged to use the daily checklists and training resources as continual reminders of the importance of being both mentally and physically prepared for the job.

When it came to stress management, the schedule and work-life balance issues seemed to be the main issue identified by the committee. In attempt to assist the officers in achieving a greater sense of work-life balance, a 10 hour schedule was implemented that allowed each officer to have every other Friday, Saturday and Sunday off. Officers unanimously agreed this schedule allows them to have more quality time with their families and live a more balanced life creating less stress.

A Vitamix blender was purchased as a gift for the agency and smoothies are regularly made as a way to encourage health and nutrition. When agency potluck events are held, there are always plant based options prepared. Healthy snacks such as oranges are regularly made available in the squad room for the officers to enjoy. These items are provided by the Chief and not purchased with agency funds. It is believed in introducing healthy snacks, green smoothies and sharing healthy recipes that healthy eating may become a habit adopted by agency members.

Suicide prevention is a topic Chief King is very passionate about. She has had articles published and has even written a book to help raise awareness throughout the profession. Officers are sent to the VALOR for Blue training program as it is available. Posters and resources from VALOR for Blue are displayed throughout the agency. A family outreach informing loved ones about the wellness initiative and ensuring they were aware of the services provided by the EAP program was sent to all officers' families. Additionally, the agency joined the "We Never Walk Alone" program to provide anonymous and effective peer support. At the cost of \$2 per officer per month, this is an investment that ensures comprehensive peer support is available for all officers needing help { <https://weneverwalkalone.org/faq>).

Additionally, a Destination Zero agreement was created and signed by all officers to bring suicide awareness to the agency. This form informs all officers of the suicide support networks and requires each officer commit that suicide will never be an option for them. This form has become part of each officer's personnel file in an attempt to let officers

know there is no shame in asking for help. It has been shared with dozens of agencies across the nation as word of this initiative has become known.

In 2020, the agency started tracking data and noticed substantial improvements in metrics. They also continued to improve the workout area and add equipment for the officers to use. During 2020, officer productivity, mainly in the area of self-initiated field activity, was up nearly 300% while sick time usage was down approximately 65%. As they continued to evolve the program, they continued to see improvements in officer health and department morale. The program has great buy in from the leadership of the organization who model a commitment to wellness both on and off duty.

### **Program Improvements Since Last Submission**

In 2021, the department looked for meaningful ways to expand the program. This was in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. The agency invested in the OURA ring as an early COVID detection device which had the added benefit of sleep, heart-rate and activity tracking. They also had a team member certified as a personal trainer, offering customized workouts for all interested department members, free of charge. A book on functional fitness was issued to the team as a conversation starter and encouragement to engage in fitness as an investment in each individual's personal health. The focus of this book was cardiovascular disease prevention through diet and exercise. It was their goal to help officers understand that fitness was more than a job requirement, it was something that could improve both their health and quality of life.

In 2022, the department took a hard look at their existing programs designed to focus on employee engagement. Though the department had a 73% participation rate, the Chief was determined to understand why nearly 30% of the team was not using the wellness program. The chief wanted a program that worked for everyone and believed a way could be found to make the program something all employees would/could engage in.

This involved personal discussions with all department members; hearing feedback about what they liked about the program and what they did not. After hearing many voices, it was learned that the program did not have enough options to meet the diverse needs of our team. Specifically team members wanted an indoor cardio option and some instructor-led workouts to help them navigate their fitness journey. Employees also wanted ways to track their progress to know that their efforts were working. The chief sought funding and within 30 days had a Peloton bike as part of the indoor cardio workout program.

The agency started keeping an accountability calendar where staff members tracked the days they used the Peloton. The chief purchased, with her own money, gift cards for the team member who logged the most rides each month. An email announcing the monthly 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place finishers were sent to the agency with some words of encouragement. One of the officers who was not taking advantage of the workout programs started using the Peloton and within three months the officer advised he had lost 17 pounds and was feeling better than ever. While the Peloton is not the only component of their wellness program, it was a welcome addition and met a gap for both cardio equipment as well as a coach-led workout option.

An expanded wellness screening program in the form of a health assessment was also offered by the District in 2022. This program made a comprehensive wellness evaluation available to all employees. This included bloodwork screening dates that were brought to several locations on campus for the convenience of employees. These screenings were offered free of charge to not only employees, but any family members covered by our medical insurance in addition to the already offered wellness benefits.

Being a small agency, they needed a peer support solution that would work for the unique needs of the agency and be realistic for their limited budget. In 2022, they continued to use the peer support network, "We Never Walk Alone" (WNWA). This is a state-wide program costs agencies \$2 per month per officer to participate. The program has more than 310 trained peer support officers from more than 60 agencies in Illinois. The program also has a network of 110 vetted mental health professionals from across the nation in the event the officer wants to seek out clinical support. This puts a network of culturally competent clinicians at their fingertips and makes it easy to find resources and help all in one place. The WNWA app was put on all agency issued phones to ensure officers had quick and easy access to the

program and all its resources. The program has a phone app and offers support via phone or text in addition to the option to meet in person.

The services provided by "We Never Walk Alone" (WNWA) are not only for officers, they extend to family members, telecommunicators and retirees as well as active members of the agency. The website offers a variety of self-evaluation tests officers can access at any time to help them navigate their experience. There are also external resources in the areas of nutrition, fitness, sleep, resiliency, mental health and more. There are educational resources on different types of therapies and support available to users. The department also trained 20% of their officers as department peer support officers who have profiles on the WNWA app and website and are available to help our team members, as well as people seeking peer support from other member agencies. The program is confidential, secure and 100% anonymous for people seeking support.

The agency also offers an unlimited Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and wellbeing resource called Lifeworks. This program is available by phone, online and by mobile app. This app was also downloaded to the officer's phones. In addition to unlimited counseling sessions for officers and immediate family members, the program also offers a personalized wellbeing newsfeed the officer can set up to address their areas of interest. The program is confidential and free of charge to the employees and their family members. There is no limit to the sessions or frequency of use. The EAP is available 24/7, 365 days a year.

In 2022, one of the agency's team members also was trained as a NCI Nutrition Coach Specialist for First Responders. This program focuses on nutrition and how nutrition can either support wellness in an individual or create challenges in achieving wellness. This coaching is available to all department members free of charge as a part of their wellness initiative. Personal training is available free of charge to all police department employees as well. A member of the team is a certified personal trainer and is offering individualized workout plans for all members of the agency interested in improving their fitness.

The department also joined a county wide co-responder program giving all team members access to a police psychologist. The police psychologists are there to help member agencies better serve the needs of crime victims, and normalize help seeking behaviors. They show the police the importance of people getting the support they need and how mental health intervention can be an effective tool for people in crisis. This program is available to staff free of charge.

A department wide survey was conducted at the end of 2022, Findings show 90% of employees are now taking advantage of the workout program. 80% of team members reported losing weight. The survey revealed that 100% of its personnel believe the MCCDPD is doing enough to support them in their wellness journey.

This department submitted for the 2021 Destination Zero officer wellness award category and was a finalist. Since that time, the department has expanded their wellness initiatives and is re-submitting 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.**