



# FBI-LEEDA

Advancing the Science and Art of Law Enforcement Leadership

## WELLNESS RECONSIDERED

In recent years, “wellness” stubbornly worked its way into the working vocabulary of most first responders and became the watchword for police departments across the country. Few topics are more important than the wellbeing of police officers; but for all the recent wellness talk, far too many wellness questions remain. On May 22, 2020, *HealthDay* reported the findings of an exhaustive international study on the mental health of police officers. “Psychological difficulties will remain a substantial health concern among police,” the study found, *until* there is “general agreement on what should be done” to treat officers.<sup>1</sup> Reframed in traditional *if – then* format, the researchers argue that *if* no general agreement can be reached on “what should be done” to help officers, then their mental health difficulties “will remain a substantial health concern.”<sup>2</sup> This article respectfully challenges the *if* premise of this argument. It is, of course, incontestable that police officers continue to suffer, but the chronic wellness crisis in this country has less to do with the lack of consensus regarding “what should be done” and more to do with the challenge of overcoming barriers to the efficacious, broadly-supported treatments already available.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Preidt, “Mental Health is Big Issue For Police Officers Around The World: Study” (*U.S. News*, May 22, 2020), <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2020-05-22/mental-health-is-big-issue-for-police-officers-around-the-world-study>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*



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This is the first installment in a series of wellness articles that will outline, first, *what should be done* to improve officer wellness, and, second, the means by which these barriers can be removed so that what *should be done* translates into what *is done*. Before forecasting the upcoming articles in this series, however, it's important to note that no study is conducted, and no article is written, in a social or political vacuum. When *U.S. News* and *HealthDay* reported the above-referenced study on the mental health of police officers, they did so just three days before the death of George Floyd. Since then, there has been a seismic upheaval in relations between law enforcement and certain segments of society, and the political aftershocks following the initial quake in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, continue to reverberate across the country. Thus, when the study reports a disconcerting chasm between the “high levels” of officer stress and the “low levels” of officer support, we know that, post-Floyd, that chasm has widened considerably.<sup>3</sup> And when the study concludes that an “increase in funding” to support officer wellness is desperately needed, we know the study could not have foreseen that the amount of funding needed to support officer wellness would mushroom overnight as a result of single, tragic event in Minnesota.<sup>4</sup> But it has. The “considerable hostility towards law enforcement” takes “an emotional toll” on men and women in blue who are already

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*



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operating on the periphery of emotional limits.<sup>5</sup> The aforementioned juxtaposition of too much stress and too little support is all too real for police officers today. When the “overarching lack of respect for officers” from city councils and other traditionally supportive bodies<sup>6</sup> collides with the abuse and venom in the streets, it can be, in a word, “debilitating.”<sup>7</sup> Consequently, today’s need for wellness support and funding is greater than it’s ever been in the lifetimes of the men and women who currently protect and serve.

Over the course of the next several weeks, we will hear from a Chief of Police and Peer Support Coordinator regarding the biggest challenges facing their respective departments; we’ll hear from the CEO of a nationally recognized residential treatment center specializing in the treatment of first responders, and from a retired law enforcement, now trauma-clinician, who specializes in treating first responders in crisis regarding what works and what doesn’t when addressing

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<sup>5</sup> David Hogberg, *Police Officers Feel Psychological Strain in Wake of George Floyd Killing and Protests* (Washington Examiner, July 9, 2020), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/police-officers-feel-psychological-strain-in-wake-of-george-floyd-killing-and-protests>.

<sup>6</sup> *Former Seattle Police Chief, Carmen Best, as quoted by Madeline Holcombe, Seattle Police Chief Announces Her Retirement After City Council Votes to Cut the Police Budget by Nearly \$4 Million* (CNN, August 11, 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/11/us/seattle-police-chief-budget-cut-4-million/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> *Retired Police Lieutenant, Randy Sutton, as quoted by David Hogberg, Police Officers Feel Psychological Strain in Wake of George Floyd Killing and Protests* (Washington Examiner, July 9, 2020), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/police-officers-feel-psychological-strain-in-wake-of-george-floyd-killing-and-protests>.

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the mental-health needs of officers. And finally, we'll discuss the important legal considerations, including the distinction between confidentiality and privilege, a topic more relevant than ever with the number of cases being removed from state to federal court for alleged civil rights violations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 28 U.S.C. § 1443.



Mr. Toone is an entrepreneur, businessman, speaker, and attorney. He is co-founder, CEO, and General Counsel of Stepstone Connect, a tele-behavioral company headquartered in Woods Cross, Utah. Stepstone Connect has a network of trauma-trained clinicians throughout the United States providing a wide-range of mental, emotional, and behavioral-health services using secure, on-line, HIPAA-compliant technology. Stepstone Connect proudly works with America's First Responders and Veterans through its growing professional network and contractual relationships with police, fire, and other first-responder agencies across the U.S. at the federal, state, and local level. Mr. Toone co-hosts a weekly podcast (First Responder Mental Health Network) with Kristin Walker, CEO of the Mental Health News Radio. Prior to founding Stepstone, Mr. Toone was a trial lawyer and litigator. He was the Managing Partner of Bowman and Brooke in Phoenix, Arizona, the largest product liability defense firm in the U.S. He has represented many of the world's largest corporations, including Ford, Toyota, Honda, Yamaha, Mazda, GM, and Polaris. He has taken depositions in 46 of the 50 states and handled jury, bench, and appellate matters across the United States.