Daily, officers across the nation are exposed to the darker side of life—face-to-face confrontations with violent criminals, investigating crimes too heinous to make up and knowing each day they don their uniform could potentially be their last. Officers often build strong defenses as a coping mechanism for these challenges. But when a critical incident, such as a line-of-duty death, injury or wounding occurs close to home, those defensive walls come crashing down, often leaving officers and the departments they serve shattered and exposed.

When a law enforcement agency finds itself in the midst of trauma, Concerns of Police Survivors, or COPS, can be that helping hand to reach in, relieve some of the burden and offer a clear direction in the midst of chaos.

COPS is an organization with a mission to provide resources to assist in rebuilding the lives of surviving families and affected co-workers of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty.

"Some say we are the best kept secret in law enforcement and nobody hears about us until after the tragedy," said Jennifer Thacker, president of the national COPS organization and Louisville, Ky. resident. "When a tragedy occurs, we want people to know that COPS is one of the [groups] they need to call."

COPS began in 1984 as an organization specifically geared toward helping family survivors cope with the loss of an officer. However, in recent years, COPS has expanded its mission to encompass the needs of law enforcement agencies and co-workers in dealing with line-of-duty death situations and their effects—ranging from training about line-of-duty death procedures and filing for benefits to recognizing the warning signs of officers who are having trouble coping with job stress, guilt or both.

Since the Kentucky Chapter of COPS was formed in 2001, 21 Kentucky law enforcement officers have been killed in the line of duty, many from relatively small departments with no plan about how to manage a line-of-duty-death situation.

"By far, the vast majority of departments in the United States have only 10 or 20 officers; less than 10 percent have 100 or more, so line-of-duty death isn’t something every department deals with regularly," said former Seattle (Wash.) Chief Gil Kerlikowske in the book "Better not Bitter: The Story of The Concerns of Police Survivors."

"Nobody wants to plan for tragedy, but without planning, a terrible situation can become even worse," said Connie Clark, the book’s author. "We owe it to our police officers to make those decisions before the critical incident happens—and before one loss, dealt with improperly or not at all, leads to unnecessary suffering and the loss of good men and women from the law enforcement field."

In an effort to combat this issue, COPS launched the Traumas in Law Enforcement training. The training, offered about seven times per year from January through March at various locations across the country, consists of three days dedicated to preparing law enforcement personnel for the harsh realities of the career. One day is spent on preparing and handling line-of-duty death and one day on the cumulative stress on an officer. The third day is split in half with part devoted to discussing and recognizing signs of police suicide and the other half on disabled officers and what the agency’s responsibility is when an officer is in...
Concerns of Police Survivors

Until afterwards because then you're reacting to a crisis, rather than waiting until afterwards to take the time to deal with a critical incident, especially line-of-duty death. The organization also stresses the importance of agencies creating and putting into place policies that specifically address how they will deal with a critical incident, especially line-of-duty death.

“Officers don’t look at it as a priority and they don’t want to think about that stuff,” said Monroe, who also serves as UK’s acting police chief. “That’s why we think of it as a tool.”

If an agency does not have general orders or standard operating procedures, COPS offers a booklet – Supporting Services to Surviving Families of Line-of-Duty Death: A Public Safety Agency Handbook – that only takes about 20 minutes to read, Thacker said. The booklet can help agency heads make sure they aren’t making any mistakes.

Also available to agencies are model policies, which, like the Supporting Services handbook, can be downloaded from the COPS Web site, and can be tailored to fit the needs of each individual agency. Depending on the size of the agency, there are two model policies an agency can download.

“If SOPs are in place and they are reviewing them annually, they are always looking at mind set of being a compassionate agency, and I think that is sometimes lost if they are not thinking along those lines,” Thacker said.

Beyond training and preparation, COPS main mission is supporting survivors and agencies when a line-of-duty death occurs.

“I would recommend that they always bring SOPs in as soon as possible,” Thacker said. “Tell them we can take the burden of them, not that the family is a burden, but we can take that responsibility from them.”

In 2001, LaGrange Police Department Officer Eddie Mundo was killed when his patrol car was struck head on by a vehicle. The driver of the vehicle, who was under the influence of alcohol and narcotics, had assaulted his wife and fled the scene before officers arrived and Mundo was searching for the vehicle.

When LaGrange Chief Kevin Collette, who had been chief at LaGrange for less than four months, found himself dealing with the very situation no agency ever wants to face, it was the outreach of other law enforcement colleagues and COPS that helped him and his department get through that difficult time.

“It is definitely a whirlwind,” Collette said. “I got that phone call that night and I don’t think I slept for about 49 hours straight. You have so much going on and there is so much to do that you have to get taken care of and make sure are taken care of. It’s just nice to have an organization there to make sure that you’re clicking on all cylinders because it’s easy to get off track.”

Within hours of the fatal crash, Collette was contacted by two Louisville Metro officers who wanted to help out the LaGrange Police Department as they went through the tragedy. One of these officers, Eric Johnson, has since retired and formed the organization Supporting Heroes, which offers assistance and support to agencies dealing with a line-of-duty death. These men put Collette in contact with COPS.

COPS assisted LaGrange in two specific ways. First, COPS was able to help Office Mundo’s surviving family – his wife, Brandi and 1-year-old son.

“It was all new to us – we are a small depart- ment and don’t deal with this on a year-to-year basis, if ever,” Collette said. “So, they could talk to us and tell us what to expect from the family and also give the family someone to talk to that had some knowledge of what was going on.”

“It also allowed us to focus on the investiga- tion and arrangements and things we had to fo- cus on when dealing with a line-of-duty death,” Collette continued. “So it was obviously a great benefit for us having an organization to take care of what is really the most important mat- ter, which is the emotional side of the family, the survivors.”

Second, COPS assisted in ensuring the de- partment was properly filing necessary benefits paperwork.

“As an administrator, there’s a lot of paper- work that goes into making sure the family is taken care of,” Collette said. “Nobody wants to be the one that screws something up and the family misses out on a benefit or is delayed on a benefit. It was good for the COPS organization to be there to steer us in the right direction and make sure and keep us on path.”

The LaGrange Police Department is just one of hundreds of law enforcement agencies that COPS has assisted over the years. Though the organization represents a side of law enforce- ment that few want to face, the training, as- sistance and emotional support they offer are invaluable.

“Chances are most officers retire and go on to lead a happy life, but the reality is an aver- age of 150 officers die every year (nationwide),” Thacker said. “It’s amazing how few agencies still don’t have a plan. They have a plan for ev- erything else, but not the thing that happens with some regularity in this profession and al- ways has, and unfortunately, probably always will.”

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The Traumas in Law Enforcement Training presented by Concerns of Police Survivors is offered approximately seven times each year from January through March. In 2010, the training will be conducted in:

- Salt Lake City, Utah
- Tween, N.J.
- Grand Rapids, Mich.
- Springfield, Mo.
- Charlotte, N.C.
- Portland, Ore.
- Southern Calif. area

In addition to these trainings, agencies can request COPS to come and bring the training to their area if they are willing to pay for the expenses and provide a facility.

For additional information on COPS, COPS training dates and resource materials, visit the Web site at www.cops.org. Contact the national COPS director, Suzi Sawyer, at (573) 346-4911 or COPS Ky. Chapter President Priscilla Walls at priscilla@priscilla.com or (502) 333-1655.