



**D**aily, 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-



# A HELPING HAND TO PICK UP THE PIECES

/Abbie Darst, Program Coordinator

» jured in the line of duty.

“At these trainings, [the instructors] talk about how we put these officers in harm’s way. And when they get harmed, it is the agency’s job to take care of them,” said Thacker, whose husband, Brandon, was an Alcoholic Beverage Control officer killed in the line of duty in 1998.

Traumas of Law Enforcement addresses more than just the physical harm that can be done to an officer, Thacker explained. It also tackles the emotional and mental harm that officers experience in dealing with the grueling

that allows the department to quickly notify a spouse or family member after a critical incident. It also indicates the wishes of that officer should he or she be injured and unresponsive or killed in the line of duty. Officers can update their profiles at any time, but the agency requires a mandatory update each year.

It is pertinent for agencies to have this up-to-date contact information for its officers’ families. When Thacker’s husband was killed, it took his agency several hours to notify her because she had started a new job and her daytime contact information was outdated.

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reality of their jobs.

This type of training is just one form of assistance that COPS offers law enforcement agencies in preparing for line-of-duty-death situations. 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.

“It’s important to have a plan in place beforehand, before the crisis happens, rather than wait until afterwards because then you’re reacting chaotically to a chaotic event,” Thacker said.

For instance, the University of Kentucky Police Department has an electronic database with up-to-date information on its officers as a first step toward implementing a critical-incident response policy. The database, which was started shortly after Maj. Joe Monroe and another UK officer attended the Traumas in Law Enforcement training, contains personal information

“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 for them.”

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 having that 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 COPS in as soon as possible,” Thacker said. “I tell them we can take the burden off of them, not that the family is a burden, but we can take that responsibility from them.”

In 2003, 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’s 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 Officer

Mundo’s surviving family – his wife, Brandi and 1-year-old son.

“It was all new to us – we are a small department 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 investigation and arrangements and things we had to focus 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 matter, which is the emotional side of the family, the survivors.”

Second, COPS assisted in ensuring the department was properly filing necessary benefits paperwork.

“As an administrator, there’s a lot of paperwork 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 enforcement that few want to face, the training, assistance 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 average 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 everything else, but not the thing that happens with some regularity in this profession and always has, and unfortunately, probably always will.”



### Training for Trauma

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
- Trenton, 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.nationalcops.org](http://www.nationalcops.org), contact the national COPS director, Suzie Sawyer, at (573) 346-4911 or COPS Ky. Chapter President Priscilla Walls at [pwallskycops@yahoo.com](mailto:pwallskycops@yahoo.com) or (859) 333-1655. ■