



Wellness Coordinator Underscores Albany Corrections Commitment to Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

Albany County Correctional Facility leaders are strengthening their commitment to officer wellness.

After several officer suicides over the past 15 years, “we knew we needed to take a proactive stance and find a way to help more officers—both within our department and in neighboring Sheriff’s Office departments,” said veteran Corrections Sergeant David Poole.

In 2014, the agency launched a training program dedicated specifically to helping new staff understand how their new jobs might affect their mental health and how to develop skills to better cope with stressors that are a part of the job. The agency also established a PEER team comprising four to five corrections officers trained to provide basic mental health first aid to staff seeking help and to help staff with more acute needs find treatment options.

Leadership across the Albany County Sheriff’s Office quickly recognized the potential value of these supports to other departments.

“Law enforcement, dispatch, EMS—they all face similar types of stressors,” says Poole. “They experience shift work, witness emergency and traumatic scenes, and face public scrutiny. Many civilian employees also deal with these stressors vicariously through their interactions with the first responder staff.”

The CARES UP grant provides the structure and funding needed to not only expand services for correctional services staff but to extend these supports to other departments. To facilitate this expansion, the Sheriff’s Office hired its first full-time wellness coordinator in April 2022.

THE VALUE OF A WELLNESS COORDINATOR

As the wellness coordinator, Ron Notar plays a key role overseeing CARES UP activities within the correctional facility. Trained in health and nutrition, he serves as the point person for all wellness training across the Sheriff's office.

He is responsible for:

- › **Coordinating all aspects of training delivery**, including ensuring that training materials are accessible in a variety of formats, setting schedules, and communicating any changes well in advance. "If you say you'll do something at a specific time, it's important to follow through," says Notar. "There's probably someone waiting for that update or training. And if you don't follow through, both you and the program lose credibility fast."
- › **Tailoring training content.** Notar makes sure that trainings are delivered consistently, across departments. But he also understands that uniformed personnel working in different contexts have unique needs. For example, corrections officers face different barriers in dealing with traumatic situations than police or emergency medical service (EMS) personnel. "When EMS has a bad call, they can get some quiet time in the rig on the way back to the station," says Notar. "Corrections has to be mindful of the 'eyes and ears' of the inmates. They don't want inmates knowing about their personal lives. As a result, they may be less likely to deal with—or even acknowledge—their feelings right away."

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CARES UP AT ALBANY CORRECTIONS

The Albany County Sheriff's Office is using its CARES UP grant to expand wellness supports available to staff at the Albany County Correctional Facility. The facility will use the funding to develop a new wellness and resilience component for its current wellness training and to make training available to veteran officers in addition to new hires.



- › **Being a program champion.** According to Notar, when it comes to training, the messenger definitely matters. “People don’t want to waste time [in a training] if they feel that they’re doing it just to check a box. They want someone at the helm who they see as credible and trustworthy, who they can learn from.” Notar also plays a key role in keeping mental health issues front and center across the Sheriff’s Office and in creating a culture in which talking about mental health needs is acceptable.
- › **Building connections.** “Neighboring departments frequently help each other out. When one department suffers a loss, they depend on their neighbors to assist.” Notar is continually networking, helping to build these connections before a crisis arises.
- › **Overseeing CARES UP activities.** As grant activities unfold, Notar will take the lead in overseeing the development of the new training modules and expanding training access to all corrections staff—not just to new hires. He will also support the uptake and dissemination of new mental health supports the department has in the works, including a new cell phone app where staff can access health and wellness tips.

NY CARES UP

TO LEARN MORE about CARES UP, a state-funded program to support veterans, first responders, and uniformed personnel through wellness and resiliency to lessen the stress inherent in their careers, go to:

preventsuicideny.org/cares-up

or email CARESUP@omh.ny.gov

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“Corrections is the largest group of the department and has seen the most loss of staff. The gains we make in the corrections side of the house will hopefully translate to a positive impact department-wide. The wellness coordinator can play a pivotal role in this translation.”

- David Poole, Veteran Corrections Sergeant

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