



PUTTING OFFICER INPUT INTO ACTION: Engaging Law Enforcement in CARES UP

Staff surveys provide key information on current department needs and future priorities for mental health and officer wellness. But the value of these surveys depends on two factors: (1) the willingness of staff to participate in the process and (2) how honest they are willing to be in their responses.

The Albany Police Department is successful on both counts.

Shortly after receiving its CARES UP funding, the Albany Police Department administered an anonymous member support survey to its 250 staff members. The survey offered staff an opportunity to provide feedback on existing mental health and wellness services and gaps and a chance to shape program priorities.

Most staff, including both new and seasoned officers, provided feedback—much of it thoughtful and solution-focused.

“People are very much on board with what we are trying to accomplish,” says Officer Zinab “Zee” Kitonyi, a law enforcement trainer and coordinator of the department’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP). “They want to help leadership however they can.”

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Here are some steps the Albany Police Department took to mobilize officer support:

- › **Put mental health and wellness front and center from the beginning of an officer's training.** Most of Albany's current patrol are graduates of the department's own police academy, where wellness is a priority. "[During the Academy,] officers spend time exploring topics such as mental health, self-awareness, and suicide prevention," says Kitonyi. "They understand the importance of acknowledging and addressing these issues."
- › **Establish a culture of listening.** The survey wasn't the first time officers were invited to share their thoughts on health and wellness. Supervisors and commanders check in regularly on the welfare of those under their command, and peers and partners also regularly check in on one another. "We have conversations with people on a daily basis—both individually and as a group," says Albany Police Department Commander Norah Harrington. "It's an ever-evolving conversation. The survey was just a continuation of this dialogue."
- › **Craft a thoughtful ask from the right person.** Kitonyi and Harrington took time to craft an email that clearly explained what the survey was about and how the department would use it. They also made sure that it came from respected messengers—people whom officers knew had a personal stake in the program. "If you have someone with no credibility make the ask—or even worse, someone who is a drain on people's mental wellness—you won't get a response," says Harrington.



CARES UP at the Albany Police Department

The Albany Police Department is using its CARES UP grant to implement a multi-pronged approach that includes:

- » Providing advanced training for Employee Assistance Program (EAP) staff
- » Increasing staff awareness of when mental health stressors are becoming too much and helping them develop coping skills
- » Reducing stigma associated with seeking help
- » Boosting staff morale and cohesion

- › **Ensure anonymity.** According to Harrington, officers were much more candid in their responses because they knew the survey was anonymous and that they wouldn't have to defend their responses. "Because there was no one arguing back, they could say what was on their minds, without worrying about how it would come across."
- › **Be transparent.** Harrington and Kitonyi printed out and shared the anonymous survey responses with everyone on staff. This allowed officers to see how others responded. It also communicated leadership's commitment to taking the responses seriously and their readiness to be held accountable.
- › **Be responsive but realistic.** Harrington and Kitonyi are very up-front about the fact that they don't have all the answers. "We tell our officers, 'We want to know what you need so we can help you.' But we're also realistic about what we can and can't accomplish," says Harrington. As they review the survey responses, they will need to see which suggestions are feasible and which are sustainable beyond the CARES UP grant.
- › **Focus on solutions.** The member survey was designed to focus on both needs and solutions. "It wasn't fishing for compliments," said Kitonyi. "It invited people to share their problems, but then moved quickly to solutions." These solutions included a variety of great 'outside the box' suggestions, such as innovative recruitment and retention strategies to alleviate staffing shortages, and microwave-ready healthy meals for officers who are pulled in, last minute, to work extra shifts.
- › **Engage supporters at all levels of command.** Harrington and Kitonyi communicate regularly with their command staff to ensure their buy-in

and support for the department's wellness initiatives. But they are also continually on the lookout for informal leaders who have the ear of their colleagues and who share a sense of responsibility for creating a safe and supportive work environment. "The broader our base of support, the more successful we are likely to be," says Kitonyi.

NEXT STEPS

Harrington and Kitonyi look forward to using the survey data to build support for their wellness efforts—to command staff, city hall, and the public. "There's a societal expectation that police be on the top of their game and able to make sound decisions," says Kitonyi. "Everyone has a vested interest in that—especially the officers and their families."



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