



Officer Wellness at Allegany Corrections: MOVING BEYOND 'I'M FINE'

At Allegany Corrections, self-care begins with conversations. Hard conversations about the challenges built in to being a corrections officer: ongoing stress, regular exposure to trauma, mandated overtime, and limited control over the course of one's day.

"Officers often don't talk about their feelings. We put them in the vault. If you ask how we're doing, we tell you we're 'fine.' But sometimes we're really not. And eventually, these feelings come out in ways we don't want," says Wellness Officer Brent Schlafer.

To help officers begin to acknowledge and address these feelings, Allegany has developed the Officer Wellness Program: a voluntary, proactive approach to everyday self-care. Supported in part with CARES UP funding, the 8-hour training and

accompanying activities provide officers with tools and strategies to facilitate a healthy work-life balance—before their stressors have escalated, and they are experiencing mental health challenges.

"What's different about our program is that it's real talk about the pressures of the job and the things that we're experiencing," says Schlafer. "It's about empowerment. Most guys say they're 'fine' because they don't feel empowered to change anything. This program helps them take control of those areas of their lives that they can control."

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Launched in February 2022, the Officer Wellness Program comprises an 8-hour, in-person training for agency staff and eight monthly online messages designed to engage participants in self-care activities related to each of SAMHSA's Eight Dimensions of Wellness. Participants, including both officers

and leadership, are encouraged to develop personalized self-care plans, are provided with incentives to encourage wellness-related activities, and receive monthly links to mental health and wellness services tailored to the needs of their profession. The program also includes guidance for agency administrators on how to encourage leadership investment in workforce development and wellness.

According to Schlafer, the Officer Wellness Program is effective for several reasons:

- › **Participation is voluntary.** For a population whose work is dictated by rules and mandates, voluntary participation is critical. “We hear all the time, ‘I know what’s best for you.’ We comply with policies because we’re told to do so—not because we necessarily agree. Encouraging participation, rather than mandating it, demonstrates respect for officers’ autonomy. It increases buy-in. It also increases the likelihood that participants will sustain their self-care plans,” says Schlafer.
- › **People speak the truth.** An integral part of the training is personal testimonials. Officers share their stories, as do clinicians from the community. For the initial training, even Sheriff-Elect Scott Cicirello shared his experiences working in law enforcement and its impact on his family. “Officers hear people being vulnerable and giving a name to their experiences. And they learn that there are answers beyond ‘I’m fine,’” says Schlafer.
- › **Mental health clinicians deliver portions of the training content.** These clinicians are familiar with corrections settings and the unique stressors that officers face; they are also available for one-on-one therapy if officers have mental health needs. “Because the training is in a neutral, non-clinical setting, participants are more willing to open up and share their own experiences,” says

Officer Wellness Program Objectives

- » Teach officers and leadership how to use SAMHSA’s [Eight Dimensions of Wellness](#) to develop personalized wellness plans
- » Help officers develop resiliency skills for everyday life stressors
- » Help officers improve work-life balance
- » Help improve work efficiency and performance
- » Encourage leadership investment in workforce development and wellness
- » Show leadership how to reward officers for their proactive participation in developing wellness plans

Schlafer. “And if they do have something traumatic going on, now they’ve heard from a clinician who they know is competent, who they will be more willing to connect with should they need to.”

- › **Follow-up activities are confidential and self-directed.** Following the initial training, participants are expected to spend approximately one hour per month for the next eight months completing at least 3 out of the 10 recommended wellness activities. Each month focuses on a different dimension of wellness. Participants use the Power DMS mobile app to report on their activities online, including a reflection on the benefits of the work they’ve done.
- › **Built-in reward system.** Participants who complete at least the minimum activities receive an incentive. To date, incentives have

included a free dinner for the family at a local restaurant, a day at the local roller rink, and an officer recognition concert at a local concert venue. Schlafer sees dual benefits to an incentive-based approach: it communicates to officers that their wellness matters, and it is a value-neutral justification for participation. "Because the program is proactive, you don't have to admit that anything's wrong. And because there are incentives, you can also say that you're doing it for the incentives," says Schlafer.

› **Strong support from senior leadership.**

The program has the backing of Sheriff-Elect Cicirello and senior Allegany Corrections leadership. "Without effective leadership, this goes nowhere," says Schlafer. "You need to care about your people, and your actions need to dictate that." Schlafer's team is also developing a separate leadership training for middle management. "If we want to change the culture of the workplace, middle management needs to be part of the solution. They need to understand the importance of empathy. They can still be strong and give direction, but they also need to be approachable," says Schlafer.

NEXT STEPS

Allegany is approaching the end of its first 8-month training cycle. In the first round, 18 of the agency's 70 staff participated—nearly 25 percent. As more officers hear about the program and incentives, the team anticipates that many more will join when the program begins again in spring 2023. Schlafer has also delivered the training to more than 35 agencies across the state.

"It's a win-win for everyone involved. For administrators, because it demonstrates that they care about their staff and are invested in their wellness. And for officers, because they can develop a sustainable plan that allows them to thrive in their work, not just survive," says Schlafer.

In the upcoming year, Schlafer and his training team will explore ways to merge their CARES UP work with their existing wellness programming. Already, five Allegany officers have become designated *True Grit* trainers and have begun incorporating lessons from that program into their own wellness training.

"All of this work is connected and is vitally important," says Schlafer. "This wellness stuff isn't going away. It's long overdue. We're taught defensive tactics. Range. Policy and procedures. But for health and wellness, we're not given any tools for our toolbelt. But people are starting to have those difficult conversations—individually and at the organization and state levels. And I feel hopeful that things are starting to change."

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

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