



Clarkstown Trainings Focus on Officer Wellness and Resiliency

Like many police departments, Clarkstown has a strong emphasis on training.

“We are a highly trained department. We always pursue whatever might be out there,” says Sergeant Christopher Bax.

But what makes Clarkstown particularly proud is its in-house training capacity. Sergeant Bax is a New York State (NYS) Division of Criminal Justice Services Master Instructor and a Consultant for the NYS Office of Mental Health; he is also a Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) instructor. Fellow officers Niles Davies and Dan Maloney are fundamental crisis intervention skills instructors. This in-house capacity ensures that the department’s 164 officers receive ongoing, quality training on a range of critical topics, including mental health promotion and wellness.

So, when the Clarkstown Police Department (CPD) received CARES UP funding in Spring 2022 to improve officer wellness, Bax and his team looked forward to using part of the grant to attend relevant trainings that they could then share with the rest of the department. These trainings will build on CPD’s current wellness efforts and lay the foundation for broader, department-wide changes.

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MAKING WELLNESS AND RESILIENCE A PRIORITY

Over the past five years, wellness and resiliency have become a key component of Clarkstown’s in-service training. For example, all of CPD’s officers receive training based on CIT skills, a model designed to improve the way law enforcement and the community respond to people experiencing mental health crises.

“The CIT trainings focus on communications and de-escalation skills, but the more you get into those subjects, the more you see the crossover with how it impacts wellness and resilience, overall,” says Bax. “We teach these skills on how to interact with a person in crisis and the public, but know that this could also be us, too.”

Bax teaches the model initially to recruits, but also incorporates it into in-service training for veteran officers.

Bax and his team weave health and wellness into other trainings, as well. For example, all officers are introduced to the acronym SLOW to teach the concept of slowing things down in crisis situations: Situational awareness, Listening, Outlining, and Wellness. Officers are

taught to apply the concept to their work with the public, but also to stressful situations that may come up in their personal lives.

“Whenever we talk about working with a person in crisis, we also talk about keeping yourself and your co-workers in mind,” says Bax.

The CPD has also been revising its wellness training to incorporate the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Eight Dimensions of Wellness: emotional, physical, occupational, intellectual, financial, social, environmental, and spiritual.

“We’re drilling down into each of the dimensions, to show how they apply to police officer’s lives. Every officer can relate to at least a piece of each dimension, some to more. And then we’re connecting the dimensions to resiliency,” says Bax.

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THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

In September, Bax, Davies, and Maloney attended a pilot presentation on managing staff stress and promoting workforce resilience, delivered through New York's State Preparedness Training Center.¹ According to Bax, the training took the content "to the next level"—particularly in the area of trauma.

"We've had lots of training in crisis response and management and had a general awareness of stress and its impact. We also had a general awareness of individual trauma. But this course was focused on large scale disasters and how that impacts a person's mental health. The course also recognized the vicarious trauma we experience as the first responders.

"As police officers, we experience vicarious trauma almost every day. We're micro-dosed with it. We get thrust into situations where people are having their worst days and we're trying to put a Band-aid on their problems. [This trauma] changes how we see and think about things. Learning about how trauma affects our reasoning and memory was extremely eye-opening," says Bax.

Because the presentation was a pilot, Bax and his team were able to provide feedback on the presentation and will later attend the finalized training. In the meantime, they look forward to incorporating what they learned into Clarkstown's current wellness trainings.

NEXT STEPS

Bax is proud of how far the department has come, but while he recognizes the value of training for moving CPD's wellness efforts forward, he acknowledges that trainings are just a piece of the puzzle. With support from CARES UP, CPD is also developing a list of

local mental health resources for officers and their families and would like to create a more formalized peer support network. Bax also hopes that, over time, wellness strategies will become embedded into the department's Standard Operating Procedures, or "General Orders."

"New York State has a mandate that every police department have some sort of wellness policy, it's a part of accreditation," says Bax. "Many departments just adopted a boiler plate statement. We'd like to go a step further and build in some of the things we develop through this grant."



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

¹ This training opportunity is provided by the Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services State in conjunction with The State University of New Paltz, Institute for Disaster Mental Health.