



Port Chester Engages Diverse Professionals to Support Officer Wellness

Many police departments have chaplains. Few have chaplains who are Buddhist priests.

The Port Chester Police Department (PCPD) is one of the exceptions. Since 2019, Reverend Qalvy Grainzvolt, an ordained Buddhist priest with the Shinnyo-en Buddhist Order, has provided PCPD officers with one-on-one behavioral health counseling and spiritual support, as well as regular trainings on mindfulness and meditation, as a uniformed department chaplain.

Although skeptical at first, the PCPD team has come to embrace Grainzvolt and his practices. "He teaches us how to relax. To take a deep breath. To calm down," says Captain Charles Nielsen, administrator for PCPD's CARES UP grant. "This helps us in our work and in our lives."

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- Reverend Qalvy Grainzvolt
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Mindfulness and meditation are also the foundation for Port Chester's deepening commitment to officer wellness.

MINDFULNESS AND STRESS

According to Grainzvolt, mindfulness is central to police work.

"In moments of acute stress, officers need the inner space and psychological flexibility to 'respond' rather than 'react,'" says Grainzvolt.

“They need to slow things down so they can assess the situation and discern the wisest course of action. Mindfulness offers them that clarity.”

But mindfulness and meditation also help officers address the chronic stressors that are part of the job, including organizational stressors such as shift work and the “anticipatory stress” that is inherent in policing. “When you’re on patrol, you never know how your day will go. This ‘not knowing’ can take its toll on an officer’s physical and mental health,” says Grainzvolt.

Through the practice of meditation and mindfulness, Port Chester’s officers learn strategies for responding more productively to the stressors in their lives. One of these strategies is to identify and regulate their emotions so they don’t surrender to habitual reactions. “Habitual responses aren’t always the wisest or most helpful. Mindfulness helps officers choose their first response, rather than rely on only the familiar. This broadens their definition of being *first responders*,” says Grainzvolt.

Mindfulness and meditation also help officers recover from stressful situations and conflict, which can improve wellness and push back the stress that accumulates over time.

“Police officers are tasked with being compassionate warriors, but this takes replenishment and care,” says Grainzvolt.

Grainzvolt shares these practices with officers who meet with him one-on-one. He also teaches at the Westchester County Police Academy, where all PCPD recruits, along with recruits from other county police agencies, receive their initial training. He frequently shows up to do mindfulness exercises during roll call. Most recently, he delivered a

presentation on mindful first responding and the psychology of decision-making in conjunction with a CARES UP mental health training.

“The two trainings worked together well,” says Nielsen. “Because Qalvy teaches at the Academy, our new recruits were familiar with what he had to say. They’re open to the topic of wellness. But the older guys—they were paying close attention, too.”



Why Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is associated with:

- » Fewer emotional difficulties (Hill and Updegraff, 2012)
- » Reduced emotional reactivity (Van den Hurk et al, 2010)
- » Faster recovery from emotional distress (Fogarty et al, 2013, 2015)

PROJECT ALLIANCE

PCPD's willingness to engage diverse professionals in supporting community wellness isn't limited to its collaboration with Grainzvolt. It is also the first police department in Westchester County to support an embedded Mobile Crisis Response Team (MCRT)—part of a county-wide initiative called Project Alliance. The five mental health clinicians who make up the team work closely with the police to assess the mental health needs of callers. They also accompany the officers on mental health calls, as needed, and provide short-term support and linkage to necessary services.

As with Grainzvolt, some of Port Chester's officers were initially wary of the MCRT. "They didn't want to call them. They didn't see the need. But the biggest critics back during the training are the ones who now call the most. The buy-in is unbelievable," says Nielsen.

The main reason for this is that the team is providing much-needed respite for the officers. "It's making policing more collaborative," says Grainzvolt. "It spreads around work that until now had fallen squarely on the officers' shoulders. The fact that they've adopted this approach is huge."

The presence of the MCRT has also helped to create a culture of compassion toward people—including officers—with mental health problems. "[The MCRT] is literally sitting right behind us," says Nielsen. "The guys can reach out confidentially—and they do."

NEXT STEPS

Nielsen, with the support of Grainzvolt and Police Chief Christopher Rosabella, look forward to continuing to strengthen PCPD's wellness program through the CARES UP grant. They have made plans to collaborate with the

county's local suicide prevention coalition and will continue to weave mental health and wellness into their police academy and in-service trainings.

"We're getting better at talking about these issues and recognizing when people have problems," says Nielsen. "The scary part is that these problems are hidden so deep. But people are waking up to the fact that we're trying to make things better."



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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