



True Grit Training Deepens Culture of Resilience at Suffolk Corrections

In September 2022, twenty-two officers from the Suffolk County Sheriff's Office (SCSO) participated in a five-day training-of-trainers focused on helping corrections professionals build resilience skills to help them stay healthy. The *True Grit* training, developed by Desert Waters Correctional Outreach and made possible with CARES UP funding, will serve as the foundation for SCSO's new Wellness Unit.

"*True Grit* set us on the path we want to go with our program," says Sargent Michael Poetta, the officer responsible for overseeing the Wellness Unit. "It reframed how we understand and address stress, and brought a whole new perspective to how we want to teach others about these issues. We now have a group of officers who are passionate about this work, and who are prepared to go out and deliver the training themselves."

Over the past five years, SCSO has immersed itself in wellness work. Officers have attended in-service trainings with the New York Police

Department, webinars by the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program, and trainings with programs dedicated to supporting officers and their families through crises. They've been in touch with local non-profits dedicated to preventing officer suicide, like Beyond the Badge of NY. They've had a strong mentor and partner in the Suffolk County Police Department—an agency well-versed in addressing mental health and wellness issues. And they have strong support from their Sheriff, Dr. Errol Toulon, Jr., who has made the well-being of his staff a priority since he took office.

Now, with the support of CARES UP funding and trainings like *True Grit*, SCSO can continue to build on this solid foundation.

ABOUT THE TRAINING

Participants in the *True Grit* training ranged in age from 24 to 50 and included both men and women. Some had been on the job just over a month; others nearly 27 years. "They came from all walks of life, and were able to relate to different generational issues," says Lt. Thomas Cotter, a member of SCSO's Academy Bureau. Participation was also entirely voluntary. "When you volunteer, you're a lot more open to listening and learning," says Cotter.

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During the 40-hour training, participants had multiple opportunities to "teach back"—that is practice teaching sections of the curriculum. Following the training, participants also received three hours of follow-up coaching from the *True Grit* instructors.

Over the next two years, these graduates will go on to train others across SCSO's two correctional facilities. "Our goal is for all 1,100 of our staff to eventually be trained—even our civilian staff, who work alongside our corrections officers and deputy sheriffs," says Poetta. "We need everyone on the same page if we want to change attitudes toward wellness and self-care more broadly. And we want

everyone to have the same opportunity if help is needed. We don't want to put up any walls between our officers and our civilians."

WELLNESS UNIT

Leadership selected three of the 22 *True Grit* graduates to coordinate SCSO's new Wellness Unit; two are already on board and one will be coming on in December.

The purpose of the unit will be to provide a safe space for officers to talk about the issues that are bothering them. It will also connect officers with more acute needs to additional resources.



True Grit Course Objectives

- » Define and recognize the nature and characteristics of psychological resilience
- » Describe evidence-informed resilience factors and adapt them to the corrections workplace context
- » Identify resilience-promoting skills and practice these skills during small-group activities

“Our vision is to create a more open, trusting workplace, where people feel comfortable coming forward with their problems,” says Cotter. “We want everyone to feel clear-headed and good about ourselves. But first we need to get people talking, and get past the idea that asking for help means you’re weak; that there’s something wrong with saying something’s bothering you.”

The new wellness staff will work with other agencies that already have established wellness programs, including the NYPD and the Suffolk County Police Department. “We want to draw on existing models. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel,” says Cotter.

The team is just beginning to develop organizational policies to support lessons learned from the training. Some areas they are exploring include yearly physicals and mental health/wellness check-ins for all officers, as well as automatic debriefs with wellness staff following incidents. They will also develop clear protocols for ensuring confidentiality. “We want to make sure we’re dealing with issues professionally and consistently,” says Cotter.

MOVING FORWARD

Cotter anticipates some skepticism as the facility rolls out the *True Grit* training to others: “Everyone is skeptical of something new. But people will eventually come around because they don’t want to see officers get hurt.”

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Poetta agrees. “We started thinking about this five years ago, when we began noticing the uptick in suicides in the NYPD,” he says. “We knew we had to take some course of action. Our path led us down a thousand different roads, looking at a thousand different things. They were all relevant. But the *True Grit* program helped us focus our efforts. It gave us the vocabulary to engage staff in talking about mental health. We’re blessed to now have strong support from leadership, strong partners, and full-time wellness officers who can concentrate entirely on this important aspect of law enforcement.”



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