

## **Providing Support to New York City Police Officers: Perspectives on Workplace Peer Assistance**

***Briana Barocas, PhD***

***Peggy Grauwiler, LCSW, PhD***

New York University - Center on Violence and Recovery

Traditionally, police officers have been known to be reluctant to seek assistance for work related stress, and in particular, from mental health professionals (Chamberlin, 2000). The paramilitary structure of police organizations fosters an attitude that views the need for assistance in managing work related stress as a sign of weakness, cowardice, and an admission of incompetence (Miller, 1995). Police peer support programs provide first line assistance and basic crisis intervention to fellow officers (Robinson & Murdoch, 2003). These programs rely on selected, highly-trained, paraprofessionals from within a police organization. Peer programs have been shown to help officers cope more effectively with daily stressors as well as catastrophic events (Chamberlin, 2000). These assistance programs also promote healthy recovery by addressing cumulative work stress on a day-to-day basis (Robinson & Murdoch, 2003). However, the empirical research on police peer support programs remains limited.

This study examined two peer trauma education and support programs used by the New York City Police Department; one is internal to the department and the other is an external program. These assistance programs strive to address both cumulative work related stress and stress in response to traumatic events. Police officer beliefs and attitudes about help seeking and the need for post-event support were examined.

Qualitative or naturalistic methods of research are designed to facilitate the exploration of complex processes. Qualitative methods offer an opportunity to build knowledge about little known phenomena or new systems, and permit exploration of practice and knowledge thereby promoting a deeper understanding of connection and disconnection between the two (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). A phenomenological study using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with uniform members of the NYPD were conducted. 14 interviews with officers who had utilized one of the two available peer programs and 25 interviews with officers who had not used either program were conducted. Additionally, interviews and focus groups were conducted with peer providers and administrative leaders from the two programs. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. A thematic analysis of the transcripts was conducted using ATLAS ti.

Based on preliminary data from in-depth interviews with police officers, it is clear that there is a need for peer support programs for officers. This finding was consistent among both officers who have used the programs as well as those

who have not. Another finding is the importance of having an assistance program that is truly confidential, and is thus, external to the department. Additionally, the peer providers described the challenges of providing assistance during a critical incident. Finally, the significant role that informal peer support in the workplace plays in buffering the negative effects of traumatic material was identified. These findings have implications for workplace assistance programs for such high risk occupations as law enforcement and other emergency personnel.

These findings suggest the need for theory, training, and assistance paradigms that integrate the complexities of cumulative stress and traumatic events with a specific focus on high risk occupations that promote long term psychological health and well-being.