

MN Law Enforcement Family Support Network Sheriff's Survey Report

In early 2006 the Minnesota Law Enforcement Family Support Network or MN LEFSN began working across law enforcement agencies to identify critical gaps in family support for the 9,700 active peace officers and over 300 active part-time peace officers in Minnesota. Family support in this case is defined by the identification of resources and information family members must have to effectively support peace and police officers in their day to day jobs. In an effort to obtain accurate and timely information and family support perspectives, LEFSN has held family and department focus groups and met with law enforcement partners across Minnesota. We have begun the process of identifying department and organizational needs as they relate to the subject of family support. LEFSN has also actively sought support and buy-in for addressing these gaps through a cross agency state wide law enforcement family support network.

Executive Summary

Twenty-seven of the approximate 67 Minnesota Sheriffs attending responded to a survey effort at the 2007 MN Sheriff's Conference, a 46% return rate. Among the MN Sheriff's who responded to the conference survey, 70% had more than 15 years on the job. 100% indicated they held the office of Sheriff. The ideas they share come from valuable longitudinal perspectives.

In general, responding Sheriff's strongly supported the idea that families play a critical role in contributing to officer preparedness. It is interesting to note that despite strongly agreeing that an deputy's family life had an impact on and deputy's job performance and that healthy family functioning contributes to deputy preparedness these representative offices, by their own admission are clearly not addressing the reported education/training needs of families, nor are the Sheriff's recommended *outreach methods* for families widespread. At the same time the family training/information topics that the Sheriff's prioritized are among the *least available* to department families keeping in mind that **23.2% of the respondents currently offer no outreach/education whatsoever.**

Although there are obvious limitations to this 'snapshot approach' from the MN Sheriff's survey, there are also some safe assumptions.

Assumptions

1. More can be done to broaden the options available for connecting local offices with their deputy's families.
2. Training and educational topics for families need to be expanded to meet the currently identified needs in Minnesota's law enforcement offices.
3. Known barriers exist in the effort to connect with law enforcement families and the perspectives of seasoned administrators and family members will be important to keep in mind when designing family outreach strategies.
4. Engaging family members must be a priority when moving this work forward.
5. Designing outreach and training to address deputies understanding and knowledge about the importance and value of family engagement will be important.
6. Building momentum with offices who supported **fiscal partnership** for family support and outreach will be needed.

7. Exploring sustainable funding options for family support must be a collective priority.

Conclusions

Results from the recent survey of Minnesota's senior law enforcement representatives have helped identify perspectives and uncover needs related peace and police officer job performance & support. The issue of supporting law enforcement families as it relates to police officer job performance is overwhelmingly supported by top law enforcement representatives in Minnesota. Addressing these gaps from a holistic perspective will be important if we are to continue to provide Minnesota's citizens with the culture of excellence they have come to expect from our law enforcement agencies. Holistically approaching the preparation and support of law enforcement officers and their families will maximize Minnesota's investment in their law enforcement personnel. Combining resources in a strategically designed, cross agency family support network is one critical strategy identified to address these unmet priorities.

For more information about the work of the Minnesota Law Enforcement Family Support Network contact; Sue Dion, MN LEFSN, Concordia University, Department of Criminal Justice, Saint Paul, MN 651.603.6155 dion@csp.edu or visit: www.lawenforcementfamilysupport.org

Full Survey Report

Participants at the 2007 Minnesota Sheriff's conference were asked to provide their perspective on issues related to family support. The surveys were handed out at the beginning of the annual MSA conference. The reason for the survey was discussed and Sheriffs and Chief Deputies were asked to return the survey some time during the conference.

To see a copy of the survey go to www.lawenforcementfamilysupport.org and follow the survey link.

Biographical Information

There are over 400 law enforcement offices in Minnesota with an average sworn staff size of 5. Our survey sample appears to be fairly representative of the greater Minnesota law enforcement community department settings with returns from 8 urban (major regional urban area), 19 suburban (communities surrounding major population centers) and 29 rural (communities under 10,000) responding. Two respondents did not provide geographical information. The average number of sworn officers in the responding offices was 23.7 with the largest amount of sworn staff being 71 and the lowest 2. Non sworn staff size ranged from 1-120 with an average of 9.6 non sworn staff.

Deputy Stressors

Seventy-four percent (74.0) of Sheriff's surveyed strongly agree or are certain that a deputy's family life had an impact on an deputy's job performance the remaining 25.9 percent agreed. Eighty four (84) percent of respondents strongly agree and/or are certain that healthy family functioning contributes to officer preparedness and the remaining 14% agree.

Sheriff's were asked to rank stressors that impact officers' job performance. Family situations and routine job related stressors like shots fired, high speed driving and use of force situations were ranked 1 and 2 followed, in order of importance by critical incidents, shift work, and department policies and procedures. Respondents also mentioned day to day politics and dealing with press and media as other notable stressors.

Addressing Family Support Issues

Among those surveyed, 85 % agreed, strongly agreed and were certain that preparing families for their role in the law enforcement community was an important part of department training and overall support.

Sheriff's expressed the following comments related to prioritizing family support in their offices;

- 'there is a lot of support but we have never provided training, I think it is a good idea'
- 'We do not take on any issues of family training of their spouse, mother, father in LE'
- 'some of the largest problems with employees stem from their family problems'

Eighteen percent (18.5%) of offices indicate no barriers in their current outreach and connection to their department families. The remaining 81.5% indicated specific barriers in the following in order of priority;

- small department everyone already knows each other
- officers don't want their family members to participate
- confidentiality and trust are reasons families give for not participating and families are geographically spread out
- say they don't have time
- family members don't get the information

Additional comments regarding connecting with department families included; 'we don't have a lot of sponsored events'.

Family Outreach Strategies and Topics

Sheriff offices identified multiple strategies for connecting with families. Forty percent (40%) of responding offices rely on social functions/networks for family outreach, and 59.2% rely on informal family networks. Eighteen percent (18.5%) of responding offices have open training available through their department and 7.4% use service projects as a vehicle for family outreach.

Eighty one percent (81.5%) of the offices self identified as not providing or addressing any family directed educational outreach. The remaining offices stated that the following topics were available to family members;

- 40.7% Pandemic health emergencies
- 37.0% Disaster preparedness
- 11% Critical incident protocol for families
- 7.4 % Emotional survival in the law enforcement family

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- 7.4% Stress patterns in law enforcement families
- 7.4% Recognizing & preventing mental health issues
- 3.7% Career levels and changes in family stressors
- 3.7% Suicide prevention and child development
- 0% Raising healthy children in a law enforcement family

The survey respondents were asked to rank in order of importance family training topics. Emotional survival in the law enforcement family, stress patterns in law enforcement families, recognizing and preventing mental health issues in the LE family were ranked 1, 2, and 3. Raising healthy children, critical incident protocol, and disaster preparedness were ranked 4,5 and 6. Suicide prevention, pandemic health emergencies and child development were the final priorities indicated by the respondents.

Family Outreach Practices

Respondents were asked detailed questions about their current methods of family outreach followed by their beliefs regarding the most effective or BEST methods for reaching department families. Currently 70.3% of responding offices provide outreach to families through the use of health insurance EAP plans. Seventy percent (70.3 %) provide support face to face when deputies and families request services, and 11.1% use scheduled training or courses for outreach purposes. Three percent (3.7%) hold department sponsored discussion groups and none provide telephone triage with dedicated staff in place to respond to calls.

Effective Approaches

Respondents were asked to indicate which outreach approaches would be the most effective (check all that apply) they (62.9%) responded by telling us that a combination of all of the approaches listed would yield the best results. Individual percentages were as follows;

- 48.1% Face to face when officers and families request services
- 29.6% Through the use of health insurance EAP plans
- 22.2% Scheduled training or courses
- 22.2% Office sponsored discussion groups
- 11.1% Via online courses and tutorials
- 7.4% Through a centralized web based clearing house

The Future

A total of twenty five percent (25.8%) of the responding Sheriff's state wide strongly agree (14.8) or are certain (11%) that they supported the idea of a cross department family support network. An additional thirty-three percent (44.4%) agree with the concept. Only 7.4% of the respondents indicate a 'not sure' rating and none disagree with the idea.

When asked to predict their deputy's willingness to embrace the family support network concept 55.5% were not sure how their officers would respond, followed by 37% who felt that their officers would agree. Three percent (3.7%) of Sheriff's surveyed strongly agreed that their officers would embrace the concept.

When asked to predict their deputy's *family's willingness* to embrace the concept, 66.6% were not sure, followed by 33% who thought their families would agree.

Priorities & Sustainability

Sheriff's were asked to prioritize the engagement key groups needed to move this work forward. They indicated that training/educating law enforcement administrators should be first priority followed by educational outreach to officers followed by educational outreach targeted to family members.

When asked about the likelihood of using direct department level funding to support this work, a total of 48.1% of respondents indicated that they agree (29.6%) strongly agree (14.8) or were certain (3.7) of direct funding support. Fifty-one (51.8%) respondents were not sure with 7.4 % disagreeing.

Comments from the unsure respondents included;

- 'depends upon costs',
- 'can not commit to funding of state wide services, this is not an office decision'

Respondents were asked to recommend additional ways to sustain a state wide, cross departmental family support network. (Check all that apply) City, county or regional funding sources and legislative mandates were the top two recommendations, followed by government funding. A fee for service was the least recommended sustainable strategy recommended.

Discussion and Assumptions

It is obvious that the concept of supporting families as a way of contributing to officer preparedness has widespread support among Sheriff's in Minnesota. Eighty nine (89.1%) percent of responding Sheriff's believe that a fully implemented state wide family support network could make a positive impact on officer preparedness in their organization. None disagreed with this statement and only 8.9% were unsure.

Administrators agree that to move family engagement work forward in Minnesota we must address educational gaps in administrators, officer and family members about the critical role law enforcement families play in officer preparedness. The full continuum of recommended methods for engaging law enforcement families in Minnesota is currently not available.

Respondent's recommendations for exploring additional funding sources must be followed including looking to private foundations and government agencies to support a portion of this work.

Although there are obvious limitations to this 'snapshot approach' from the MN Sheriff's of Police survey, there are also a few safe assumptions.

Assumptions

1. More can be done to broaden the options available for connecting local offices with their deputy's families.
2. Training/educational topics for families need to be expanded to meet the currently identified needs of Minnesota's offices.

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3. Known barriers exist in the effort to connect with law enforcement families and the perspectives of seasoned administrators will be important to keep in mind when designing family outreach strategies.
4. Engaging family members must be a priority when moving this work forward.
5. Design outreach and training to address deputies understanding and knowledge about the importance and value of family engagement.
6. Build momentum with the offices who supported fiscal partnership for family support and outreach. Address questions and provide additional information to other offices and explore other funding options until critical funding momentum is achieved.

Conclusions

Results from the recent survey of Minnesota's senior law enforcement representatives has helped identify perspectives and uncover needs related peace and police officer job performance & support. The issue of supporting law enforcement families as it relates to police officer job performance is overwhelmingly supported by senior law enforcement representatives in Minnesota. Addressing these gaps from a holistic perspective will be important if we are to continue to provide Minnesota's citizens with the culture of excellence they have come to expect from our law enforcement agencies. Holistically approaching the preparation and support of law enforcement officers and their families will maximize Minnesota's investment in their law enforcement personnel. Combining resources in a strategically designed, cross agency family support network is one critical strategy identified to address these unmet priorities.