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### **Redefining What It Means To Be A 'Warrior': Dismantling Mental Health Stigma In Law Enforcement From the Classroom to the Academy**

Maeve Lyons

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**Redefining What It Means To Be A ‘Warrior’: Dismantling Mental Health Stigma In Law  
Enforcement From the Classroom to the Academy**

**Maeve Lyons**

Master of Science in Criminology & Criminal Justice

Merrimack College

December 2021

**DEDICATION**

Officer Stephen M. Levesque (March 1, 1995 ~ June 28, 2021)

Time to come home dear brother  
Your tour of duty through  
You've given as much as anyone  
Could be expected to do

Just a few steps further  
The smoke will start to clear  
Others here will guide you  
You have no need of fear

You have not failed your brothers  
You clearly gave it all  
And through your selfless actions  
Others will hear the call

So take your place of honor  
Among those who have gone before  
And know you will be remembered  
For now and evermore

-Robert Longley

Fallen but Never Forgotten

Rest in Eternal Peace

“Stephen’s death is tragic. Let it not be in vain.”

Rowley Chief of Police  
Scott A. Dumas

## **Redefining What It Means To Be A ‘Warrior’: Dismantling Mental Health Stigma In Law Enforcement From the Classroom to the Academy**

In today's society, it is almost impossible to pay attention to national news without hearing of a new tragedy that has occurred. In the ever evolving age of social media and technology, it seems as though brutality, injustice, heartbreak, and unmitigated calamity are relentlessly present. Throughout the past three years, our globe has been in and out of lockdowns facing a pandemic of biblical proportions. Commencing in late 2019 and raging ceaselessly, the virus now known as COVID-19 has taken the lives of over 4.5 million people globally (CDC, 2021). While controlling the pernicious spread of COVID-19 is of the utmost importance to a large quantity of communities, there are a multitude of other epidemics we continue to face that must not be ignored.

According to Maryville University (2021), there are hidden or overlooked epidemics that need attention such as opioid addiction and mental health (Maryville, 2021). Suicide is an epidemic that cannot be managed with social distancing or a vaccine. While global suicides rates have reduced in the past two decades, the rate of suicides within the United States have spiked (World Health Organization , 2021). It is approximated that one person dies from suicide every forty seconds (World Health Organization , 2019). Annually, upwards of 700,000 individuals take their life (World Health Organization , 2021). Although these numbers are chilling enough, the rates of suicide may in fact be much higher when considering that the numbers provided may not account for deaths that went unreported or suicides that were not labeled as such.

Suicide and mental disorders do not discriminate and can affect anyone. While there is a well established connection between suicide and mental disorders, such as depression and

addiction; suicidal behaviors and actions seek to find the vulnerable (World Health Organization, 2021). Those who are most at risk include those who are under great stress that are unable to cope and manage, those experiencing conflict and disaster, as well as people who experience discrimination (World Health Organization, 2021).

Careers within law enforcement are regarded as being some of the most highly stressful jobs (Dantzer, 1987; Loo, 1984, as cited in Ashnel, 2000). Jobs in law enforcement, in particular, prove to be, emotionally, physically, and psychologically trying. In recent years the question of “why would someone even want to be in law enforcement nowadays?” has been uttered innumerable times. It seems as though the dangers associated with being a law enforcement officer are exponentially increasing. While external threats to law enforcement officers pose the risk of great harm and even death, the number one killer of law enforcement personnel is suicide (Kelly & Martin, 2006, as cited in Johnson, 2010, p. 54). In her publication, *Blue Wall of Silence: Perceptions of the Influence of Training on Law Enforcement Suicide*, Dr. Olivia N. Johnson explains that law enforcement officer suicides occur at shockingly high rates of 140-500 annually (Johnson, 2010, p. 158). As reported by Perin (2007) ninety-seven percent of law enforcement officers their service weapon to commit suicide. According to FBI statistics, 89 law enforcement officers lost their lives in the line-of-duty in the year 2019 (FBI, 2020). In 2019, a total of 228 law enforcement officers took their own lives (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). Unfortunately, these trends are not new to our society. Year after year, data concludes that law enforcement officers are taking their own lives at alarming rates.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework

It is important to consider the application of theoretical works when conducting criminological research in any regard. When studying a topic, such as suicide, it is imminent to examine strain as it coincides with suicidal ideation. Renowned theorists, such as Emile Durkheim, Robert Agnew, and Robert Merton, each contributed to the development of the strain theory of deviance. Strain can be regarded as either social processes or personal experiences. Strain theory derives from Durkheim's theory of anomie, or an absence of social norms (Zhang, 2019, p. 5). If a society were labeled as anomic, it would henceforth have few or no moral regulations which could lead to increased frustration and ultimately strain (Zhang, 2019, p. 5).

Theoretical studies surrounding suicide date back centuries. In 1897, Durkheim's social integration and moral regulation theory discussed factors in relation to suicide risk throughout Europe in the nineteenth century (Zhang, 2019, p. 2). Durkheim believed that suicide should be perceived as an individual behavior, that it was not caused by personal reasons but rather the reasons may have been within a social structure at which integration and regulation converge (Zhang, 2019, p. 2). In today's society, Durkheim's work on suicide is relevant when considering rates at which suicides occur in conjunction with certain factors. Durkheim's original hypothesis is confirmed when accounting for the connection between people who commit suicide and the increase of loneliness, isolation, and general societal disconnect (Zhang, 2019, p. 2). Despite being widely recognized and referred to within criminology, Durkheim's suicide theory has been subject to countless critiques. Numerous psychologists and psychiatrists argue against this Durkheimian structuralism, voicing that both personal and psychological state-trait interactions

lead to precursors to suicide, such as hopelessness (Beck, Steer, Kovacs, & Garrison, 1985, as cited in Zhang, 2019, p. 2).

In order to argue the strain of societal pressure on deviancy, Robert Merton developed his anomie theory of deviance. Merton argued that society pressures one to commit deviant behaviors through strain regulation in the individual's life (Zhang, 2019, p. 5). Although Merton's (1957) strain theory is acclaimed in some ways, ultimately the theory neglects to consider suicide as a "target for explanation" (Zhang, 2019, p. 5). Prior literature provides a multitude of theoretical findings to explain crime occurrences, as well as behaviors labeled deviant or criminal. In 1992, Robert Agnew presented new literature on a theory that most had lost interest in. Agnew (1992) reintroduced strain theory in order to explain that any degree of negative experience can lead someone to experience stress. Three major types of strain are described when external individuals may, "(1) prevent one from achieving positively valued goals, (2) remove or threaten to remove positively valued stimuli that one possesses, or (3) present or threaten to present one with noxious or negatively valued stimuli" (Agnew, 1992, p. 50).

Zhang (2019) builds off of the work of Agnew (1992), as well as Durkheim (1897/1951), and Merton (1957) to introduce the strain theory of suicide or STS into criminological research. Zhang describes a "socio-psychological mechanism prior to suicidal behavior" (Zhang, 2019, p.1). Zhang (2019) hypothesized that conflicting and competing pressures one experiences in life lead to strain and oftentimes leads to suicide (Zhang, 2019, p.1). The strain theory of suicide provides four strains that lead to suicide, "(1) value strain from differential values, (2) aspiration strain from the discrepancy between aspiration and reality (3) deprivation strain from the relative deprivation, including poverty, and (4) coping strain from deficient coping skills in the face of a

crisis” (Zhang, 2019, p.2). If strain is not properly examined and addressed it may in turn lead to suicide as a solution (Zhang, 2019, p.4).

### **Stigmatization of Mental Illness**

Although stress and trauma induced mental health disorders are seen more often than not amongst law enforcement officers, the prevalence of officers seeking help for such problems does not stand out. Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) argue that direct exposure to traumatic events and stress from work in law enforcement often lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, substance use disorder, and suicide or suicide ideation (Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019, p.711). Without proper treatment and professional help for dealing with such a stress-inducing occupation, officers may develop depression, PTSD, and panic disorder, as well as alcohol and substance abuse disorder as a way of coping.

According to Velazquez and Hernandez (2019), seeking help for mental health may be viewed as “weak” or going against the social expectations of a police officer (Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019, p. 718). Prior studies provide data that have shown a link between the mental health conditions and both suicidal ideation and completed suicide in law enforcement (Violanti et al., 2018; Waitzkin et al., 2018; Ramchand et al., 2018, as cited in Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019, p. 719). According to Blue H.E.L.P. (2021), an organization charged with ending police suicide, creating awareness, and dismantling stigma surrounding mental health and law enforcement, our nation has lost 116 officers to suicide alone in the first ten months of 2021 (Blue H.E.L.P., n.d.). Additionally, research has noted that along with an increase of stigma associated with seeking help for mental health, law enforcement officers face distinctive stressors including shift work, traumatic events, and a lack of organizational support. Each of these



stressors have been documented to contribute to an increase of suicide rates amongst law enforcement officers (Violanti et al., 2018; Ramchand et al., 2018, as cited in Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019, p. 719).

Stigma is an extremely difficult obstacle to conquer as it can exist in any society and surround nearly anything that can be seen as ‘taboo’. Stigma is most notably defined as “a mark of shame or discredit ” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). According to Milliard (2020), prior research indicates that law enforcement officers experience mental health disorder diagnoses at higher rates when compared to that of the general public. This is truly frightening information when considering how many officers are not seeking help. Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) refer to the work of Pasciak and Kelley (2013) and proclaim that emotional denial and the continuation of impractical ethics upholds a police culture that is vulnerable to the continuation and growth of mental health stigma and the stigma surrounding the pursuit of treatment for mental health concerns (Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019, p.717). Despite a large population of police officers being deterred from asking for help for mental health because of the overarching stigma, the number of officers that are obtaining mental health disorder diagnoses still surpasses that of the general population.

In the current literature, two types of stigma are presented, public stigma and self-stigma. Public stigma refers to the enforcement of prejudice towards a stigmatized group by the public. Whereas self-stigma refers to when publicly endorsed stigma is internalized by members of a stigmatized group (Soomro & Yanos, 2018; Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019). Both self and public stigma are noted to deter police officers from seeking the proper mental health resources that they may need. As stated by Soomro and Yanos (2018), “...the police culture of valuing toughness, self-reliance, and suppressing weakness in combination with the distrust and

suspicion of seeking outside help can further promote and enforce the negative beliefs around help—seeking among police officers" (Soomro & Yanos, 2018). For many officers, there is a great fear of seeking help whether it be within an organization or externally, due to the fact that it may lead to labeling of “mentally ill” (Soomro & Yanos, 2018; Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019).

### **Police Academy Training**

The immersion into police culture and training begins long before officers take their first steps on the beat. Recruits are first introduced to police culture and lifestyles in police academy training. The academy begins a recruits path to professional socialization within a police organization (Prokos & Padavic, 2002, p. 440). The work of Prokos and Padavic (2002) explains that while police academy training involves formal curriculum and physical training, police academies also train recruits in concealed curriculums (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Martin, 1998, as cited in Prokos & Padavic, 2002, p. 440). It is important to discuss the curriculum in police academies that is not listed within course learning objectives. Although most data discusses mental health stigma in law enforcement to be faced within the occupation, it is argued that police academies promote the learned behavior of stigmatizing both mental health and the pursuit of treatment for mental health within the profession of law enforcement.

A wealth of prior knowledge and research has demonstrated that law enforcement officers need to receive more training in order to combat harmful stigmas and the adverse effects that materialize within departments. Although it is evident that law enforcement officers devote large sums of time to health and wellness training, the overwhelming majority of this training is focused on the aspect of physical fitness. Although physical fitness is immensely important for the success and safety of an officer, it is argued that hours devoted to classroom training on the

importance of mental health curriculum are just as significant. The work of Soomro and Yanos (2018) proclaims that the need for increased training for police officers is evident when accounting for the considerably large endorsement of negative stigma that is present (Soomro & Yanos, 2018).

Commonly within the structure of North American police academies, paramilitary training is adopted. Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce (2010) discuss the socialization within police academies as they follow a structure of paramilitary training. According to their research, police academies and boot camps share similarities throughout training such as group consequences and discipline, stress, and the importance of knowing and respecting the chain of command (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010, p. 189). This socialization of militaristic training is implemented by police academies to break the student officers down to then build them up. Prior research concludes that engaging in these particular socialization experiences can strip student officers of their individual qualities thus embracing the organizational “esprit de corps”, or the morale of the group (Albuquerque & Paes-Machado 2004; Griffiths, Klein, & VerdunJones 1980; Skinner 1983; as cited in Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010, p. 189).

Culture in any form is learned and passed from one to another. Thus, in order to address any negative aspects of police culture we must look towards leaders and influential beings within police academies or departments. It is therefore imminent not to put this pressure solely on recruit officers but rather it is staff and curriculum leaders who must take accountability for the eradication of negative stigmas and practices. When this pervasive stigma is combined with a lack of resources, as well as improper time allotment to mental health in academy training, the developed stigma is maintained throughout the academy and subsequently exacerbates within the overarching police culture.

In the State of Massachusetts the Municipal Police Training Committee, more commonly known as the MPTC is responsible for maintaining the development, implementation, and enforcement of standards for training of municipal, MBTA, environmental, UMass, campus police officers, as well as deputy sheriffs tasked with performing police duties and functions (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2021). The first step to the process of becoming an officer in Massachusetts is to take a written Civil Service exam. Before any examinations or training begins, recruits must meet the necessary requirements. As stated in Civil Service Law Chapter 31, Section 58, applicants must be at least twenty one years of age and no more than thirty two years of age (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2021). If an applicant passes the examination their name will be placed on a list of eligible applicants. Police departments will then reach out and receive a range of applicant names from the Civil Service Unit when job positions arise. Throughout the hiring process, extensive background checks and interviews are administered and extensive employee packets must be completed. At this point in the process there is either a job offer extended or there is not. If a job position is offered recruits must pass a medical exam as well as the Initial-Hire Physical Ability, more commonly known as the PAT Test before beginning their academy training.

### **‘Warrior Nation’**

Warrior is a term given to those who possess a strength unlike any other. The term is commonly found in militaristic settings. In police culture a warrior is defined as being, “... an individual within a department who understands the relationship between the department and the militaristic persona, in which the police are soldiers involved in a war against the streets” (Crank, 2004, as cited in Johnson, 2010, p. 20). A true warrior is someone who embodies strength, power, leadership, bravery, and a multitude of other favorable attributes.

Merrimack College is a private Augustinian college located in North Andover, Massachusetts. The college is proud to be the home of their mascot, the Warriors. As stated by Mackenzie Bowring in the Merrimack College Student Newspaper, *The Beacon*, “Being a Merrimack College Warrior means embodying the spirit and mindset our community believes in” (Bowring, 2017). Merrimack College’s Vice President for Mission and Student Affairs, Father Ray Dlugos takes this definition a step further in explaining that, “Real warriors are strong for the sake of those who are not, and speak and fight for those unable to speak and fight for themselves” (Bowring, 2017).

In the fall of 2021, Merrimack College opened the doors for recruit officers to begin training in the newly developed Merrimack College Police Academy. The program is the only one of its kind in Massachusetts as recruits attain both their police academy certification as well as a Master of Science in Criminology and Criminal Justice degree all within one year. The goals for this academy are rooted within social justice and strive to ensure that recruits are trained to lead the next generation of policing with integrity and respect for all. Although the academy does excellent work to promote the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion, there are several ways in which the Merrimack College Police Academy can expand upon the existing curriculum to further ensure the long-term success and wellness of their recruit officers. Through a focus on the significance of mental health de-stigmatization and the importance of mental health and wellness within police training, the definition of a true ‘Warrior’ can be reimaged within the Merrimack College Police Academy.

The Merrimack College Police Academy is authorized by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ Municipal Police Training Committee. The training and education that the Merrimack College Police Academy student officers receive is truly unlike any other. Although

there has often been a disconnect between law enforcement and academia, the convergence of academia and academy training has proven to be an impeccable collaboration. Not only are trainings administered by skilled staff instructors with years of experience, student officers receive lessons from professors with doctoral degrees within the Criminology and Criminal Justice Department at Merrimack College. These lessons offer student officers a completely unique view on specific subjects, such as domestic violence and implicit bias.

According to the MPTC's Health & Wellness Preparation Guide (Commonwealth of Massachusetts: MPTC, 2019, p. 2), "...the ultimate goal is to provide the Commonwealth's citizens with police officers who are more efficient, effective and less likely to be injured on the job and who are better prepared for providing service and protection to their communities."

There are three principal objectives to the health and wellness training:

- A. Provide student officers with needed levels of strength and endurance to participate in specific academy training programs.
- B. Ensure student officers graduate with needed levels of strength and endurance to perform essential police officer job tasks.
- C. Promote lifestyle habits to enhance the student officer's long-term health throughout his or her law enforcement career.

Presently, the provided health and wellness curriculum offers student officers with health, wellness, and lifestyle information. Throughout their training, they learn about physical health and disease, such as hypertension and diabetes. The student officers also learn about common injuries and injury prevention. In conjunction with curricula focused on physical health, the curriculum also provides student officers with coursework covering mental health concerns, such

as anxiety, depression, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide risk factor identification. The present curriculum surrounding mental health is satisfactory as it provides a basic framework for further development of the course. The curriculum is derived from MPTC guides from 2019 and are based on research published in 2015. While this is not detrimental, it signifies that the curriculum surrounding mental health must be updated to rely on the current literature and societal needs.

### **Proposed Curriculum Development**

Mental health training in law enforcement can be incorporated from several different perspectives. For example, education on mental health and how to properly engage with individuals in a mental health crisis can be undervalued in law enforcement. It is imminent for law enforcement officers to have sufficient training in order to properly engage with members of the public who suffer from mental illnesses so that both the responding officer and the individual can remain as safe as possible. In order to add to the current curriculum of the Merrimack College Police Academy, I propose a multidimensional inclusion of mental health and safety related course programming. Updating literature, adding training courses, and developing ways to manage stress and stay connected will greatly benefit student officers in a multitude of ways throughout their time at Merrimack and far into the future.

### **Mental Health First Aid**

The first proposed addition to the current curriculum is the incorporation of a mandatory Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety Training provided by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing. Not only will this training educate student officers on some of the most common mental illnesses, this specific program will provide skills-based training in order to aid these

future law enforcement officers with the ability to safely and effectively manage a mental health emergency situation. This specific course is individually tailored to assess the experiences of individuals working in public safety. The training covers topics such as crisis diffusion, connecting individuals to proper care, recognizing signs and symptoms and providing early intervention, mental health literacy promotion, as well as education on mental health stigma and how to combat it (Kelly et al., 2015). There are many goals encompassing this program. Not only does this program provide student officers with lifesaving skills and knowledge to appropriately manage a mental health emergency, the training also provides resources they would otherwise not be provided in order to assist them in the management of their own career induced stress.

All training that is administered as a part of the intended curriculum is fitting for classroom required coursework due to the informational nature of the instructed content. As stated in the Mental Health First Aid™ USA manual, “The content of this publication is informational in nature and is not intended as a substitute for counseling, medical care, peer support, or treatment” (Kelly et al., 2015, p.i). The provided manual states it can be seen as a “guidebook,” a “...blueprint for providing comfort, promoting recovery, and helping to reduce distress related to stressful situations, trauma, and crisis” (p. iii). The course contains content on general information on mental health, as well as emergency mental health crisis training, and specific mental illness such as depression, anxiety disorders, psychosis, substance use disorders, and eating disorders. In addition to the mandatory training for the student officers in the MCPA, during the spring 2022 semester, faculty in the Winston School of Education and Social Policy will provide a two credit elective course on adult focused Mental Health First Aid Training. This will provide a different insight for students if they do choose to take this course as well.



### **Effective Grounding Techniques and Mindfulness**

Prior studies have revealed that police officers experience heightened stress due to the dangerous nature of their occupation. Therefore, the second proposed inclusion to the Merrimack College Police Academy's curriculum is a focus on mindfulness and grounding techniques. Not only will student officers be able to utilize these techniques themselves, but they will also be able to utilize these techniques in helping others.

While it is important for officers with diagnosed or recognized mental health concerns to seek proper treatment, it is just as essential for officers to be able to manage their daily stress. According to the Mayo Clinic (2020), mindfulness is defined as being, "...a type of meditation in which you focus on being intensely aware of what you're sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgement." Mindfulness can be such an important tool for anyone experiencing increased levels of stress. Evidence suggests that practicing mindfulness meditation can be beneficial to those with anxiety, depression, stress, insomnia, general bodily pain, and hypertension; all of which are discussed in the present MCPA curriculum as possible health concerns that may develop throughout a career in law enforcement (Mayo Clinic. 2020). The provided information on mindfulness meditation also describes that it can help improve attention, decrease job burnout, improve sleep, and also improve diabetes control.

Similarly to the concept of mindfulness is the inclusion of practicing grounding techniques. Grounding techniques are helpful in managing symptoms associated with trauma related responses accompanying PTSD, panic attacks, and anxiety. Grounding techniques help individuals by taking their focus away from intrusive thoughts and distressing situations and bringing them into the present moment. There are many different commonly practiced techniques

for both mindfulness and grounding. One method of practicing mindfulness has been implemented throughout a wide range of police departments throughout the nation; yoga. In recent years, the City of Bend, Oregon has become famous for their incorporation of yoga and mindfulness into their officer wellness programming. Bend Chief Jim Porter stated, “We were shocked by how great the increase in morale was, and how much the citizen’s view of our officers improved... plus the nearly 60% decrease in days lost to injuries,” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020)

After a painful and sudden loss in their department, Chief Porter decided that it was time to make a change. Bend Police Department (BPD) developed a comprehensive program designed to mitigate stress, fatigue, depression, and poor physical health while maximizing quality of life. After its emergence in the early years of the 2000s, the program has flourished. The program is composed of classes focused on stress reduction, mental health programming, group activities, and programs focused on emotional support for the officers. Along with these sections of programming, a psychologist can be found on-site to offer referrals as well as informal consultations (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020).

The program is regarded as being very successful with voluntary participation from 75% of the department. In 2015, the department began incorporating yoga into the program. Despite initial hesitance and overall weariness from officers, the yoga program has received high levels of support from officers who proclaim that not only does the program help relieve stress but it also relieves chronic pain. The program has been found to be connected to an overall decrease in on-the-job injuries. Not only is this great for the officers, but for the department as a whole. Data provided by the State of Oregon’s Accident Insurance Fund concluded the overall decrease in on-the-job injuries helped save the department \$42,000 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). The

development and inclusion of a wellness program such as that in the BPD is twofold in regards to health. This program can improve physical health by decreasing the likelihood of developing serious health conditions with risks such as heart attacks and can also aid in the development of resiliency and overall mental wellness for officers.

Grounding techniques tend to be more complex than mindfulness practices. While grounding techniques can be done without any added elements, sometimes other tools can be used in order to successfully “ground” an individual. One grounding technique that involves other objects utilizes ice cubes. When experiencing a very stressful situation that triggers a trauma response, one way to practice grounding is by holding an ice cube in your hand and focusing your attention on how it feels and how it is melting. This will slow down the response of the individual affected by the stressor and help them to refocus their energy away from the panic. This can be modified by using an ice pack. Another way to practice grounding is to shock the nervous system and stop the shift into fight-or-flight mode. When sensing the beginning of a panic attack, sour candy can be eaten to shock one's brain out of panic. The brain will focus on the new sensation rather than focusing on the external stressor. These grounding techniques can be easily implemented when needed by keeping sour candy and ice packs on hand in an officer's vehicle.

While meditation and yoga are common practices, it is important to remember that mindfulness can simply be focusing on your breathing and being aware of how your body is responding to stressors. The majority of law enforcement officers face extremely long shifts with very little time to focus on anything besides the next call, not to mention overtime and other aspects of the job such as paperwork eat away at the very consideration for downtime. Many grounding techniques and forms of mindfulness can be practiced anywhere at any time. One of

the most important aspects of including education of mindfulness and grounding techniques is that these techniques can be practiced without judgment as they are most commonly practiced silently to oneself.

The best practice for including this into the MCPA classroom would be to incorporate these techniques into the coursework by first learning about a technique at the beginning of the class, then when class is ending allot a certain amount of time to practice the discussed grounding technique or form of mindfulness. Along with practicing these techniques within the classroom, student officers should be provided with a wellness journal via Canvas or Google Classroom. This would provide students with a forum to detail situations in which they utilize mindfulness or grounding techniques to help cope with stress. These posts would not be used as a discussion board between students but rather an ungraded, private post that would only otherwise be visible to instructors. Teaching mindfulness and grounding techniques will help to equip officers with ways to manage triggered responses and to cope with highly traumatic calls while in pursuit of the subsequent call. Practicing these techniques will help de-stress, de-escalate, and reduce overall aggression from repressed emotions and negative thoughts.

### **Wellness Debrief**

Although first responders can be seen as modern day superheroes, they are still simply human and that has long since been forgotten by those who uphold law enforcement to unreasonable and unrealistic standards of practice. How are officers expected to go from one highly traumatic call to the next mundane traffic stop and repress all thought of what happened previously? In an ideal world, officers would be able to take leave after a highly stressful and traumatic call and receive proper counseling in order to heal and debrief. Unfortunately, it is

evident that our society doesn't not and will never function in a way for that to be possible.

Understandably so, there needs to be acceptance of that fact in conjunction with a continued push for what can be implemented. Accordingly, I propose the inclusion of a monthly wellness debrief for the student officers, overseen by professionals who specialize in the overlapping fields of mental health and law enforcement. This would provide them with the opportunity to divulge how they are feeling throughout their academy process. The program would begin following the first several weeks of academy training in which recruits' determination is pushed to their limits. The debriefing sessions would be voluntary but highly encouraged.

### **CCJ Buddy Project<sup>1</sup>**

While the majority of this paper focuses on the Merrimack College Police Academy, this proposed *CCJ Buddy Project* would apply to undergraduate, graduate, and police academy students within the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice in the Winston School of Education and Social Policy at Merrimack College. For many students, applying for college for the first time or entering a Masters program and selecting a concentrated study can be very difficult. The CCJ program at Merrimack College provides students with a deeper understanding of crime and criminology outside the realm of basic law and order. The *CCJ Buddy Project* represents a coordinated effort by faculty and staff to emphasize the importance of social ties to peers, both inside and outside of an academic setting. The project serves as a time for students to explore and learn more about peers, practice class material, and confide in one other.

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<sup>1</sup> Created in partnership with Maeve Dubiel, M.S., Merrimack College Police Academy Program Coordinator

The process of being paired with a CCJ Buddy will be handled with great care and attention to detail. Similar to the process of being assigned a roommate, students will answer vetting questions tailored for each individual program (*see attached prototype form in Appendix*). During orientation at the beginning of each academic year, the Buddy Program will be established. To students who have declared a CCJ major during their undergraduate studies, a Buddy will be someone to create a friendship with, someone to provide guidance, and someone to help support them throughout their time as an undergrad. When in the Master's program, it can be difficult to make connections with classmates. Students at this level have a multitude of different life experiences, work experiences, and tend to have larger variations in age. While it is likely that students know the names of classmates, that may be the extent to peer relationships created in grad school. Buddies at the Master's level will help to build these connections while also promoting networking and inclusivity. The most unique approach to the *CCJ Buddy Project* will take place within the Merrimack College Police Academy. The implementation of CCJ Buddies in the academy will emphasize the sisterhood and brotherhood mentality of police culture while encouraging social and emotional vulnerability. The program seeks to bring a whole new meaning to peer mentoring, into our very own CCJ Department.

### **Significance Within the Merrimack Community**

In a school setting, there is always one student who stands out amongst the rest. Not only is this student gifted academically but they always have a smile on their face and no matter how strong your relationship is to this student, they always seem to make an impact on your day when they are near. At Merrimack College in the Criminology and Criminal Justice Department, this student was Stephen Levesque. Stephen's enthusiasm for learning and his passion for making a difference in the lives of others was indisputable. Academically, Stephen maintained a high cumulative grade point average and continuously went above and beyond what was expected.

Outside of the Merrimack classroom, Stephen was known by his community as Officer Levesque. Not only had Stephen become a police officer in the Town of Rowley but he also served the Town of Byfield as a Call Firefighter. Stephen's love for serving his community and making a difference was undeniable.

In the summer of 2021, our CCJ community and the lives of everyone who knew Stephen were irrevocably altered. On June 28, 2021, Stephen passed away as a result of suicide at the age of twenty six. Stephen's passing came as a shock to the communities he served. Rowley Chief of Police, Scott A. Dumas released a formal statement the following day illuminating the questions so many began to face, "What did I miss?" and "What could I have done?" This question became the center of my paper and course development. Now more than ever, I believe that it is truly in the hands of our community to make an impact and to do our best to ensure this tragedy does not happen again. In his statement, Chief Dumas made it known that Stephen's family gives their blessing to break the silence and speak openly about suicide in law enforcement.

### **How Change Can Be Achieved**

Acknowledging the need for an expansive and updated mental health curriculum within police academy training will ensure that the next generation of law enforcement officers will be well equipped to properly assess mental health related emergencies in others while also learning how to combat their own personal stress. Given how new the Merrimack College Police Academy is, one pushback may be the accumulation of additional funding. While the majority of the proposed curriculum will not need to receive funding there are aspects that are reliant on funding. In order to obtain the necessary funding while also promoting mental health training, I put forward the concept for a day of mental health and a 5k in Stephen's honor.

The day would be spent learning about mental health and speakers could volunteer to come into the academy to discuss related topics. Student officers, MCPD officers, as well as staff and students of the CCJ department could participate in a 5k where they would be sponsored by mile by family, friends and colleagues. The event would be open to anyone further who would like to participate and it would be able to be completed at any speed. Proceeds would help fund the newly proposed curriculum for the MCPA and certain percentages be donated to foundations of choice. The event would serve as a day of remembrance for Stephen and all other first responders who lost their lives to suicide. Along with the Merrimack College community, the Rowley Police Department, as well as any surrounding police departments, would be openly invited to participate in the event. Not only will this build rapport between departments and the MCPA, but the departments in attendance could learn from our curriculum and continue to pass on knowledge and training to their officers.

There are many ways in which the Merrimack community can honor Stephen's passing. Along with the previously proposed day of mental health and 5k, the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice can honor Stephen's memory by awarding an outstanding student award in his name. This would be awarded annually in the month of May at the closing of each Spring Semester. This award would be given to a student who is recognized by faculty and staff to be an outstanding individual both inside the classroom and out.

### **In Conclusion**

The Merrimack College Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice is now faced with the opportunity to make a meaningful change. While the department is already making headlines due to the groundbreaking Merrimack College Police Academy, we can continue to set and example both within Massachusetts and nationally by promoting the de-stigmatization of



mental health and openly discussing the link between law enforcement and suicide. The ultimate goal of this program development is simple. If just one student officer can walk away from our program having learned something about mental health, whether it be how to spot signs of suicide ideation or if they learn how to effectively manage their own stress; this is not just a student with new knowledge, it is a life saved.

In the concluding remarks of his capstone titled, “Carrying Trauma from Birth to Work: Adverse Childhood Experiences in Law Enforcement Officers and their Implications”, Stephen states, “Policing is an essential part of any safe country, and therefore, making sure officers are mentally prepared and able to carry out their jobs in a professional manner is imperative...I would like to invite anyone to pick up where this study failed to take off, and use this proposal as a catalyst for further research into Adverse Childhood Experiences in law enforcement officers. If there is one lesson to be learned from this, it is that progress may be slow and difficult, but the implications are endless and worth the toil” (Levesque, 2021, p. 30-31). While my research has not focused specifically on Adverse Childhood Experiences amongst law enforcement officers, my hope is that this project can lead to a much needed reform of mental health care in policing. Following in the footsteps of Stephen, I invite anyone to build upon this project and continue to voice the importance of protecting those who protect us.

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**Appendix**

Buddy Project Google Form <sup>2</sup>

CCJ Buddy Project: MCPA:

Congratulations on your acceptance to the Merrimack College Police Academy!

This year we are implementing a new program in order to help students build connections and develop close relationships with one another, both before and during your time here at Merrimack College. Below is a questionnaire to help pair you with the best match for your CCJ Buddy. Please fill out the questionnaire with honesty, as you will be paired with another student officer based on your compatibility.

**Name:**

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**Age (Numerical):**

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**Date of Birth (MM/DD/YYYY):**

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- I. Do you know everyone in your academy cohort?
  - Yes
  - No
  
- II. If so, who do you have any personal relationships with? Select all that apply.
  - Name of Student Officer A
  - Name of Student Officer B
  - Name of Student Officer C...(etc.)

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<sup>2</sup> Created in partnership with Maeve Dubiel, M.S., Merrimack College Police Academy Program Coordinator

- III. Would you be uncomfortable with expressing your emotions, feelings, or mental well-being with anyone specifically within the Academy class?
- Yes
  - No
- IV. Would you be comfortable having someone share their personal experiences with you?
- Yes
  - No
  - I am unsure
- V. Would you be more likely to open up to others OR listen to others?
- More likely to open up to others
  - More likely to listen to others
- VI. How would you prefer your CCJ Buddy to contact you?
- Email
  - Phone (Call)
  - Text
  - Social Media/ Direct Message (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
  - In person
  - Video Conference (e.g., zoom, skype, facetime)
  - Other... (Short answer option)
- VII. Do others consider you a trust-worthy person?
- Yes
  - No

- VIII. Do people consider you to be a confidant?
- Yes
  - No
  - Sometimes
  - I am unsure
- IX. Are you more likely to confide in someone of the same sex? (Please feel free to elaborate on your preference)
- Yes
  - No
  - Other... (Short answer option)
- X. Would you feel comfortable talking to someone of the opposite sex?
- Yes
  - No
  - I am unsure
  - Other... (Short answer option)
- XI. Are you comfortable with talking to someone older than you or younger than you?
- Younger
  - Older
  - Same age
  - No preference
- XII. Please indicate the top three qualities that someone would use to describe you.
-

XIII. Please describe your greatest strength(s) when engaging with a group of friends.

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XIV. Are there any personal challenges or limitations you face? What would you like to improve upon?

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Do you have anything you may want us to know about you? Or do you have any questions regarding the CCJ Buddy Project?

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**Thank You!**