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More cops call N.J. helplines as protests and a pandemic add stress to a stressful job

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Facing the stress of a global pandemic and nationwide protests about police misconduct, more cops are reaching out to helplines in New Jersey for support.

Both Cop2Cop, at Rutgers University, and Copline, based in Freehold, said they have recorded recent increases. Cop2Cop reported 2,718 more calls and other messages during the first eight months of the year, compared to the same period in 2019, while Copline logged a 74% increase in calls.

The two organizations help cops process a variety of problems and each has expanded its reach in recent years, while officials have worked to reduce the stigma of asking for aid. Sometimes an officer or family member will have multiple conversations with counselors, which are logged as separate contacts, and only a small fraction of callers have historically mentioned the threat of suicide, helpline leaders said.

But they also noted that cops were undoubtedly under more pressure, especially as protests began earlier this summer.

“We heard from officers about violence at protests, and feeling threatened, feeling isolated,” said Cherie Castellano, who runs Cop2Cop. Officers reported confusion, depression, anxiety and anger, she said, and recent demonstrations left many “disheartened and sad.”

It didn’t help that protests followed months of working in a pandemic, when some officers had to quarantine from family, she added.

“The community embracing them is a big part of their job satisfaction,” Castellano said. “When that’s not there, they’re feeling it.”

Cop2Cop is mainly for New Jersey officers, but they receive calls from across the country. Interactions increased the month President Donald Trump declared a national emergency because of the coronavirus, and they jumped again after George Floyd’s death in police custody sparked protests nationwide.

Copline, which helps officers from across the United State and Canada, received hundreds more calls during the last eight months than the same period last year.

Their calls also increased the months immediately after the pandemic erupted and protests spread.

Officers were more ready to face an “invisible enemy” like the coronavirus than a drop in public confidence, said Stephanie Samuels, Copline’s founder and director.

“They were never prepared to be the enemy,” she said. “This unprecedented hatred and mistrust, it is devastating watching these calls.”

Overt public opinion can feel like whiplash.

There was an outpouring of appreciation for police late last year after Jersey City Det. Joseph Seals was killed, and signs thanking first responders sprouted in yards at the start of a pandemic that killed some officers while infecting hundreds of others.

But Floyd’s death in Minnesota and Jacob Blake’s shooting in Wisconsin led to dozens of local protests against police misconduct and systemic racism. New Jersey mayors cited Floyd and Blake to demand more civilian oversight and activists have raised questions about deaths in police custody in Vineland and on the Garden State Parkway.

Most Americans do not have high confidence in police, according to a Gallup poll released last month. The 48% of people who expressed having “quite a lot” or a “great deal” of confidence in law enforcement was the lowest share in 27 years, and the decline was even more pronounced among Black adults, fewer than a fifth of whom reported high confidence.

“There is no question that this is a difficult time for police officers, who are facing new challenges and risks from the COVID crisis, while simultaneously facing a crisis of trust” because of “unjustified deadly force” in other cities, state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said in a statement.

Grewal and other law enforcement leaders launched a program last October to train “resiliency officers” across the state to act as go-to’s for cops under pressure.

There are now almost 960 resiliency officers statewide, according to Grewal spokesman Peter Aseltine. About 777 still need to be trained because the pandemic halted face-to-face instruction from March until July, Aseltine said, although officials still plan to have training finished by New Year’s Day.

The fact that resiliency officers were directing more people to Cop2Cop showed the program “is working and providing that critical safety net that our officers need and deserve,” Grewal said.

Cop2Cop is hosted by Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care and receives funding from the human services department. Officials announced another \$80,000 to expand Cop2Cop in May, and the organization recently initiated many calls to overwhelmed first responders.

Leaders hope resiliency officers can intervene long before officers consider harming themselves.

During the past two decades, Cop2Cop counselors got immediate clinical care for more than 300 people considering suicide, officials said, while about 2% of Copline calls include officers with suicidal thoughts, Samuels estimated.

Data on officer suicides is hard to come by.

Previous estimates have come from outside nonprofits like Blue H.E.L.P., which logged 37 law enforcement suicides in New Jersey from the beginning of 2016 through June 30 of last year. Although that may be an undercount, it's still more than four times higher the number of line-of-duty deaths over a similar period.

A law took effect in July requiring departments to report suicides to the state attorney general's office. Aseltine said agencies have reported suicides, but he said they were not ready to release numbers.