



More N.J. police die from suicide than in line-of-duty. New program helps officers in crisis.

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The panic attacks began after his fourth friend died.

Anthony Woodson, a former deputy police chief in East Orange, knew he needed help. The four friends had all been cops. All four had taken their own lives. He had even been first to the scene for the last one, on the day before Thanksgiving in 2007.

But there weren't people he could turn to within his department, he said. Asking for help only put your job at risk.

"This is what the problem is," he said. "They're afraid to ask for help, because there's such a stigma with mental health."

Amid a number of high-profile police suicides in the region, Woodson joined more than 1,300 cops and state officials in Trenton Thursday for the start of a two-day "Resiliency Summit," in order to draw attention to the toll policing can take and to highlight a new statewide program that aims to reduce officer suicides.

There were 37 law enforcement suicides in New Jersey from the beginning of 2016 through June 30 of this year, according to the Massachusetts-based Blue H.E.L.P. But that nonprofit noted that their overall statistics may be an undercount.

In contrast, nine New Jersey officers died in the line of duty over a similar period of time, officials said.

When a deputy attorney general asked the auditorium who had been affected by suicide, hands went up in all corners.

That program, originally announced in August, will eventually train hundreds of cops as "Resiliency Officers," who can help colleagues cope with daily trauma.

"It is not a sign of weakness to ask for help, in fact, it's a sign of strength," Gov. Phil Murphy told the crowd, before declaring Oct. 10 as "New Jersey Law Enforcement Resiliency Day."

State Attorney General Gurbir Grewal, whose office hosted the summit, said that while it was common sense to give officers vests to protect against physical threats, New Jersey had not done enough to address mental health.

“We don’t give you anything to protect against those internal threats,” he told officers.

Through the program, cops will be able to reach out to trained officers at any department for confidential conversations, which officials said would combat fears of retribution if an officer asked for help within their own agency.

Officers may then be referred to programs like Cop2Cop, the police helpline that originally helped Woodson, the former East Orange Deputy Chief. Woodson now works for Cop2Cop, which often uses retired officers as counselors.

Cherie Castellano, director of Cop2Cop at Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care, said the new initiative was a “dream come true,” partially because it used active-duty cops to help others.

A pilot version of the program is already underway in Maple Shade, in Burlington County. The training was originally developed by the U.S. military, and was adapted for law enforcement by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, officials said.

Nationwide, suicide rates are higher for “protective service occupations,” which includes police, than the country overall, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Several New York officers have taken their own lives this year, and President Donald Trump recently signed a bill that sets aside up to \$7.5 million for police suicide prevention.

New Jersey’s summit cost about \$30,000, according to a state Attorney General’s office spokeswoman. Forfeiture funds were used, she said, which is money seized from suspected criminals. She also said it was too early to know how much all of the training would eventually cost.

Michael Genovese, the chief medical officer for Acadia Healthcare, said the program would help cops address problems before they became life-threatening.

“We can’t change the job,” he said, “but we can change the way your brain will respond to the stressors of the job.”