

# New Jersey police recruits required to take suicide prevention training

By Sharon Adarlo/The Star-Ledger

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Shelia Hobson, a certified suicide prevention trainer, talks to Newark police officers during a mandatory training session held by Cop2Cop, a police counseling service.

At law enforcement academies around the country, cadets learn chapter and verse about statutes, the sanctity of evidence, the appropriate way to handle suspects and dozens of other topics related to crime and public safety.

Starting this year in New Jersey, they'll also learn about depression, the emotional hazards of their work and the possibility one of their colleagues will consider ending his or her life with a bullet.

It's a blunt message meant to counter the persistent problem of suicide in law enforcement ranks. While the issue isn't unique to the Garden State, New Jersey is the first state to mandate suicide awareness training for all recruits, said trooper Orlando Ramos, who served on a task force created by Gov. Jon Corzine to assess and combat the problem.

Ramos, who helped develop the training program, called the move "a step in the right direction." "My hope is that over time, it will reduce the number of suicides," he said.

The curriculum goes into effect July 1 and will be required for prospective police officers, sheriff's officers, corrections officers, juvenile detention officers and state and county investigators. The New Jersey Police Training Commission approved the change last month.

The training remains voluntary for active officers, though the state's largest municipal force, the Newark Police Department, began requiring its officers to begin suicide awareness training in the fall.

"You see tragedy day in and day out. It's human nature to be affected by it," Newark police director Garry McCarthy said. "We have a responsibility to make sure we provide resources to police officers so they can protect themselves."

The stresses of the job - including long, irregular hours, and exposure to horrific crimes and danger - put law enforcement officers at an above-average risk for suicide, according to the task force's findings. That risk is exacerbated by ready access to firearms, making it easier for despondent cops to act on impulse.

Ramos called the nature of the work "inherently negative."

"People don't call us when their babies are born or invite us to a barbecue," he said. "They call us when that baby stops breathing or when that barbecue grill blows up in their face."

Across the country, an average of 436 law enforcement officers have taken their lives each year since 2004, according to the National Police Suicide Foundation.

In New Jersey, 10 law enforcement officers committed suicide last year, up from an average of 7.4 per year between 2003 and 2007, said Cherie Castellano, director of Cop2Cop, a state-funded police counseling service. In 2008, 11 officers took their own lives, said Castellano, who also served on the 14-member task force.

Come July, the recruits will learn how to spot the signs of depression in themselves and others, how to cope with difficult experiences and how to seek assistance, either through private practitioners or groups like Cop2Cop.

At a recent training session for active officers in the Trenton suburb of Hamilton, state Attorney General Anne Milgram told some 200 people that officers need to break down the stigma that prevents so many troubled cops from reaching out for help.

"There's no question these programs work," Milgram said. "This difficulty is getting people to actually use them."

#### **'CARE AND COMFORT'**

At a separate session in Newark, former homicide detective Shelia Hobson, a Cop2Cop supervisor, urged officers to be one another's "keeper."

"Sometimes all you have to do is show care and comfort," she said.

Since Cop2Cop was formed in 2000, the agency's hotline has fielded 24,000 calls, Castellano said. In 171 cases, the officer calling was suicidal. In all but two of those cases, counselors talked the officers out of taking their lives, she said.

Kenneth Burkert, a union representative for corrections officers in Union County, lost two colleagues to suicide in a recent 18-month span.

"After the first one, everybody was devastated," Burkert said. "After the second one, everyone I knew was very numb and somber."

Within a month of the second death, he said, about 20 corrections officers attended a Cop2Cop seminar.

"It helped them understand what suicide is," Burkert said.

For Ramos, the effort to reduce the number of police suicides is intensely personal. Seven years ago, a friend and colleague on the State Police shot himself in the heart. Ramos said he didn't see it coming.

"He was such a positive person," Ramos said. "He was the last person I thought would do something like that."

The suicide prompted Ramos to focus his dissertation on police suicides when he obtained a doctorate. His friend's death continues to drive him today.

"Day in and day out, we take care of everyone else," he said. "But who's going to take care of us?"

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