

OFFICER WELLNESS AND RETENTION

Promising Practices from Community Supervision Administrators

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Across the country, probation and parole departments are operating in a changing landscape. Community supervision officers are tasked with growing caseloads and complex expectations in agencies that are often understaffed and underfunded. In 2018, the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) and the National Reentry Resource Center partnered to better understand challenges facing the community supervision workforce and identify ways to address them. APPA spoke with community supervision leaders from 15 states in interviews that focused on front-line staff recruitment, training, retention, and performance evaluation. This brief features the voices of these leaders and distills the qualitative data surrounding a central finding of APPA's interviews: agency administrators are taking comprehensive steps to retain officers and avoid high turnover in what is an inherently stressful job.

THE PROBLEM

"We haven't done a very good job in criminal justice . . . in recognizing the impact the work that we do has on the people who are doing it and providing the necessary support for those people to be healthy and happy human beings."

Correctional and community supervision environments can be uniquely taxing because of difficult work conditions, high staff turnover, high caseloads, and complex client needs. Officers may suffer from acute and chronic stress or trauma related to extreme or critical incidents on the job and the day-to-day requirements of their position. As a result of working with clients who have extensive trauma histories or who are currently experiencing trauma, officers may also experience vicarious trauma. Interviewees noted that their front-line staff ask for more training and resources related to vicarious trauma due to changing job expectations. The implementation of evidence-based practices—such as Thinking for a Change (T4C), Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS), and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)—while a positive development for the field overall, necessitates that officers move beyond simply surveilling client behavior and dive more thoroughly into client-trauma histories and how clients' ways of thinking influence their behavior.

SOLUTIONS FROM THE FIELD

"We used to prefer law enforcement [or] corrections backgrounds but have been shifting to social work and social sciences because of the shift in how we . . . do probation."

Interviewees described recruitment as an avenue for ensuring that applicants are prepared for the intensity and diverse challenges of community supervision work. They noted that as the type of work carried out by officers has changed, so have the types of applicants being recruited and hired to their agencies in recent years. For example, one interviewee said that, in order to be considered for positions, candidates must demonstrate integrity, impulse control, conscientiousness, and stress tolerance. Other **"softer skills"** such as empathy, communication, problem solving, critical thinking, case management experience, and cultural awareness are also in demand.

With an eye toward the concept of rehabilitation, one hiring director simply asks applicants if they feel that people in general have the capacity to change. Educational background is also a consideration. Most interviewees reported looking for applicants with **behavioral science** degrees, such as sociology or social work, as they may be more familiar with concepts like psychological stress and

trauma than applicants who have strictly correctional or law enforcement backgrounds.

Training was also identified as a means of preventing and addressing burnout and stress from vicarious trauma. For some agencies, **trainings about vicarious trauma, health, and work-life balance** are included in formal staff orientations. One interviewee reported that, during their agency's eight-week orientation, new staff are introduced to not only the types of trauma that clients may experience, but also the concept of vicarious trauma endured by officers. This training prepares officers to maintain professional boundaries with clients while managing the effects of vicarious trauma. For other agencies, information about these topics is included in continuing education modules either as a supplement to orientation trainings or in lieu of them.

Agencies have instituted a number of different policies to reduce stress and prevent burnout. Some leaders stated that they have been attempting to foster **better work-life balance** by directing supervisors to promote the use of vacation and sick time, for example. Several jurisdictions institutionalize this balance by providing financial **incentives for healthy habits**, offering discounts or access to different types of physical or mental health programs. One jurisdiction offers gym memberships and a monthly two-hour break in the work day for officers to play kickball, run, or take walks.

Another interviewee discussed two innovative procedures that have the potential to effectively prevent or reduce trauma among officers. In one of those procedures, officers receive notifications promptly and directly from colleagues about critical incidents involving people on their caseloads or in their units because, they said, "we want to be able to reach out and see how [officers] are doing and maybe [allow them to be] excused for a day or two while they gather their thoughts." Additionally, officers and supervisors are tasked with creating **personalized safety plans** for themselves in difficult situations. These safety plans can be long term or short term, and may include adjusting one's caseload and avoiding the location where a critical incident occurred. In another agency, a wellness psychologist is on retainer to offer prompt support to staff who have been involved in critical incidents.

Twelve of the interviewees mentioned that **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)** are in place to aid officers who are experiencing stress in their personal or professional lives, either through on-site therapists or through contracts with local mental health providers. Many departments have trained supervisors or veteran employees to coach officers through difficult cases or circumstances on the job, and one agency has even brought on a staff chaplain to help officers cope. Furthermore, **peer support groups** in some departments are trained to work with their colleagues either on an ongoing basis or following a critical incident. One interviewee mentioned that their agency's peer support team is part of a larger employee wellness committee, and that staff on the peer support team are in place as part of the agency's official response to critical incidents.

LOOKING AHEAD

"Staff wellness initiatives are at the forefront of retention and [are crucial] for our officers to be effective with the population they are working with. . . . There are multiple dimensions to wellness: emotional, financial, their spiritual well-being, physical well-being, a variety of things."

While officer stress and vicarious trauma were not the initial primary focus of study, the interviews revealed that they are significant emerging issues for community supervision administrators. The data herein represents some ways in which agencies are adapting and attempting to address a growing need in the field. The field-based solutions discussed by interviewees illustrate the urgency in promoting officer well-being. As such, community supervision officer wellness merits further exploration for researchers, organizations, and the agencies that employ these critical members of the workforce.

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The National Reentry Resource Center (NRRC) was established by the Second Chance Act and provides education, training, and technical assistance to states, tribes, territories, local governments, community-based service providers, nonprofit organizations, and corrections institutions involved with reentry. The NRRC is a project of the Bureau of Justice Assistance and is administered by The Council of State Governments Justice Center, in collaboration with the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and key partner organizations.