

SANTA CLARA POLICE DEPARTMENT GENERAL ORDER 22.7

PEER SUPPORT

ISSUED APRIL 2006

22.7.1 Purpose of the Peer Support Unit

The purpose of the Santa Clara Police Department Peer Support Unit is to provide personal support for all members of the Department who are involved in critical incidents while on or off duty, or who have experienced significant emotional events while off duty for which personal support is requested. With peer support available, incidents and situations that could have a significant effect on an employee's mental, emotional and physical well-being can be minimized. The Peer Support Unit is designed to be peer driven, and its goal is to act in the best interests of both the employee and the Department. The three main functions of this unit are to provide defusing, critical incident debriefing and basic peer support.

22.7.2 Definitions

Critical Incident: An event that is outside the NORMAL HUMAN experience. Examples include shootings, officer injury, gun take-aways, child deaths, officer suicides, disease exposure, disasters, etc. A critical incident can also be any incident experienced by an employee, which the employee feels affects his/her well-being.

Employee: Any member of the Santa Clara Police Department that is sworn, non-sworn, paid or volunteer.

Peer Support Unit: A network of employees trained to provide support to fellow employees in need of assistance as listed in [22.7.3](#).

Peer Support Professional: A mental health professional with sufficient police exposure, and whom the Peer Support Unit approves.

Post Traumatic Stress: It is a NORMAL REACTION to an ABNORMAL SITUATION. Examples include, but are not limited to, the normal physical ailments as well as normal physiological responses (time distortion, altered visual and auditory perceptions) that occur during and after the incident.

22.7.3 Functions of the Peer Support Unit

Defusing: To provide immediate support to Department employees who have been involved in a critical incident. Peer Support members will provide education and information to the employee, so they can better understand what has happened and what to expect in the future. Peer Support will also see to the immediate needs of the employee and their family through established resources as well as support for the employee.

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Critical Incident Debriefing: A process, normally occurring 48 to 72 hours after the incident, where involved employees along with Peer Support members and, in most cases, a Peer Support Professional, discuss the incident in a non-judgmental way. The purpose is to address informational gaps, normalize feelings and reactions, and educate employees about stress management techniques and available resources. As with defusing, the goal is to minimize the effects of situations that could have a significant negative impact on employees and their family's mental, emotional and physiological well-being.

Basic Peer Support: To maintain a group of employees with whom an employee can choose to discuss sensitive issues. These discussions will be as confidential as current law allows. Peer support will make people aware of the various resources available for their specific needs. Peer support is not intended to replace professional help, nor are the peer support personnel professional counselors.

To maintain an extensive list of resources that employees may use in time of need. These can include psychologists, counselors, clergy, and literature on death and dying, marital and children's issues and normal and abnormal reactions to stress and post traumatic stress syndrome. Additionally, peer support may arrange emergency childcare, transportation and meals as well as assist with notifications to families of employee injury or death.

22.7.4 Policy

Notification and Response: It is the policy of the Santa Clara Police Department that when an incident occurs that requires a mandatory critical incident debriefing, the Peer Support lieutenant/sergeant shall be notified by the Watch Commander. The Peer Support Team can also be called by a supervisor or involved employee when, from their perspective, an incident has the potential for producing the type of emotional shock that may adversely impact the psychological well-being of the employee.

Support: The Peer Support lieutenant/sergeant will coordinate initial and follow-up support for the involved employee, including logistical support. The Peer Support Team will not hinder any criminal or administrative investigation.

Debriefing and Information: When possible, Peer Support will ensure that the employee receives a formal critical incident debriefing within 72 hours after the incident for those requiring a mandatory debriefing. Employees may request non-mandatory debriefings at any time. Peer Support will also provide information to members so they can understand the normal responses to that incident, and what can be done to minimize their impact.

Non-Critical Incidents: Employees may approach any Peer Support member at any time for assistance in any personal matter. No record will be kept of the contact except for non-specific statistical purposes (Names will not be kept). Employees will not be referred to peer support by supervisors for unacceptable job performance or as a result of disciplinary action.

Structure: The Peer Support Unit is comprised of a Sergeant who acts as the coordinator and the individual members who are trained in peer support and critical incident debriefing. A Lieutenant provides logistical support and acts as the liaison with Department administration when necessary. The long-term goal is to have 10% of the Department's employees involved in the program. Peer support is available for all Department employees.

Training and Selection: Members attend the basic peer support and critical incident debriefing courses. They also attend yearly update training as well as in-service training. The unit meets monthly or more frequently if circumstances dictate. The Steering Committee determines selection criteria, and because of the nature of the unit, the criteria do not conform to existing selection standards for specialized assignments. In fact, the peer support unit is not a specialized assignment within the Department.

Confidentiality: Peer Support members shall maintain the confidentiality entrusted to them, and will not discuss any information obtained while providing peer support. It is understood, however, that by law, no confidential and privileged communication exists between a peer support member and an employee. Situations that cannot be maintained confidential are:

- When information received by the peer member reveals that a criminal act has occurred.
- When the Peer Support member is involved as a participant or witness;
- Where there is reason to believe that the employee intends to injure him/herself or another person. In the case of threatened serious injury, a reasonable attempt shall be made to warn the intended victim(s).
- When due to substance abuse, the employee is a danger to self, citizens, or fellow employees.

The Peer Support Member will not be ordered to give information to the Department concerning the content of peer support sessions for administrative purposes, except as listed above.

Supervisory officers who are Peer Members cannot abdicate their supervisory responsibilities when on-duty, confronted by misconduct, disciplinary problems, or other improper actions on the part of employees.

If a Peer Support member feels that specialized assistance is necessary, they may contact another peer support member or professional referral, as long as the involved employee agrees and gives their approval.

Mandatory Debriefing Incidents: The employee is required to participate in critical incident debriefings under the following circumstances:

- When an employee witnesses a death or imminent death to another employee.
- When a death or imminent death occurs to a citizen or employee, as a result of that employee's action.

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- When an employee is himself or herself seriously injured, and a debriefing is logistically possible.
- When an incident such as a disaster occurs, or there are other special circumstances where both the Department's administration and the Steering Committee agrees that a debriefing would be in the best interests of the employee and the Department.