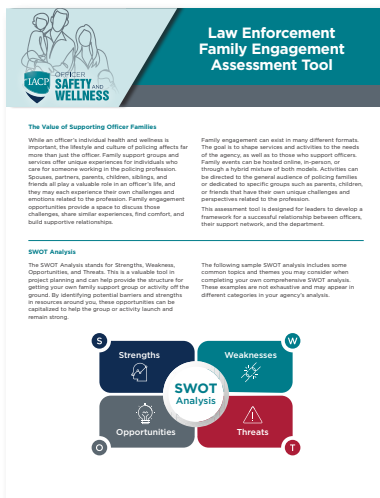


IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY COME?

Creating Wellness Opportunities to Engage, Inform,
and Support Law Enforcement Families

A robust family support system is a key component of any law enforcement agency's health and wellness program, as it benefits personnel, families, and ultimately, their agency and the community. The term "family" may refer to the officer's support system, which may encompass a partner and children, but may also include parents, siblings, and friends – anyone officers rely on for support in their personal lives. The strategies outlined in this document can support officers and all personnel in the agency, including non-sworn, as all may benefit from family wellness programs.



The IACP's [Law Enforcement Family Engagement Assessment Tool](#) walks agencies through creating a Family Support Program.



The practical examples that follow can help round out the programming with ideas and strategies that have been effective in other law enforcement agencies. These ideas emerged over three years from the IACP Motorola Solutions Foundation Family Support Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) Program.

The suggestions presented here are categorized according to budget, from no or low cost to those that require a more significant financial commitment, either initially or overall. Expenses will vary depending on the strategy the department chooses to implement and may include speaker fees, program materials, rental fees, food, and subscriptions for wellness apps.



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(\$)

Low or No Cost

(\$\$)

Moderate Cost

(\$\$\$)

Higher Cost

In-Person Engagement

Social Events \$ \$\$

In-person social events are a good way for agencies to meet the families of officers and for families to connect. For example, the Danbury, CT, Police Department has successfully hosted quarterly dinners for officers and their families to meet and socialize, with an estimated attendance of 125 people at each dinner. The department had the food catered to provide delicious, healthy meals for the officers and their families and allow everyone to socialize. These dinners occurred at the police headquarters and a banquet hall owned by the City of Danbury to keep the cost for the dinner low.

When planning events, consider the schedules of officers working different shifts and the families attending the events. Varying the locations and times of day will potentially allow more people to participate. Examples of in-person social events include:



- Ice cream social
- Breakfast meetup for partners and kids
- BBQ night
- Movie night
- Bowling party
- Nature hike
- Date night – the department provides childcare
- Community service project
- Seasonal events such as pumpkin carving or trunk-or-treat
- Yoga morning
- Guided mindfulness practice/breathing exercises
- A morning run or sunrise yoga
- Cooking club and recipe exchange featuring quick and healthy meals and snacks
- Paint party for officers and their partners at a local art studio

Family-to-Family Peer Support \$\$

A family-to-family peer support program can connect families to those who may have gone through similar experiences. Family peer support can be an informal network of family members who reach out to one another as needed or a more formal program with a written policy and structured training.

As with any peer-support program, it's essential to have a qualified person to manage the initiative. One concern that officers sometimes raise regarding family peer-to-peer engagement is the potential to become a forum for negativity and gossip. Having a qualified leader in place can ensure that the focus remains on providing constructive peer support between family members.

See the resources section for more information about setting up a peer support program.

Educational Events \$ \$\$ \$\$\$

In-person educational events allow agencies to provide families with information and resources. During the event, families can familiarize themselves with resources available through the department and within the community. Educational activities can range from a presentation on a single topic to a larger-scale event. While a comprehensive event with multiple speakers and venue fees will require more substantial funding, a department can offer educational events with little or no expense. A financial planner or qualified staff person may be willing to provide information pro bono on estate planning, family budgeting, and retirement planning. Another valuable resource is an agency's health insurance provider or other local professional, who can share information about benefits included in the plan, such as healthy eating habits and meal planning. Consider providing onsite child- or eldercare during educational events for adults. Some agencies use volunteers or Police Explorers to care for children while parents are in sessions.

Family Day at the Police Academy

Family Day events can set the tone for new law enforcement families entering the department. These events build families' familiarity with the challenges and opportunities of the profession and help them learn about resources to support them throughout their officer's career. Family Day can be held at various points during the academy, depending on what makes sense in the training schedule—before the start of the academy, during the first, midpoint, or final week of the academy, or just before the new officers start their field training.

For smaller agencies that don't have a dedicated academy or in cases where new hires don't need to go through an academy, the swearing in ceremony is a great opportunity to introduce families to resources and programs available to them.

For example, the Colorado Springs, CO, Police Department includes a mandatory training class for recruits and their families during their academy. The four-hour informational session occurs once per academy class. During this session, families learn about “a day in the life” of their officers and receive information on available resources for agency families.

Topics for Family Day could include any of the following:

- A day in the life of a police officer
- Overview of the department's resources, including wellness programs such as peer support, if applicable
- Departmental benefits
- Encouraging healthy nutrition for officers and their families
- Sleep hygiene for officers on any shift
- Meet and greet with the chief and command staff
- Injury reduction and management
- Education on signs of trauma and mental health conditions
- Resilience strategies
- Tips on how the family can support the officer

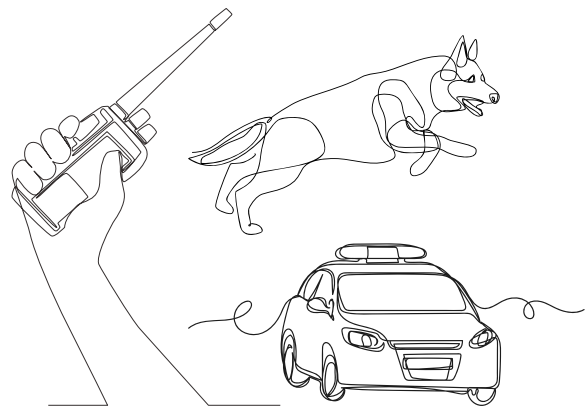
Junior Police Academy

Many departments offer Junior Police Academies as educational events to engage children in the community. If a department already offers a Junior Police Academy, it is an easy step to open it up to the children of officers, which would give them a better understanding of their parents' job.

To hold the interest of children, make this an interactive event by including any of the following activities:

- K9 demonstrations
- Touring the station
- Vehicle demonstrations
- Obstacle courses
- Mock report writing and scenario roleplay

Another option for continued engagement could be to allow older children who have gone through the program to volunteer to help with the academy.



Virtual Engagement

Online Educational Events \$ \$\$

Virtual education events can be excellent tools to engage officers and families on topics that will assist them throughout their lives. These events might include presentations by local subject matter experts, community partners, or officers and other staff. For example, the Chula Vista (CA) Police Department created a resilience training webinar for officers' families. Leaders of the department's peer support team joined a police psychologist to present the program and facilitate the participant Q&A that followed. In addition, the Chula Vista peer leaders recorded the one-hour live webinar to be available for future viewing.

Below are additional examples of educational events on virtual platforms to engage families. Similar to planning in-person events, reaching out to a variety of community professionals for assistance can yield low-cost or free speakers for educational events. For example, financial planners, yoga instructors, local chefs, professional organizers, or nutritionists, to name a few, may be willing to offer a free class as a service to the families of first responders.



- Estate planning
- Retirement planning
- Nutrition/healthy eating
- Online/social media safety for law enforcement families
- Creating a family emergency readiness plan
- Family stress management practices
- Effective communication strategies
- Identifying signs of trauma and other mental health conditions
- Resilience training, such as identifying thinking traps and practicing gratitude

Social Media \$ \$\$

Social media can be a great way to connect groups and share information regardless of conflicting schedules. Departments can use social media tools to connect the agency with families and families to each other. This strategy provides families with updates on what is going on within the department and how that might affect officers. For the department building a program, social media is a useful tool to market new resources. Social media is a useful tool to market new resources.

Wellness Apps for Officers and Families

Wellness apps are an excellent tool for officers and families to easily access departmental and community resources. Several departments participating in the IACP Motorola Family Support Program have adopted wellness apps. Various commercially available apps exist and are customizable according to a department's preferences. Apps provide officers and their families with anonymous, 24/7 access to wellness tools and features such as informational pages, self-assessments, links to community and departmental resources, private discussion forums, peer support services, and contact information for chaplains and qualified mental health professionals.

When selecting an app, you may want to take the following things into consideration:

- Its price structure (set up fees, hosting fees, price per user, etc.)
- What kind of support does it offer through the implementation process and beyond (fixing bugs, pushing updates, etc.)?
- Is it compatible with multiple platforms?
- Does it come with pre-loaded wellness content or will you need to create your own?
- Is it customizable enough to fit your agency's needs?
- What kind of security is in place?
- Can it offer different levels of access for families and officers?

Private Social Media Pages

Creating a private page for officers and their families can allow them to connect with others who understand the life of a police family. IACP's

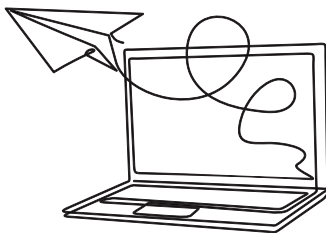
[Creating an Online Support Group: Digitally Connecting Officer Families](#)

guides departments in establishing and maintaining a safe online community for families. Families can use private pages to socialize, ask questions, and share experiences. In addition, private social media pages allow agencies to push information out directly to families.



For example, the Buffalo Grove, IL, Police Department has a private social media page they share during the family orientation for new officers. The department's social media page provides weekly updates about new hires, promotions, anniversaries, community engagement activities, and more. Feedback from the families shows that the weekly updates keep them informed and connected to the department. These updates also provide great conversation starters for partners to discuss the job with their officers because it allows them to focus on the positive aspects of the job.

What should you post on your department's family wellness app or social media page? Items that bridge the gap between the job and home life can give officers easy work-related topics of discussion with their families. Having a "safe" topic to discuss can encourage officers to share elements of their work life with their partners. Examples may include:



- Announcements and news from the department
- Welcoming new officers
- Promotions and retirements
- Marriages, births, anniversaries, graduations
- Promoting wellness activities
- Group chats or private messaging
- Links to community and wellness resources

Adding a Family Wellness Component to Existing Officer Wellness Programs or Training

Certain established officer training events or activities can be opened to or modified slightly for family participation. This approach allows agencies to get a family offering up and running quickly with little additional effort or expense. Of course, not every training session an officer attends will be appropriate for families, but some possible appropriate options may include:

Officer Training and Education **\$\$**

Opening opportunities for training and education to family members allows them to be involved in the department in a new way. Also, these opportunities provide additional skills and knowledge for the family, which ultimately benefits the officer.

Departments commonly offer the following types of education to officers, any of which might be extended to families:

- CPR/AED
- First aid
- Roadway safety and alcohol awareness
- Yoga classes

Physical Wellness Program **\$\$**

Departments that provide fitness facilities and classes for officers may consider opening those resources to families to promote whole-family physical wellness. The value of these programs for officer wellness is significant, and extending these resources to families can also encourage officers to take advantage of them. Fitness facilities and classes may be onsite, or the department may provide free or reduced-price family memberships to a local gym as an employee benefit.

Chaplaincy Program **\$**

Departments that have a relationship with a police chaplain may extend chaplaincy access to family members. Families can benefit from talking to a chaplain who knows police culture and the challenges officers and their families face. In addition, a chaplain's familiarity with the family can provide a more detailed picture to help the chaplain better assist the officer and the family.

Administrative and Outreach Tools

On the administrative side of implementing a family wellness program, a variety of tools and approaches can improve communication about and increase the efficiency of the department's family wellness program. In addition, streamlining the administrative aspects of the program will enhance its sustainability over the long term.

Wellness Committees and Volunteers \$

Agencies can benefit from involving family members in planning wellness activities. Doing so can remove some of the administrative burdens from officers, encourage buy-in from family members, and ensure that programming reflects families' needs and interests. Family members can volunteer to help plan an individual event or be included as a member of the department's wellness committee to assist more broadly in wellness programming.

For example, the Victoria, TX, Police Department has a wellness committee made up of four officers and two family members that plans events for officers and families. The Bellevue, WA, Police Department created a formal volunteer coordinator position with a written job description outlining the responsibilities and qualifications required. Other agencies involve family volunteers on an as-needed basis.

Sharing Wellness Resources \$ \$\$

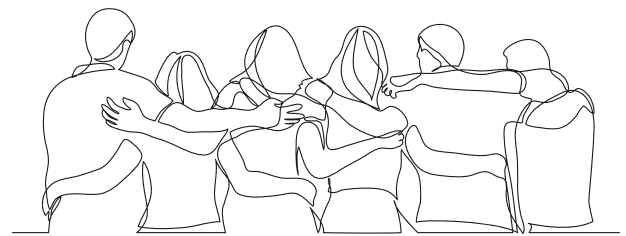
Many police departments have invested time and money into developing wellness resources for their officers. Making these resources available to families allows the department to expand the impact of resources they've already created. It also gives families another connection to the department and helps them understand what is available to their officers.

Wellness Board and Wellness Room

Larger departments with multiple hub locations have created wellness boards – physical bulletin boards in each location where they post initiatives and information. In this way, departments can disseminate information across their entire department. For example, the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension has multiple locations

across the state. Their wellness boards allowed family wellness leaders to communicate with each site by posting messages and information about family activities.

Wellness rooms are another option that departments can explore. While wellness rooms are generally an onsite benefit that an agency creates for its officers, depending on the amenities, they could also be made available to family members. An example would be a wellness room with a resource library that family members could access or fitness equipment they could use onsite or borrow.



Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no “one size fits all” approach to building a family wellness program. Each department is different, so it is important to check-in with the families and staff to get a solid understanding of what they want and need out of the program. Adopt any of the ideas included here, or use them as a springboard to create something unique for your agency. Create checkpoints throughout the development process and once the program is established to get feedback from the families to ensure that the program meets their needs. Families are the officers' first line of support outside the department and are an essential part of officers' lives. Family support is a key component in a department's overall commitment to officer wellness.

Resources

For more ideas on building your department's Family Support Program, consult the following resources:



[Empowering Policing Families with Social Media Safety](#)



[Officer Health and Wellness Agency Assessment Tool and Action Planning Roadmap](#)



[Family Matters: Executive Guide for Developing Family-Friendly Law Enforcement Policies, Procedures, and Culture](#)



[Police Chaplain Resource](#)



[Family Matters Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Law Enforcement Families](#)



[Peer Support Guidelines](#)



[Peer support as a Powerful Tool in Law Enforcement Suicide Prevention](#)



[Family Matters Agency Considerations for Officer Family Preparedness Reference Guide](#)



[Supporting Law Enforcement Families in Understanding Trauma](#)



[How to Start a Law Enforcement Family Support Group: Insights and Considerations](#)

Have other questions or an innovative idea that you'd like to share? Please reach out to the IACP's Officer Health and Wellness team at OSW@theIACP.org.



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For more family support resources please visit:

www.theiacp.org/OSW

 **OSW@theIACP.org**

 **theIACP.org/OSW**

 **[800.THE.IACP](tel:800.THE.IACP)**