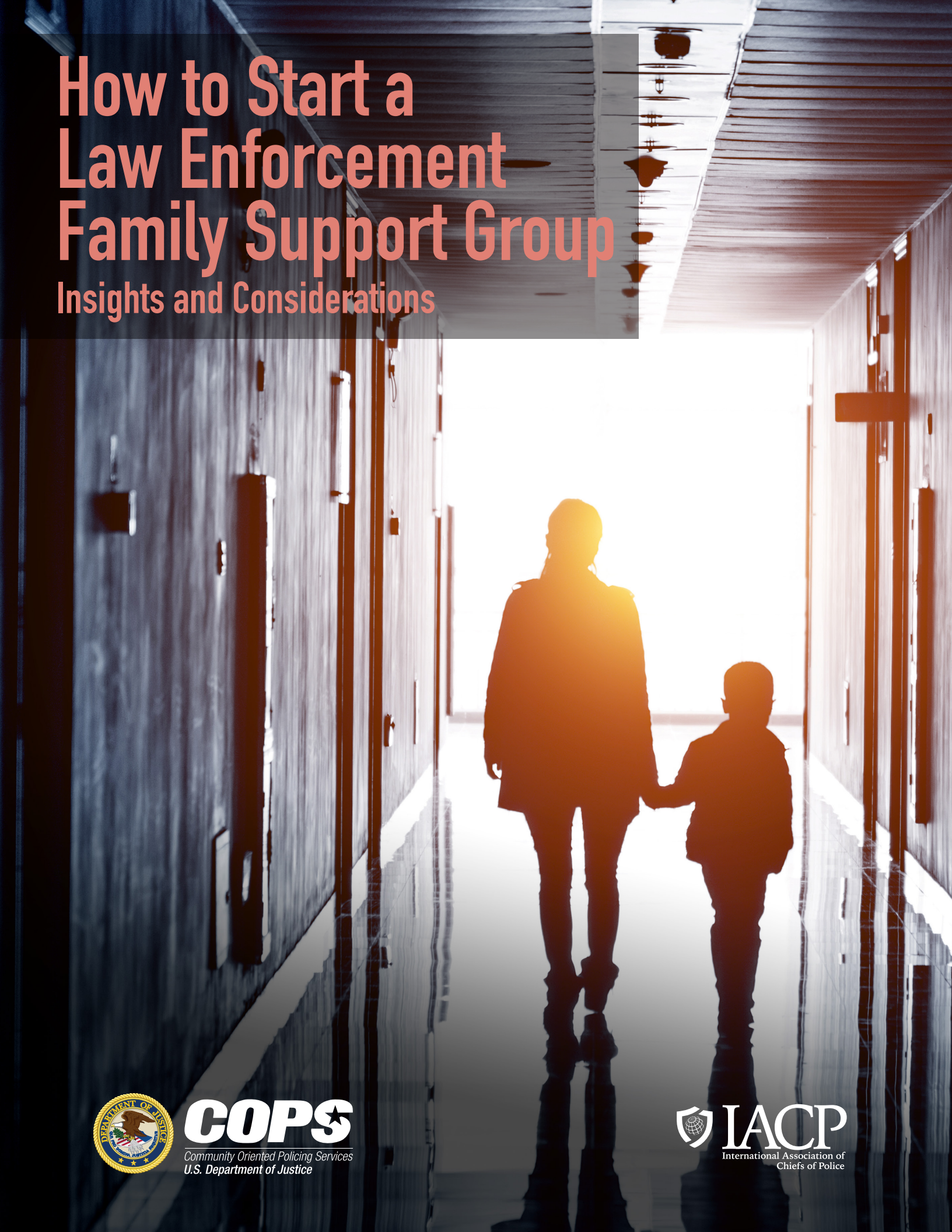
How to Start a Law Enforcement Family Support Group

Insights and Considerations



COPS
Community Oriented Policing Services
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IACP
International Association of Chiefs of Police

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Letter from the Director of the COPS Office

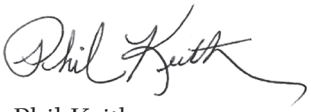
Colleagues:

As a former police chief, I know how important the support of our families is to our ability to serve and protect our communities. And I also have seen how the job affects our loved ones almost as much as it affects us. The hours we work, the milestones we miss, and the dangers we face take a toll on our families. Just like us, they benefit from the support of their peers: other law enforcement families who understand what *they* go through every day.

To help agencies facilitate the establishment of family support groups, the COPS Office worked with the IACP to prepare this publication. It is a valuable resource and guide to the key factors to consider when setting up a group—formal or informal, online or in person—in which our loved ones can support one another and in turn support their officer or deputy.

Whether your agency already has family programming or is looking to begin a new effort, I encourage you to consult this guide and the tips and advice it offers on getting our families the support they need while keeping everyone safe.

Sincerely



Phil Keith
Director
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

The Need for Support Groups

Law enforcement families play a crucial role in the health and wellness of their officers, but these families need support and resources for themselves as well. Spouses, companions, children, and other family members of law enforcement face unique circumstances. Such challenges may be internalizing the dangers their officer faces while on duty, the fear of injury and potential loss of income, the constantly changing schedule, working the night shift, family scheduling, and potential issues around officer trauma and stress. Families of a law enforcement officer can benefit from communicating with peers who understand these challenges. A support group can help build connections and provide resources for families of law enforcement officers.

Support groups of any type or structure bring together people who have faced similar experiences and can relate to one another. The strength of a group lies in the connected experiences. Starting a law enforcement family support group can be challenging but also rewarding. When putting one together, there are many things to consider such as the group's purpose, group format, meeting style, key stakeholders, and financial requirements.

Laying a Strong Foundation

Those starting a law enforcement support group must be deliberate and purposeful to shape the kind of services the group can provide. It is important to develop a dedicated purpose for the group with every action, event, or engagement aligning with that purpose. Each group's purpose will be unique. Some may be educational in nature and focus on providing tangible resources and trainings to members; others may be focused on informal support in the form of discussion groups and online forums. Consider creating a mission and vision statement to guide the group as it grows. Determine whether the group will be connected formally or informally to the law enforcement agency. Connection or recognition by the agency may come later. No one path is better than another as long as the group is serving those who need it.

For some members, these support groups may be the only place they feel safe enough to express concerns. Create a safe and welcoming space for all members to discuss fears, address issues, and raise questions and to contribute their knowledge and experiences in return. This safe and welcoming atmosphere will allow members to form friendships and build trust, adding an additional support system for families and companions of law enforcement.

Group Formats

Each law enforcement family support group will have a unique format. Typical formats include online platforms, in-person meetings, or a mix of the two. There are benefits and challenges to each that should be carefully considered to best align with the group's mission and goals.

Online groups

Online groups have the benefit of being accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, which can be particularly beneficial when the time commitment of an in-person meeting doesn't fit with the family schedule. Online groups can reach a larger geographic region and therefore may be able to engage more people than in-person meetings. Some online support groups find success in creating a "closed" or "secret" group on popular social media platforms. Private social media groups allow members to post resources, participate in informal discussions, and engage in question and answer forums with slightly more confidentiality. Groups on social media sites take little effort to set up and maintain through changes in membership or leadership. Social media groups should have one or more group administrators, as well as posting guidelines. For example, many groups do not allow selling or solicitation of services and may require respectful language or treating all opinions respectfully. Post these guidelines in a central location and remind group members of these periodically. When a group exists on a public social media site, it is important to take precaution with privacy settings and to save important content elsewhere in case something happens with the site.

Some groups have found success in setting up an independent website with information, resources, and members-only sections. While these websites take more time, energy, and funds to set up, they provide the added benefit of housing resources for families, spouses, and partners in a central location. Websites can either be fully open to the public, completely password-protected for members only, or a hybrid of the two. Public webpages are a great option to house resources available to anyone—group members or the general public. Password protected websites or portions of them allow for increased privacy, including more secure forums and discussion boards. Like social media–based groups, website-based online support groups face challenges in maintaining regular engagement but may find members-only forums to be a solution.

Case Study: Las Vegas Metro Police Officer Wives

The Las Vegas Metro Police Officer Wives group was formed in 2009 to support the wives of Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) and corrections officers. The group's mission is to create "a safe haven for companionship, support, encouragement, and all organizational information."* With a membership of more than 1,000 members, the group developed a standalone website to engage members and to house information, www.lvmpowives.com. Following an uptick in critical incidents both in and around the LVMPD, group members expressed concern about privacy and security. The group created a dedicated members-only forum behind a member sign-in wall on their website. While most group members still use popular social media platforms, the group recognizes the need for dedicated safe and private online forums for members to engage.

The group operates independently from the local agency. This allows them autonomy to create fundraising events or contribute other resources to members separate from the department. The group founder, Deborah Costello, believes this autonomy lends credibility and legitimacy to the group. Officers and companions are free to participate with their peers outside of the workplace. She says the group's engagement with the agency can be summed up as "an alliance together to support officers."

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* "Official Website of the Las Vegas Metro Police Officer Wives," accessed August 19, 2019, http://www.lvmpowives.com/.

In-person meetings

In-person meetings benefit families by strengthening bonds, allowing relationships to grow. This format allows for deeper, more structured discussions in real time. Groups may find it easier to facilitate outings or events if they already routinely meet in person. In-person meetings do naturally limit the geographic reach of the group and require more logistical planning. Identifying a meeting space may present a challenge as well. Some groups reserve a room in a local community center or library. Consider asking your officers' agency if it has space to host the group periodically. Other alternatives include meeting in a park, in an individual's home, or in a coffee shop. Further, child care concerns may influence attendance, but some groups have successfully set up onsite child care by working with volunteers or hiring young adults.

Typically, groups find the most success by engaging the group in both formats, online and in-person. Having in-person meetings and an online platform for group engagement allows groups to meet the needs of the most members.

Creating a Welcoming Environment

Once the decision to start a law enforcement family support group has been made, it is important to think about other key considerations. Specific considerations include providing privacy and security—both online and in person—messaging to potential new members, engaging with key stakeholders, education and resources, and hosting events.

Privacy and security

Safety and security are important factors to be aware of when engaging with a family support group online. While websites and social media platforms have taken on more advanced security measures, individuals must be aware of basic online safety. Do not post sensitive information online, such as social security numbers or addresses, even on a password-protected website or social media group. These groups are still susceptible to unauthorized access. Remind group participants not to provide passwords to anyone, to change passwords routinely, and to make passwords complex but easy to remember. These are simple measures of safety and precaution group members should practice.

Privacy is a crucial factor for many families dealing with common law enforcement stressors. Having family and officers easily identifiable to the general public is a common concern identified by officers and families. Members need to feel safe in order to meaningfully participate in the group. Take steps to shield the group from the public eye if that is a concern of members. Scrutinize social media settings closely to ensure the group's privacy settings are secure, and that unintended individuals do not have access to the group.

Online Social Media Platforms and Group Security

The need for privacy online is important when creating a family support group on social media platforms. There are generally three different types of privacy settings for online groups: public, closed, and secret.

	Public	Closed	Secret
Nonmembers can find the group in a search	✓	✓	✗
Nonmembers can see a list of current members	✓	✗	✗
Anyone on the internet can see group posts	✓	✗	✗
Nonmembers can request to join	✓	✓ approved by administrator	✗ invitation only
Social media "friends" may receive notifications about group activity	✓	✓ may only be notified about joining the group, not about engagement	✗

Messaging to potential members

Sometimes support groups can carry a stigma, such as being focused on gossip or perceived weakness for needing support, which may impact the engagement or number of members. This perception can be detrimental to the success of a group if not addressed. When creating the group's mission, vision, and outreach plan consider developing language to articulate the need for the group and what the group can contribute to the agency culture, the family, and officer safety. Having a plan and a purpose for events and meetings lends credibility to the group. Gather testimonials from members who find value. These testimonials can be used to show potential new members or stakeholders the value of the group to its members. Consider engaging other agency personnel if it supports the mission of the group. All of this context builds the value and credibility of the group.

Engaging with key stakeholders

One method of building group credibility with families and officers is by getting command staff buy-in from the law enforcement agency. Other stakeholders may include agency psychologists, chaplains, employee assistance program (EAP) representatives, academy instructors, human resources, wellness officers, fitness instructors, and other individuals already involved in officer safety and wellness efforts. Buy-in from these types of individuals does not always require an agency-wide memo or proclamation. Small signs of support, such as allowing the group to post a flyer about an upcoming event, can be more beneficial as they imply an acknowledgment of the group. Ask if these individuals will allow the group to post a flyer of information about group meetings or upcoming events in an office or public space, and if appropriate, ask them to share as they see fit with other officers or families they encounter. Make sure to provide these departments or individuals with updated group contact information and materials regularly.

Education and resources

Family or companion support groups are also an ideal platform for sharing resources from law enforcement organizations, academic institutions, or other sources. Resources could be informational pamphlets, scholarship opportunities for children of law enforcement, or a relevant book. Beyond sharing materials, consider bringing in, attending, or viewing online a speaker or panel discussion on a relevant topic as a group. Follow up with a focused group discussion. Using the support group platform to provide education to families, spouses, or partners increases the value of the group and will likely lead to increased participation.

Hosting events

Hosting a variety of events is an opportunity to engage potential new members as well as current members and their families. Groups considering hosting events should ensure they align with the dedicated mission and vision of the group. Events may have a variety of settings and purposes. A more laid back and fun event could be a family picnic day. Inviting officers, their partners or spouses, their loved ones, and their children for a fun day helps people get to know one another and create bonds. The family support group may also choose to host educational events for families such as a health fair. Hosting a fundraiser may benefit specific goals of the group. Be sure to advertise widely and state what purpose the funds will serve. Whatever the event, ensure inclusivity is a priority with targeted outreach efforts and an open invitation to all officers and their families.

Event Ideas

Here are some event ideas to consider:

- Bike rodeo
- Community service day
- Cooking class
- Family game night
- Family movie night
- Family picnic day in the park
- Financial planning seminar or panel
- Firearm safety training
- Fundraising carwash
- Health fair
- Infant, child, and adult CPR

Communication

Decide how information about the group will be distributed both at the start of a new group and as new officers and their families join the agency. Will information be passed through officers or are there other ways to contact families directly? Be sure to present the option of the group as a resource rather than pressure families to join. Some groups find success in sending information through the agency email system. Other groups rely on word of mouth or even agency psychological services to share the group information. Regardless of the communication method, establish a comprehensive outreach plan for the group and be prepared to refine it as necessary.

Consider a private, offline form of communication, such as phone trees or texting chains, with other families of officers to use in a critical incident, natural disaster, or other emergency. Having an agreed-upon communication plan when dealing with such events can help ease fear and concern as well as share agency-verified and -approved information with families of officers.

Case Study: Huntington Beach Police Department—Support for Officers' Spouses (S.O.S.)

The Huntington Beach (California) Police Department (HBPD) Support for Officers' Spouses (S.O.S.) was founded by veteran police spouses Linda Seitz and Kirsten Knorr. The women saw a need to start their own spousal support group after learning that spousal support groups did not exist throughout Los Angeles and Orange counties in California.

The HBPD S.O.S. group continues "to create and maintain an organized peer group that provides support for families of Huntington Beach Police Officers."* Linda and Kirsten strive to foster a system of support, no matter what families and the officers face.

The spouses in the group gather, share information, empathize with one another, and post helpful and educational articles through a private social media page, email, and monthly meetings. These various avenues of communication allow for trusting and safe conversations for spouses who need support. In addition to monthly meetings and discussions, the HBPD S.O.S. also supports police-sponsored service projects, first responders, trauma support teams, management, and police chaplains to demonstrate the passion the group has for the department.

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The group receives funding and support from a local nonprofit, the Huntington Beach Community Foundation. This foundation allocates funds to the group, allowing them to hold routine meetings, receive training, attend speaking engagements, and supply postage for member resources. In additional to financial support, the group receives support from the chief's office to distribute wellness packages to new recruits that contain an information packet about the support group. The Trauma Support Team and department psychologist also promote the group to officers.

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* Kirsten Knorr, "10 Steps to Building Your Department's Spouse Support Group," IACP, last modified March 22, 2018, https://www.theiacp.org/news/blog-post/10-steps-to-building-your-departments-spouse-support-group.

Budget

While creating and maintaining a family support group can be done for little to no cost, there are financial decisions that should be considered. First, understand what expenses the group anticipates. Things to consider include the cost to rent a facility, either to host regular meetings or special events. Consider places you could get a room for free—a local library, a faith institution, or the police department. If the group intends to have a standalone website, it is likely there will be costs associated with hosting and creating that. Printed materials can help increase participation in the form of advertising the group, publicizing events, or other resources. Printing costs will vary based on the level of professional design and printing desired. Many materials can be created for little to no cost with simple word processing software and a home printer. Posting online is another option. Other budget considerations include the cost of provided child care or any food, drinks, or incentives for events. Consider if a company or vendor will provide in-kind donations for items or if donations will be collected.

Once anticipated expenses are identified, consider potential funding sources. Sources of funds or financial support may include the local law enforcement agency, police foundation, or community police academy alumni association. Engage with agency leadership about the possibility of support funds for the group. Be prepared to discuss the value the group brings to the agency, the officers, and the families, as well as specifics about how the funds will be used. Funds should be itemized by anticipated expenses rather than asking for a general pool of money to draw from. Other funds could come from fundraising events. While general fundraisers may be helpful, hosting fundraising events for a specific need typically proves most successful. Having a dedicated group treasurer can help ensure the leader is not overwhelmed with all aspects of running and managing the group as well as tracking funds.

Conclusion

Not all law enforcement family support groups will look the same, provide support in the same format, or have the same budget, but getting started is the first step. The group will evolve over time as the needs of the members change. Being committed to families and partners of law enforcement officers is crucial and providing that support in varying formats allows for increased engagement. The safety and wellness of law enforcement officers and their supportive families and partners is critical. A law enforcement family support group is one mechanism for supporting those who support law enforcement.

IACP Resources

The IACP has information and resources for individuals to learn more about the benefits and challenges faced by law enforcement family members. Visit the IACP's Law Enforcement Family Resource page at https://www.theiacp.org/ICPRlawenforcementfamily for an infographic series, blog posts, and other family and spousal support resources.

Appendix. Key Considerations for Starting a Law Enforcement Family Support Group

Use this worksheet to help map out your law enforcement family support group.

Laying a strong foundation

1. **The group's mission statement:**

_____

_____

_____

2. **The group's vision statement:**

_____

_____

_____

3. **The group's primary audience:**

_____

Group formats

1. What format will the group convene through?

☐ Online social media group

☐ Online standalone website

☐ In-person meetings

☐ Hybrid of online and in-person

☐ Other: _____

a. Online social media group

- Privacy settings matter; ensure settings are only allowing intended members to access and view the group.
- Social media groups take little funding or effort to set up.
- Establish posting guidelines all members should have access to and abide by.

i. What privacy precautions have been taken for the group?

_____

_____

_____

ii. What posting guidelines will be established?

_____

_____

_____

iii. Who will be the primary moderator or administrator of the group?

_____

_____

_____

b. Online standalone website

- Consider if the standalone website will have password protected, members-only portions or be entirely public facing.

- Establish the process of website development and any funding needed to complete.

- Online safety and security should be practiced even more vigilantly on standalone sites but can be more conducive to a sense of privacy within forums and discussions.

  i. Will the website be

     ☐ public;

     ☐ password-protected, members-only;

     ☐ hybrid, with portions being members-only?

  ii. What online privacy and security measures will be taken to protect the group's website?

  _____

  _____

  _____

  iii. How will the website be created and funded?

  _____

  _____

  _____

  iv. Who will maintain the site?

  _____

  _____

  _____

c. In-person meetings

- In-person meetings allow for more in-depth discussions and relationship building.
- Consider where these meetings might be held; library, department room, coffee shop, etc.
- In-person meetings may present scheduling or child care challenges for some. Be creative and flexible to meet the needs of most members.
    i. Brainstorm where the group will meet and several backup options.

    _____

    _____

    _____

d. Hybrid of online and in-person

- Still consider the previous recommendations for each group format and how they apply to this hybrid model.

Creating a welcoming environment

- Group security should be carefully considered to fit the needs of the group.
- Messaging the group's purpose, mission, and vision statements will lend credibility to the group.
- Engage with agency and community stakeholders to further credibility and gain valuable insight and resources.
    - Law enforcement family support groups are an ideal platform for discussion, education, and resource sharing across families.
    - Align all events to the group's mission and vision. Events can serve many purposes such as educational, fundraising, or engagement.

1. Identify key stakeholders to engage with and the potential benefit of each.

_____

_____

_____

2. Brainstorm several types of events the group might consider hosting.

_____

_____

_____

Communication

- Develop an outreach plan to communicate about the group generally or for specific upcoming events to increase engagement.
- Consider having a secure communication plan in the event of a critical incident.

1. Outline a communication and outreach plan for the group below.

_____

_____

_____

2. Does the group need a secure communication plan in the event of a critical incident? If so, detail it below.

_____

_____

_____

Budget

- Consider anticipated group expenses, including the value added of each expense.
- Identify potential funding sources from the law enforcement agency, local police foundation, or other funder.

1. Describe anticipated expenses and how they contribute to the overall success of the group.

_____

_____

_____

2. Brainstorm potential funding sources.

_____

_____

_____

About the IACP

The **International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)** is the world's largest and most influential professional association for police leaders. With more than 30,000 members in 150 countries, the IACP is a recognized leader in global policing. Since 1893, the association has been speaking out on behalf of law enforcement and advancing leadership and professionalism in policing worldwide.

The IACP is known for its commitment to shaping the future of the police profession. Through timely research, programming, and unparalleled training opportunities, the IACP is preparing current and emerging police leaders—and the agencies and communities they serve—to succeed in addressing the most pressing issues, threats, and challenges of the day.

The IACP is a not-for-profit 501c(3) organization headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia. The IACP is the publisher of *The Police Chief* magazine, the leading periodical for law enforcement executives, and host of the IACP annual conference, the largest police educational and technology exposition in the world. IACP membership is open to law enforcement professionals of all ranks, as well as non-sworn leaders across the criminal justice system. Learn more about the IACP at www.theIACP.org.

About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than $14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 130,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.

- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office–funded training organizations.

- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.

- The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, round tables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement.

COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, www.cops.usdoj.gov. This website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.

A crucial element of law enforcement mental health and wellness is officers' and deputies' ability to rely on their families for support. Those family members need care and support in turn, and other law enforcement families are among the best equipped to provide it. In this publication, the International Association of Chiefs of Police discusses the need for family support groups and some important things to consider when establishing one.

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To obtain details about COPS Office programs, call the COPS Office Response Center at 800-421-6770.

Visit the COPS Office online at **www.cops.usdoj.gov**.

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