

Creating an Online Support Group: Digitally Connecting Officer Families



Families play a vital role in the resiliency and well-being of their officers, and those family members require their own support to cope with the challenges of the profession. Online support groups can offer an accessible and cost-effective approach for agencies looking to support the partners, children, parents, relatives, and friends that officers rely on throughout their career.

Connecting and Engaging Family Members through Online Platforms

Online support groups can be created by family members, agency personnel, or through a collaborative effort. These groups can be hosted through private channels on established social media sites or dedicated secure website forums. **Social media sites** are easily accessible at no cost. They offer group and private chat features to facilitate communication between members. **Dedicated group websites** are more customizable and have various options for communication and sharing documents or resources with group members, but they may require set up and maintenance expenses. Find the platform that best meets the needs of your group. Consider hosting a focus group or conducting a survey with officers and family members to learn about what features and resources they would find useful in an online group platform.

Take time to **identify stakeholders** that will help build and potentially fund your group. Stakeholders can exist both inside and outside the agency. They may include agency leadership and command staff members, peer support group team members, or groups in neighboring agencies with a similar mission. Establish stakeholder expectations on privacy. Consider limiting access to private discussion forums for external funders or other positions that may impede trust of group members. Identify roles for stakeholders that support an environment of trust without compromising privacy for members.

An online group will **require marketing strategies** to bring awareness to the group. Consider working with the department to advertise in a newsletter or hang flyers in a common space shared by officers such as a kitchen or breakroom. Identify events with multiple family members in attendance such as academies, open houses, or award ceremonies to talk about the group and explain how to join.

Building the Foundation for Your Online Group

It is important to establish a purpose or mission for the online support group in its early stages. This will guide the activities of the group, accessibility, and the benefits for members.

- **Purpose:** Identify a vision or clear purpose of the group and the type of content that will be shared. This can change based on the needs of members and how the group evolves over time. Will it be educational or social? Or both?
- **Audience:** While many support groups are dedicated to spouses and partners, an online group means greater accessibility. Consider opening the group to parents, siblings, and children of officers, as well as creating dedicated spaces for these individuals within the group since each play a different role in an officers' life.
- **Content:** Clearly identify moderators of the page, group policies, and consequences for violating those policies. Establish a plan for monitoring content. Will it have to be approved by a moderator before publishing?





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Privacy and Security

Taking steps to ensure group security and privacy of the members will foster trust and greater group participation. Consider the following when creating your group:

- Mark the group visibility as 'private' or 'secret' on its respective platform to control access.
- Create a membership verification or screener question for individuals who wish to join.
- Ask group members to review and agree to the rules and confidentiality expectations prior to gaining access.
- Clearly identify policies on what can be shared or posted in the group.
- Require a password to access forums on discussion boards (depending on the platform used to host the group).

Virtual Engagement and Going Beyond the Discussion Boards

While some online groups are successful with basic posts and commenting, there are many opportunities to engage group members in ways that will allow them to connect on a more meaningful level:

- Virtual 'Get to Know You' Events allow partners, spouses, and family members with similar careers and interests to meet. While being a law enforcement family member is an integral part of a member's life, there are many other components to his/her identities. Coordinate virtual meet and greet opportunities alongside other planned events or set up informal video breakout sessions with family members based on shared interests.
- Educational webinars can provide valuable information and resources to family members with special considerations on how policing may impact their lives. Topics may include internet safety, financial planning, family wellness and resiliency, parenting, or communication strategies.
- Events are not necessarily limited to adult family members. Schedule time for a video call and host a virtual talent show or "show and tell" for officers' children.

- Online activities let group members step away from the everyday discussion boards to collectively experience something new. Get creative with opportunities and encourage group members to share their own ideas.
 - Host an online cooking class.
 - Participate in a virtual museum tour.
 - Create a tournament for an online board game night or host a recipe swap or book club.
 - Schedule 'Policing 101' webinars for family members to learn about various topics in policing such as the role of a K-9 or the different ranks in the department and their duties.

Supplementing the Online Support Group

While a social media page or website provide great structure for an online support group, consider looking for additional ways to connect with family members.

- Digital newsletters provide space to showcase group members, upcoming events, reminders, and gather ideas or feedback.
- Weekly or monthly video calls can help members connect face-to-face despite physical distance.
- Special in-person events such as annual awards or dinners.

Resources

- I. IACP's [Officer Safety and Wellness Page](#)
- II. [How to Start a Law Enforcement Family Support Group: Insights and Considerations](#)
- III. IACP's Policy Resource Center Guidelines on [Social Media](#)



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