

# Developing an Agency Family Support Group

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## **Abstract**

*Law enforcement in general is loaded with external and internal stressors that have a multitude of effects on an officer throughout their career. The effects can be felt by not only the officer but, their agencies, citizens, and their family. In recent years mental health issues have become less of a stigma and many agencies are seeking options to assist their officers stay healthy. Law Enforcement Officers, Corrections, and Spouses of both were surveyed for this research. Striking early in an officer's career while involving their family and educating them on both career and home stressors, could be a life-or-death difference. A supportive Command Staff and family can create an environment and culture to combat mental health and keep our officers healthy.*

## **Introduction**

In the more recent years of law enforcement, it is becoming less stigmatized to accept the mental health issues that occur in the law enforcement career field. In the past and still today a common denominator in speaking out or seeking assistance within the profession is the image and stigma attached to law enforcement. Law enforcement officers are tough and brave; asking for help would mean they are weak or possibly incapable of doing their job protecting others. Unlike most people who might see or experience one or maybe two traumatic events in a lifetime, Law Enforcement Officers (LEO) will experience multiple violent events or years of responding to harmful situations with unpredictable individuals. The daily response to horrific car accidents, deaths of all ages, natural, suicides, or homicides, and simple calls for service of all forms of violence and disregard of others, all take a toll on the officers over their years of service. As suicide rates rise when it comes to in the line of duty deaths, agencies recognize the need to take care of their own law enforcement officers, utilizing Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), and counseling.

Most agencies put new candidates through a thorough vetting process to select the best physically and mentally prepared individuals. The candidates have most often attended close to a yearlong academy learning the basics of how to be a cop, enforce laws, protect the rights of the citizens, and make split-second decisions on how much force they can or cannot use. Once hired, candidates are exposed to months of inhouse training, policy and procedures, ethics, use of force, active shooter and approximately 16 weeks of hands-on field training with an experienced Field Training Officer (FTO). Countless resources are utilized to ensure the best training is provided to produce an ethical, knowledgeable, proficient law enforcement officer who is sent out into the community to represent the agencies' and serve the community.

Most agencies don't address how the new law enforcement officer who has spent over a year of training to fight crime and change the world, will soon be changed by that

same world. During processing, it might be mentioned that EAP is available but, most new officers don't realize how they are about to change. When regularly exposed to severe injury, death, lies, violence, and the daily imminent danger on any one of the multiple calls for service during their shift most officers new and old don't realize how their personality will change their response to citizens and their loved ones. The trauma faced is cumulative and can affect both their physical and mental well-being at work and home.

Opening the new officers' eyes to the signs and symptoms of not only a single traumatic event but, what to expect after experiencing any number of traumatic events and the options they have for reaching out for help. Leadership within agencies should ensure that all officers are aware of these signs and symptoms and the families of those sworn to protect and serve. Families are affected when these changes occur and will most often see or be the first ones to reach out for help. In addition, LEO families face unique challenges brought on by the job itself, both internal and external all of which create stress and weigh heavily on both the officer and family.

Family Support Groups (FSG) can have a significant impact on the health and wellness of the officers but, only if resources are created and provided to understand the challenges in managing the ups and downs of the law enforcement career. FSGs can be presented in several formats or a combination of what works the best to reach the majority. Providing resources and educating loved ones by utilizing an informal discussion can create a safe and welcoming space for new and existing families to reach out and address issues, fears and ask general questions building trust amongst each other. Tenured loved ones who have most likely experienced personality changes and career challenges will be instrumental in a successful FSG. Lastly, communication and leadership buy-in is needed to ensure the officer and family have trust and faith that reaching out for help will not hinder their career but protect the health and well-being of the LEO Family.

What causes stress in the career of law enforcement? How can we address internal and external causes of stress? What changes will an LEO experience or exhibit at work or home? Can a Family Support Group be beneficial to the officer and agency? How do we implement a Family Support Group to provide resources and mental health support? These are the questions this study seeks to answer.

## **Literature Review**

### **Stress and its Origins**

Stress whether wanted or not is a part of the law enforcement field, from the academy, field training and throughout the remainder of most law enforcement officers' careers. Stress comes in all forms and from every direction. "Make no mistake about it. Stress is deadly. The average cop is much more likely to die from stress than from bullets, car accidents, or other headline grabbers." (Davis, 2018). Several factors have an impact on the stress an officer will deal with throughout their career. Internal department stressors from toxic supervisors, long alternating shifts and changing work hours, and bureaucracy. Many officers must work extra off-duty jobs to supplement low pay to make ends meet, thus taking away more time from their loved ones. Alternating shifts, working

weekends, training, missing holidays, and special family events are all part of the uncontrollable schedule of an officer. These stressors affect the officer and their loved ones at home, often; not understanding why their loved one can't be with the family. Many "families are left comparing their family to that of others." (Healey, 2019). First responder families are unique in the fact that just because it's the end of their shift, late calls and covering shift shortages tend to keep them at work.

Not only can the internal stressors be cumulative but, it's almost a guarantee the external stressors of the job will be. Where all jobs have some level of stress law enforcement officers will have a cumulative number of stressors over their years of service. Many of the stressors are experienced during an officer's daily shift, like domestic violence, child abuse, deaths to include natural or homicides. Some job-related stressors can be more traumatic than others, for instance, a deadly vehicle incident, child death, natural disaster, terrorist attacks, officer-involved shooting and the injury or death of another officer. Where there are more spread out over a career it will add to the cumulative effect of stress. Even when these threats are not occurring an officer must worry about the probability of violence from the daily calls for service. In today's world, law enforcement is facing a newer stressor perpetrated by the media, department, and public scrutiny, and cameras being used by everyone to record their interaction, waiting to catch that next high-profile case or so-called injustice. Society in general, is more hostile and threatening toward law enforcement than in days past, and the effects are being seen nationwide. "A June survey of nearly 200 departments by Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), a nonprofit think tank, shows a startling 45% increase in the retirement rate and a nearly 20% increase in resignations in 2021-21 compared to the previous year." (Westervelt, 2021).

When off-duty at home other stressors can come from loved ones who don't fully understand the ins and outs of law enforcement duties. They might know you work a 10- or 12-hour shift and expect you to be home at the end of your shift. Most loved ones don't understand that law enforcement is facing new dilemmas with mass retirements and shortages in the ranks, thus filtering down to the rank and file to ensure coverages are met. These issues cause stress both on the job and at home giving most officers no outs, "The disruptive effects of irregular work schedules on family centered activities, school delinquency, and adjustment problems among children are a heavy price paid by the police family." (Huda, 2003). Stress from home can come from what seems simple and understanding from an officer's standpoint, like not answering the phone or returning a text. Most significant others don't know that you are on a call and can't stop the daily grind to answer a phone call. On top of missing birthdays, holidays, working extra duty or working weekends while the kids are out of school, this leaves most of the household duties to one parent and they often get overwhelmed feeling alone, causing more stress in what should be considered a safe place, home (Miller, 2006).

## **Signs and Symptoms**

After working in law enforcement accumulating multiple types of stress, officers become cynical, guarded, and less trusting of everyone, often turning everyday conversations with family into an interrogation. Some of the signs and symptoms could come as Acute Stress Disorder (ASD) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). ASD

would be an immediate effect of a traumatic event. At the same time, PTSD is the multi-symptom, cumulative on-going response to one or cumulative traumas an individual has been exposed to during their career. The effects of either can be triggered by sights, sounds or even smells causing the officer to relive the incident over again (Javanbakht, 2020).

Some of the acute symptoms could be the feeling of detachment, restlessness, and hyper-vigilance. Several of the signs and symptoms will intertwine and could be related to PTSD and a combination of multiple issues. "PTSD changes the way the brain works, often causing anger issues, degraded ability to make good decisions, sleep disruption, relationship problems, and prompting self-medication." (Marmar & Saxe, 2020). Other stress related issues include depression, anxiety, paranoia, fear, anger, and sleep disorders including insomnia and nightmares. Chronic sleep disorders and diet can contribute to poor physical health and decreasing energy and cloudy thinking. Often overlooked is the abuse of over the counter, prescription drugs and alcohol most of which are legal but can increase from being exposed to stress and felt to numb the issues suffered. (Sipes, 2019)

Many of the signs and symptoms can be recognized by the officer, family members and peers. Having a system in place from the start of an officer's career and within an agency without judgment from the leadership benefits both the officer and agency. Reaching out to an officer before they are at rock bottom may not only save their job and family but could save their life. (Sadulski, 2017)

## **Developing and Benefits of a Support Group**

Support groups exist for everything you can think of and offer most attendees the opportunities to share experiences and support others who are experiencing similar challenges. Law enforcement officers are a little different than the average person experiencing a problem regardless of what it might be. Most law enforcement officers feel admitting any issue, primarily when revolving around mental health would be a sign of weakness. It was thought to be a career-ending statement in most agencies if an officer tried reaching out for help regarding any form of emotional or mental support. Luckily, many agencies realize officers need to be supported and care after the fact is often required for recovery or simply moving forward after a critical incident. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) is often used during or after a critical incident to accelerate healing and assess the need for additional services. CISM is usually a structured group of trained individuals and the individuals involved in the critical incident. CISM briefings often offer an open forum for everyone to speak regarding the incident and physical or psychological symptoms steaming from the trauma they experienced. Some may discuss their coping techniques based on experience and others can give information regarding multiple strategies for managing stress. When recognized that further services are needed the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can be utilized for clinical evaluations to aid in recovery and provide resources to move forward. (USDOJ, 2019)

Peer and Family Support Groups help officers realize they are not alone, and many others have the same issues. "This realization usually brings about a feeling of relief". (Susman n.d.). The monetary cost of developing a support group is less costly than most other options, often using agency personnel, family members or volunteered specialist to

provide guidance and support. Support Groups can be critical to the health and wellness of the officer as well as their family. They face unique challenges as a law enforcement family, from changing schedules, missed family events, holidays and the fear of injury or death. Many families have lived these experiences and hardships over and over but, those experiences can benefit others through communication and support. This is especially beneficial to newly hired officers and their families and goes a long way with members of an agency unsure if they will have support during or after a critical incident. (Susman, n.d.)

When creating a peer or family support group key elements must be considered. First, the group can be in person or online and provide education and support on anything from financial services to stress management dependent on their goals. Second, utilize a facilitator to ensure the group stays on track giving those participating a chance to speak or be active while keeping the group focused in a, productive direction “Consider creating a mission and vision statement to guide the group as it grows”. (USDOJ, 2019). Groups must provide a safe, trusting, and supportive environment for those being open about their experiences. Buy-in from the agency administration is a must and both the officer and families need to feel safe, welcomed, and trusting of the group purpose. (USDOJ, 2019)

Many law enforcement organizations provide pamphlets and resources that can benefit law enforcement families; these items can be shared by support groups increasing the value of the group to those attending. Additionally, support groups ease the emotional burden of stress through sharing skills learned through the experience of their members. (USDOJ, 2019)

As filling the ranks in law enforcement become increasingly complex, agency leaders need to ensure they do everything to take care of their officers and families. “Building stronger and more resilient families leads to stronger and more resilient officers who feel supported both at work and at home”. (Kirschman, 2021). Helping the officers and their families deal with the stressors that come with the law enforcement career, keeps those officers safer, in better health, enabling them to better serve their agencies and communities. (Kirschman, 2021)

## **Methods**

The purpose of this research was to identify any correlation between a law enforcement officers’ stressors on the job and at home, identifying contributing factors to both stressors, benefits, and interest in creating and participating in a Family Support Group.

Data was gathered through surveys distributed utilizing Survey Monkey, to both sworn law enforcement, and corrections, with the Santa Rosa County Sheriff’s Office (SRSO), Okaloosa County Sheriff’s Office (OCSO), and Walton County Sheriff’s Office (WCSO) in Florida. Also surveyed were participating spouses of the Santa Rosa County Sheriff’s Office. Survey questions were designed to determine the officers’ years of service, knowledge of available programs, specific on-the-job and home stressors.

Information was asked regarding if the officer felt like they have suffered from mental conditions such as Anxiety, Depression, hypervigilance, or any other condition

due to stress they have identified, past or present; If so, could they identify if it was due to a single incident, accumulative over time, work stressor, home stressor or a combination of both. Questions were asked regarding the benefits of a Family Support Program involving both deputy and family being beneficial. This includes addressing areas such as financial management, types of stressors and changes due to stress within an officer's first years of service and would this program be beneficial as a preventive or educating measure to newer officers and their families.

The Survey was anonymous to encourage truthful answers and a greater response. The data's only weakness is based on the respondent's candor regarding mental health questions and attached stigma in the field of law enforcement, despite assurances of anonymity and confidentiality of the questionnaire.

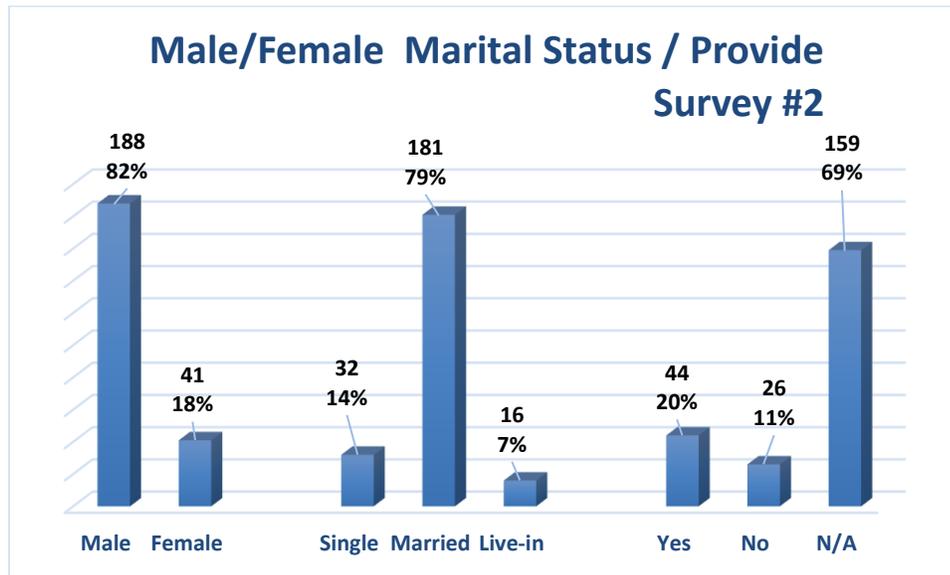
## **Results**

The 1<sup>st</sup> survey was sent to 1128 sworn law enforcement and corrections employed at Santa Rosa County Sheriff's Office, Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office, and Walton County Sheriff's Office. Of the 1128 surveys 229 sworn members responded, for a response rate of 20%. Two surveys were used, the 1<sup>st</sup> for sworn employees and a 2<sup>nd</sup> for a spousal survey provided to Santa Rosa sworn members. Question 3 on the sworn survey was directed to Santa Rosa County only who were married or had a live-in significant other that was not sworn law enforcement or corrections. A total of 44 responded that they would provide the spousal survey link to their significant other of which 14 responded, for a response rate of 31%.

The first 5 questions on the sworn survey were biographical in nature. Question 1 asked the gender of the respondent and question 2 regarded their marital status.

- Q1 - One hundred and eighty-eight respondents (82%) were male and 41 (18%) were female.
- Q2 - Thirty-two (14%) are single and one hundred and eighty-one (79%) are married, and sixteen (7%) have live-in significant others.
- Q3 applied to Santa Rosa only and asked if their significant other were not in a law enforcement field would they provide them the link for survey #2 (Spousal Survey). Survey participants responded with Yes, forty-four (20%), No, twenty-six (11%) , and N/A one hundred fifty-nine (69%).

**TABLE 1: Participant Sex / Marital Status / Provide Survey to Significant Other**



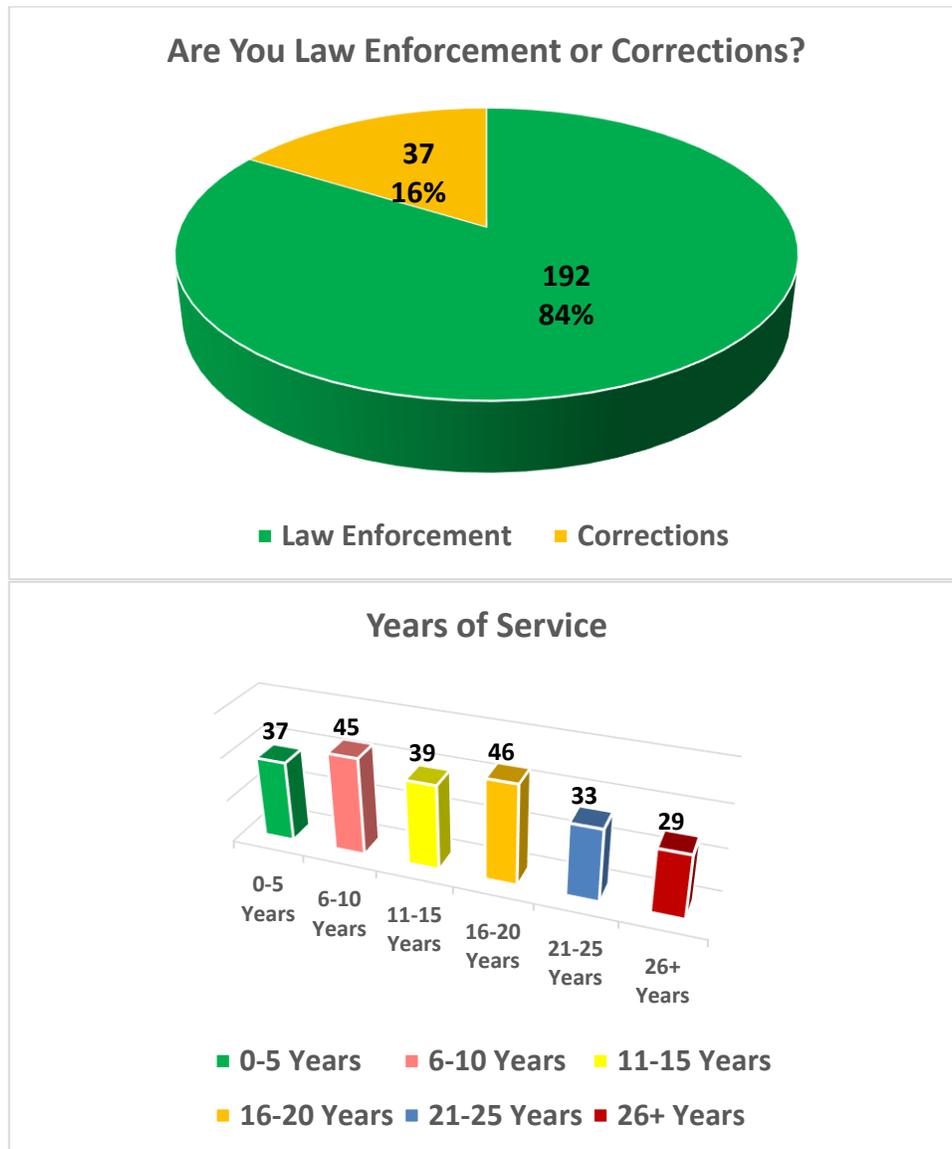
Questions 4 asked the participant if they were sworn law enforcement or corrections.

- Q4 - One hundred and ninety-two (84%) were law enforcement and thirty-seven (16%) were corrections.

Question 5 covered years of service having a minimum range of 0-5 years and maximum of 26+ years as follows:

- 0-5 thirty-seven (16%),
- 6-10 forty-five (20%),
- 11-15 thirty-nine (17%),
- 16-20 forty-six (20%),
- 21-25 thirty-three (14%),
- 26+ twenty-nine (13%).

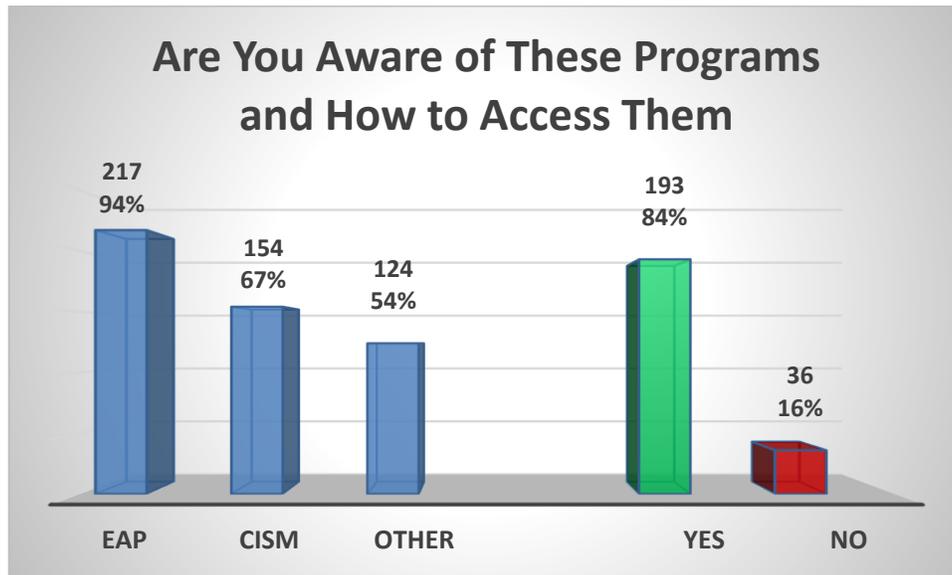
**TABLE 2: Are You Law Enforcement or Corrections / Years of Service.**



Questions 6 and 7 asks the participants if they are aware of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), or other Counseling options and do they know how to access these programs.

- Q6 - Two hundred and seventeen (95%) were aware of EAP,
- One hundred and fifty-four (67%) were aware of CISM,
- One hundred and twenty-four (54%) were aware of other counseling options.
- Q7 - One hundred and ninety-three (84%) knew how to access the programs however,
- Thirty-six (16%) did not know how to access the programs.

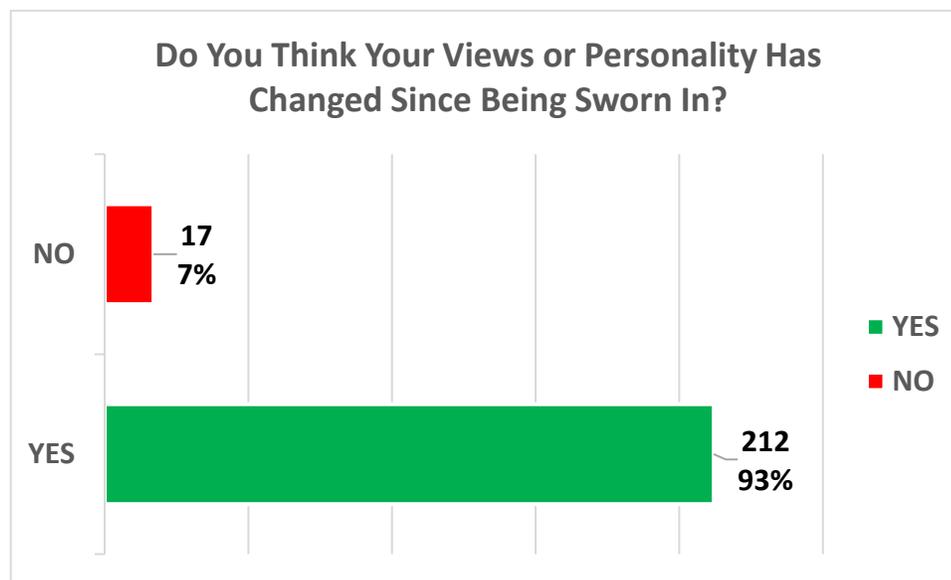
**TABLE 3: Are You Aware of These Services / Do You Know How to Access Them**



Question 8 asked the participants if they felt their views or personalities have changed since being sworn in as law enforcement or corrections.

- Q8 – Yes, Two hundred and twelve (93%),
- No, 17 (7%) answering.

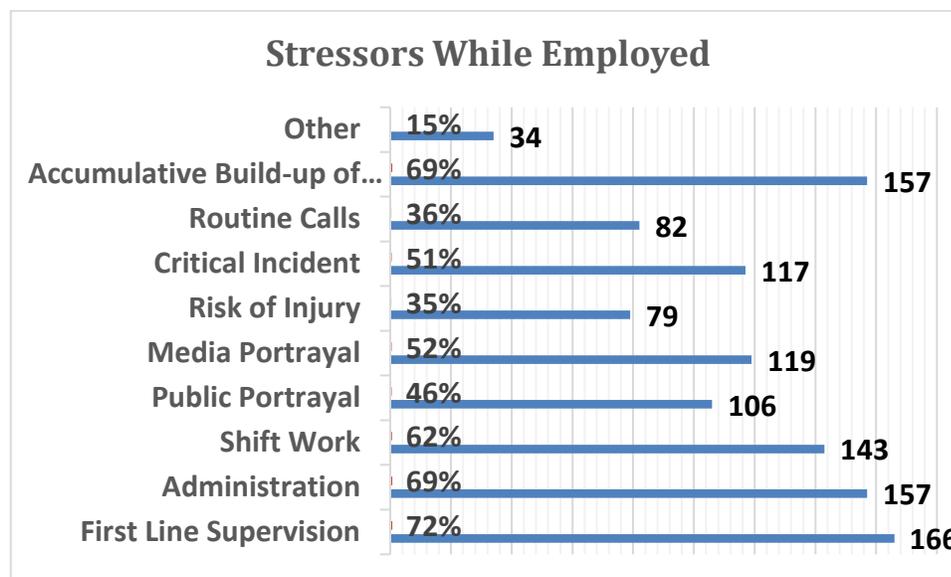
**TABLE 4: Do You Think Your Views or Personality Has Changed Since Being Sworn In**



Question 9 asks the participants to identify stressors while being employed. Multiple stressors could be chosen, the stressor and response were as follows:

- First Line Supervision, one hundred and sixty-six (72%),
- Administration, one hundred and fifty-seven (69%),
- Shift Work, one hundred and forty-three (62%),
- Public Portrayal, one hundred and six (46%),
- Media Portrayal, one hundred and nineteen (52%),
- Risk of Being Injured on the Job, seventy-nine (35%),
- Critical/Violent Incident i.e., OIS, OID, Homicide, Abuse etc., one hundred and seventeen (51%),
- Routine Calls i.e., Death Investigation, Abuse, DV etc., eighty-two (36%),
- Accumulative Buildup of Stressors Over Time, one hundred and fifty-seven (69%),
- other, thirty-four (15%).

**TABLE 5: Stressors While Employed**



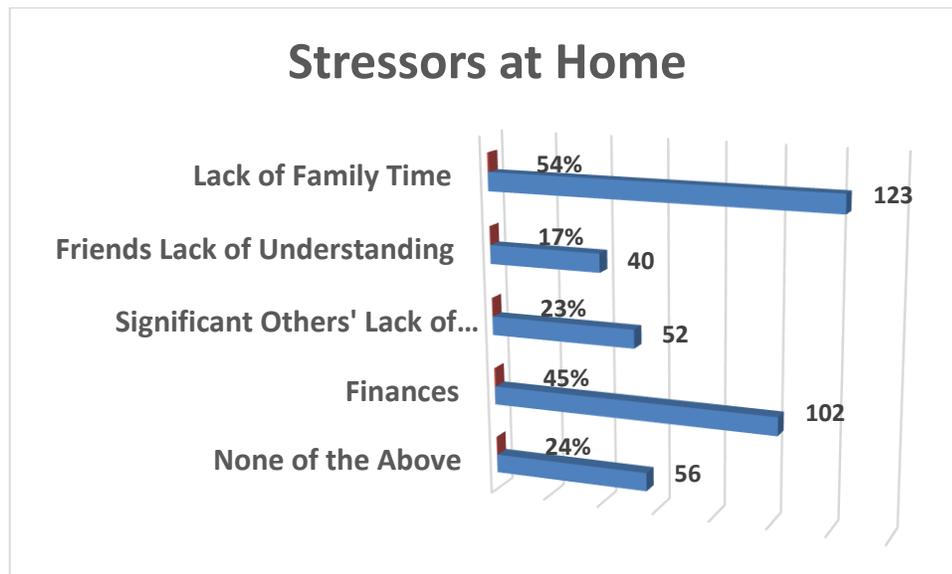
Question 9 allowed for comments of “Other” stressors. Some of the responses outside the listed categories were: thirty-four (15%)

- Retirement,
- On-Call 24/7,
- Overlooked on Promotion,
- Family / Money,
- Continuing Education,
- Understaffed,
- Organizational Inconsistencies.

Question 10 was also related to stressors however, it applied to homelife. Participants responded with:

- None of The Above, fifty-six (24%),
- Finances, one hundred and two (45%),
- Significant Others' Lack of Understanding of Job, fifty-two (23%),
- Friends Lack of Understanding of Job, forty (17%),
- Having Time to Spend with Family, one hundred and twenty-three (54%).

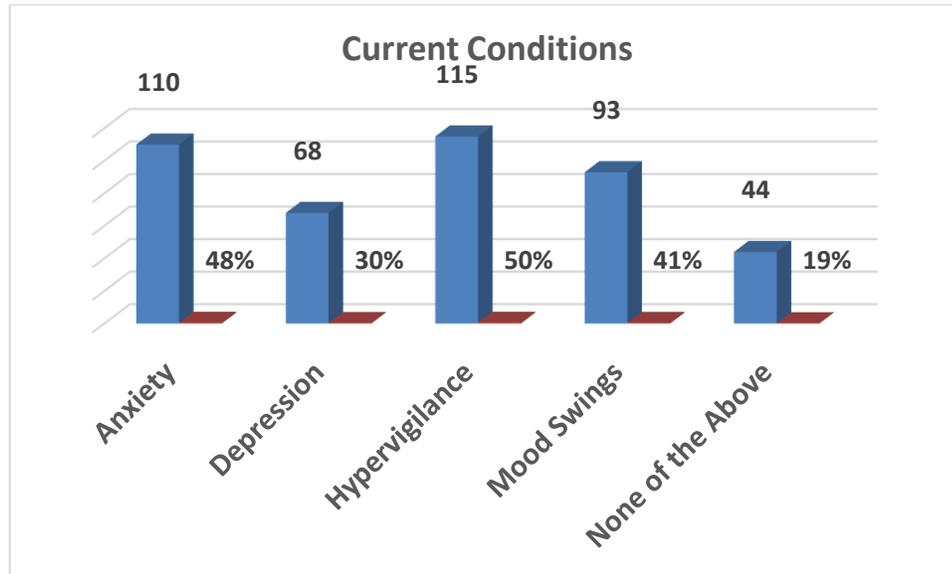
**TABLE 6: Stressors at Home**



Question 11 asked the participant if they were currently suffering from any of the following:

- Anxiety, one hundred and ten (48%),
- Depression, Sixty-eight (30%),
- Hypervigilance, one hundred and fifteen (50%),
- Mood Swings, ninety-three (41%),
- None of the Above, forty-four (19%)

**TABLE 7: Current Conditions**



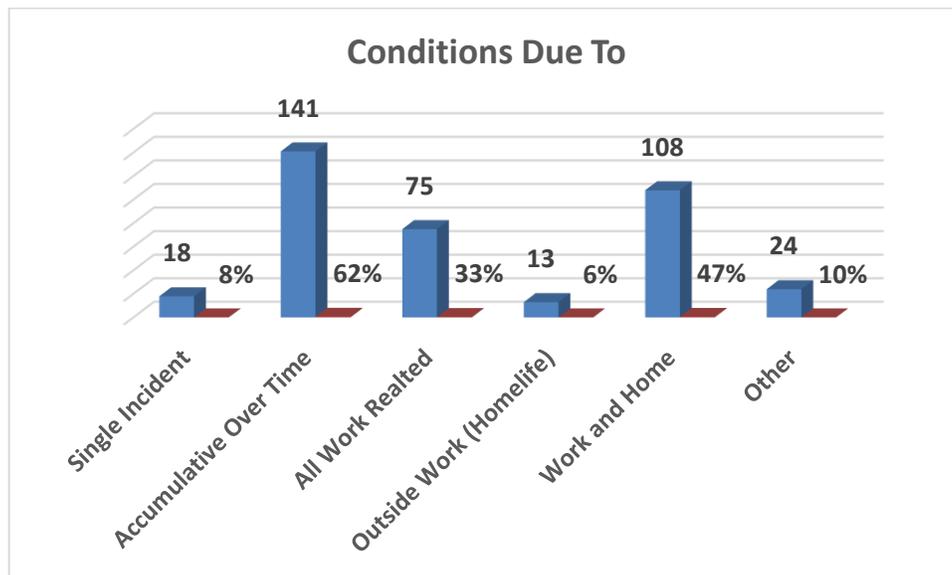
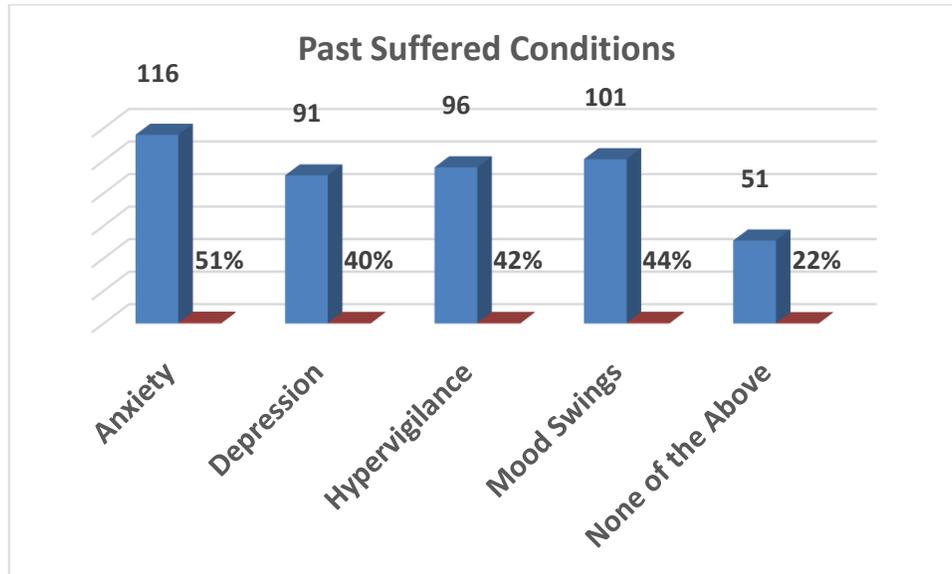
Question 12 asked the participant if they have suffered from any of the following in the past.

- Anxiety, one hundred and sixteen (51%),
- Depression, ninety-one (40%),
- Hypervigilance, ninety-six (42%),
- Mood Swings, one hundred and one (44%),
- None of the Above, fifty-one (22%).

Question 13 referred to Q11 and Q12 regarding, if any of the above choices were selected did the participant believe they were related to any of the following:

- Single Incident, eighteen, (8%),
- Accumulative Incidents Over Time, one hundred and forty-one (62%),
- All Work Related, seventy-five (33%),
- Outside Work (Homelife), thirteen (6%),
- Combination of Work and Home, one hundred and eight (47%),
- Other, twenty-four (10%). Of the "Other" comments 14 were N/A or None, while all others (10) were:
  - homelife,
  - death of spouse or child,
  - poor life choices, and
  - not sure.

**TABLE 8: Past Suffered Conditions and Previous Conditions Due To:**



Question 14 asks if the participants think addressing areas such as financial management, work and home stressors, personality changes, all of which can be early issues after becoming sworn law enforcement, would be beneficial to:

- Sworn Member, thirty-three (14%),
- Family, eight (4%), or
- Both, one hundred and eighty-eight (82%).

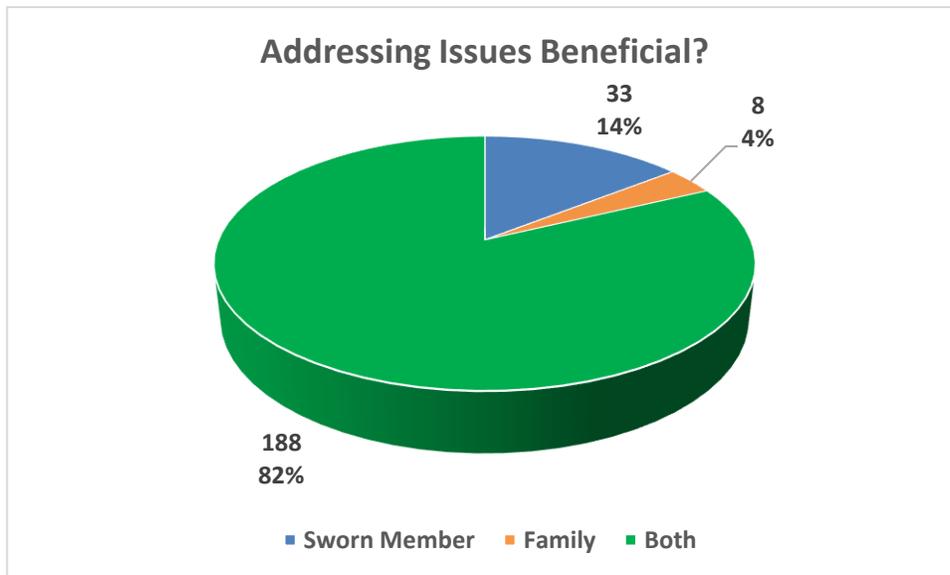
Question 15 asks if a Family Support Group (FSG) was available, what would be the best minimum meeting timeframe. The choices and responses were as follows:

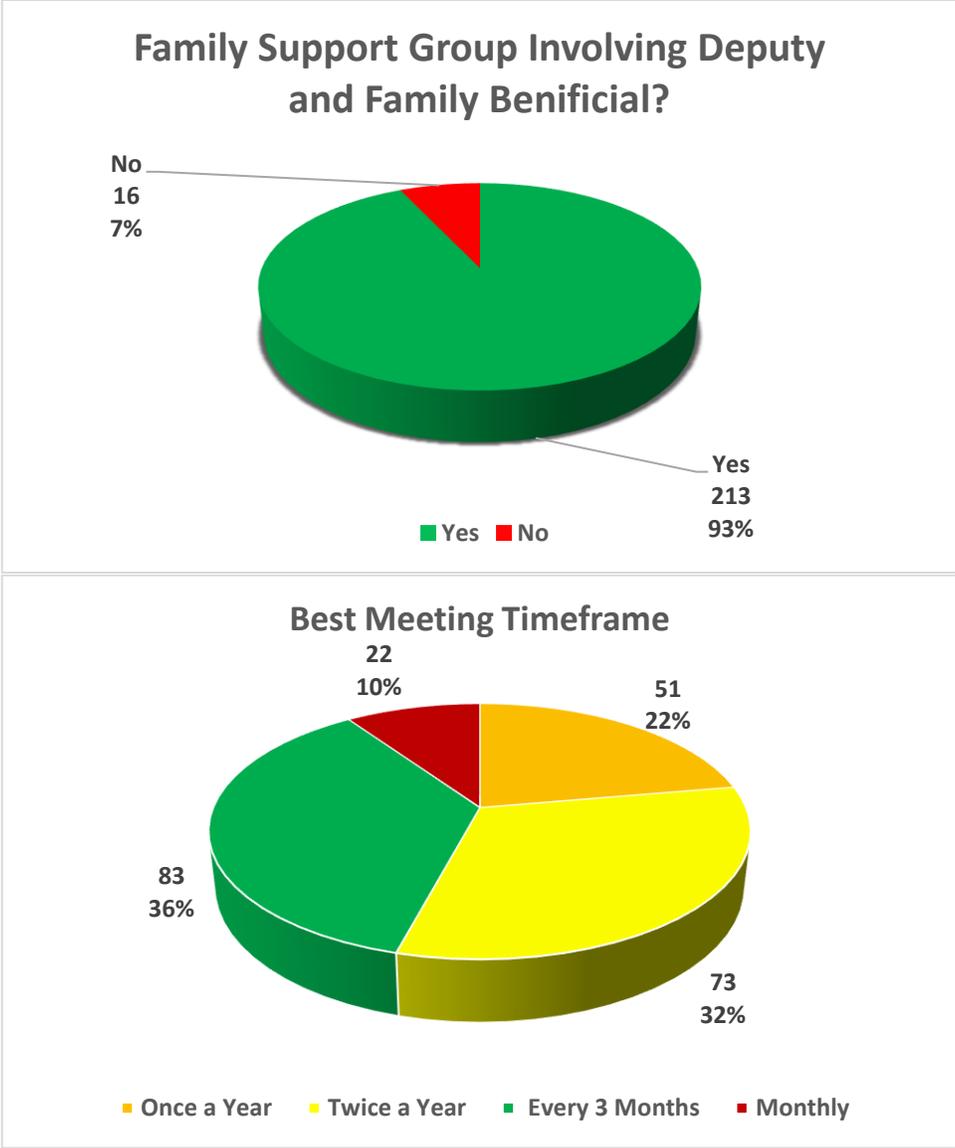
- Once a Year, fifty-one (22%),
- Twice a Year, seventy-three (32%),
- Every 3 Months, eighty-three (36%), or
- Monthly, twenty-two (10%).

Question 16 asks the participants if they feel a Family Support Program involving both deputy and family would be beneficial. The response was:

- Yes, two hundred and thirteen (93%) and
- No, sixteen (7%).

**TABLE 9: Would Addressing Issues be Beneficial? Best Meeting Timeframe? Would a Family Support Group Involving Deputy and Family be Beneficial?**





Question 17 wants to know if a Family Support Group was available, would you attend? Participants responded with:

- Yes, one hundred and forty-seven (64%) and
- No, eighty-two (36%).

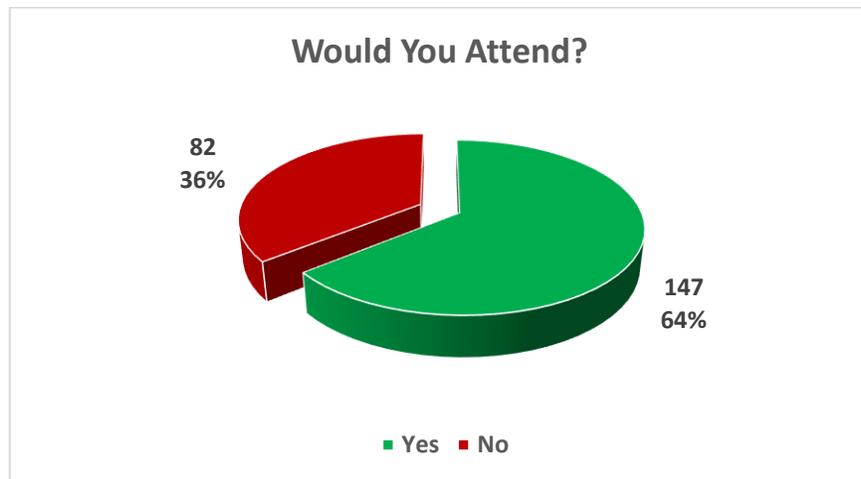
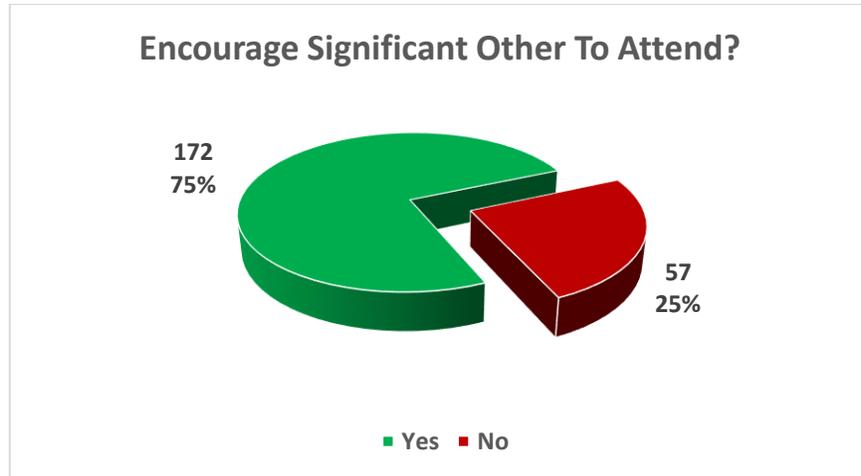
Question 18 asks the participant if they would encourage their significant other to attend.

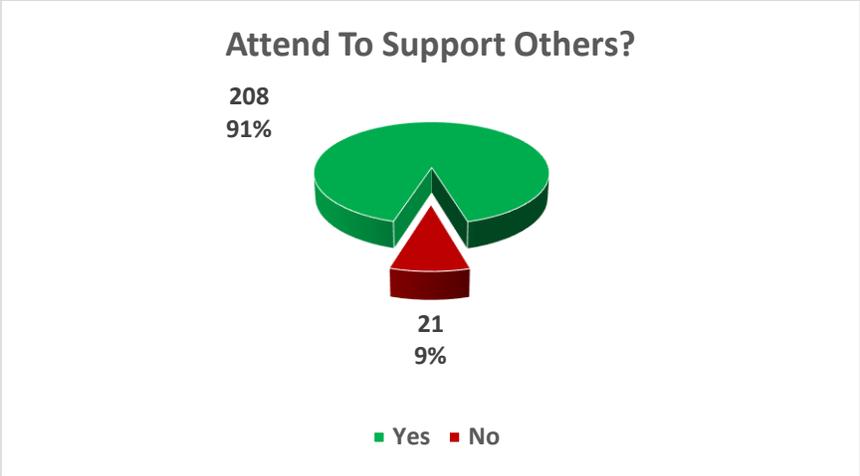
- Yes, One hundred and seventy-two (75%) and
- No, Fifty-seven (25%)

Question 19 wanted to know if the participant had experience working through stressors due to traumatic events or work-related issues, would they attend and support others. Participants responded with:

- Yes, two hundred and eight (91%) and
- No, twenty-one (9%).

**TABLE 10: Would You Attend? Encourage Significant Other to Attend and Attend to Support Others?**





Question 20 is the final question for survey #1 and asks the participant if they are part of the Command Staff (Lieutenant or above) would they support a Family Support Group. Participants responded with:

- Yes, sixty-nine (30%),
- No, three (1%), and
- N/A, one hundred and fifty-seven (69%), Once the “Not Applicable” participants are taken out of the response:
- (96%) is Yes and
- (4%) is No.

**TABLE 11: Command Staff Support**



The 2<sup>nd</sup> survey was provided to 44 Santa Rosa County Sheriff's Office significant others only, with 14 (32%) responding. This survey was provided by an emailed link to Survey Monkey through the SRSO employee email. The first few questions were biographical in nature applying directly to them and their law enforcement relationship.

Question 1 asks the gender of the participant with participants responding:

- One (7%) was Male
- Thirteen (93%) were female.

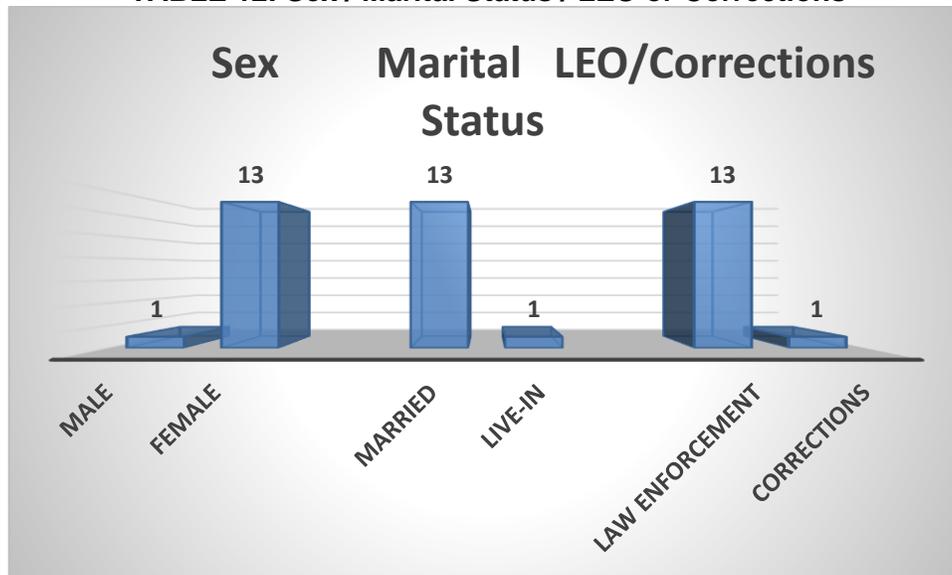
Question 2 asks about their marital status, having a response of:

- Thirteen (93%) married and
- One (7%) live-in significant other.

Question 3 asked the participants if their significant other was law enforcement or corrections in which:

- Thirteen (93%) law enforcement
- One (7%) responded corrections.

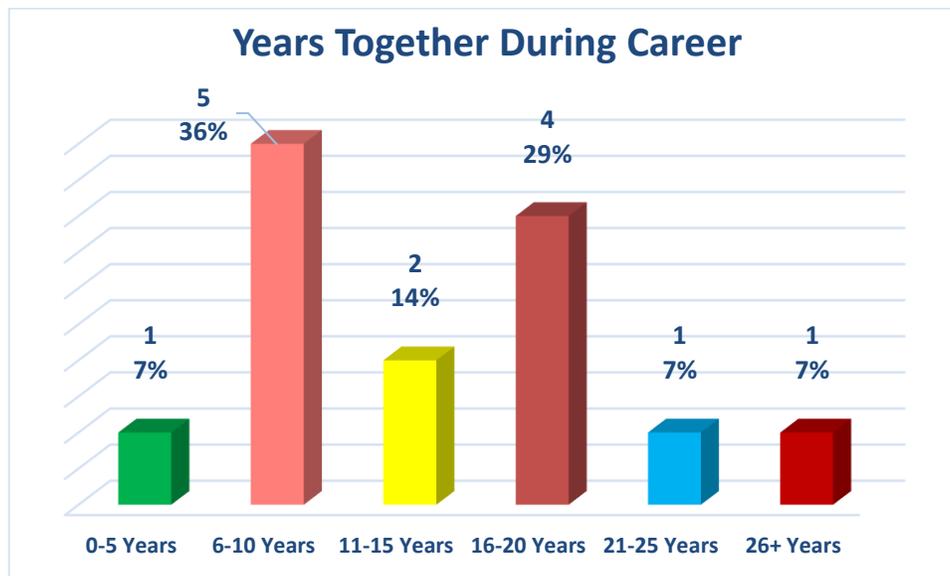
**TABLE 12: Sex / Marital Status / LEO or Corrections**



Question 4 asks the participant how long they have been with their significant other while they have been in this career field. The years of service have a minimum range of 0-5 years and maximum of 26+ years. Years of Service were answered as follows:

- 0-5, one (7%),
- 6-10, five (36%),
- 11-15, two (14%),
- 16-20, four (29%),
- 21-25, one (7%),
- 26+, one (7%).

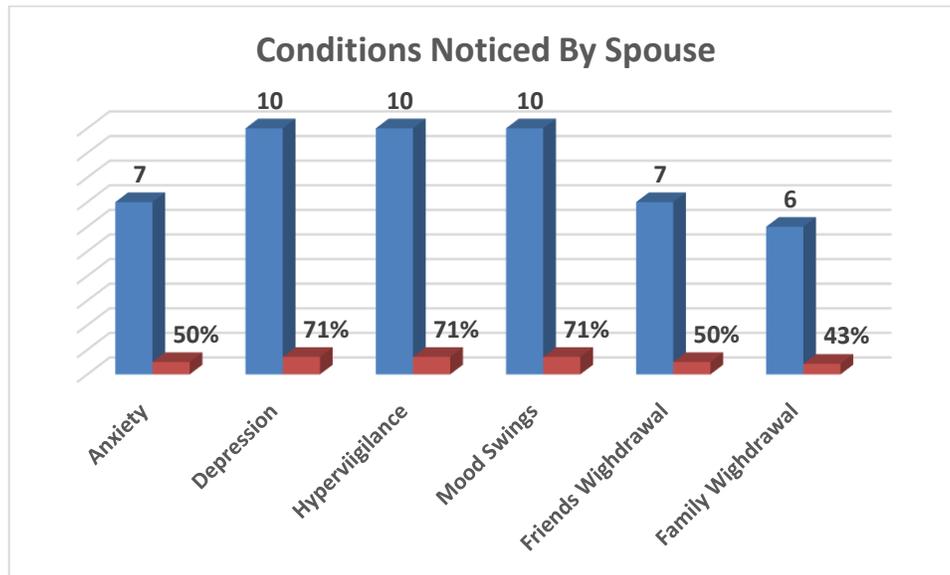
**TABLE 13: Years Together While Spouse is Sworn LEO / Corrections**



Question 5 asks if they have noticed any of the following conditions in their significant other since being in law enforcement. The participants responded with:

- Anxiety, seven (50%),
- Depression, ten (71%),
- Hypervigilance, ten (71%),
- Mood swings, ten (71%),
- Withdrawal from friends, 7 (50%),
- Withdrawal from family, six (43%).

**TABLE 14: Conditions Noticed by Spouse**



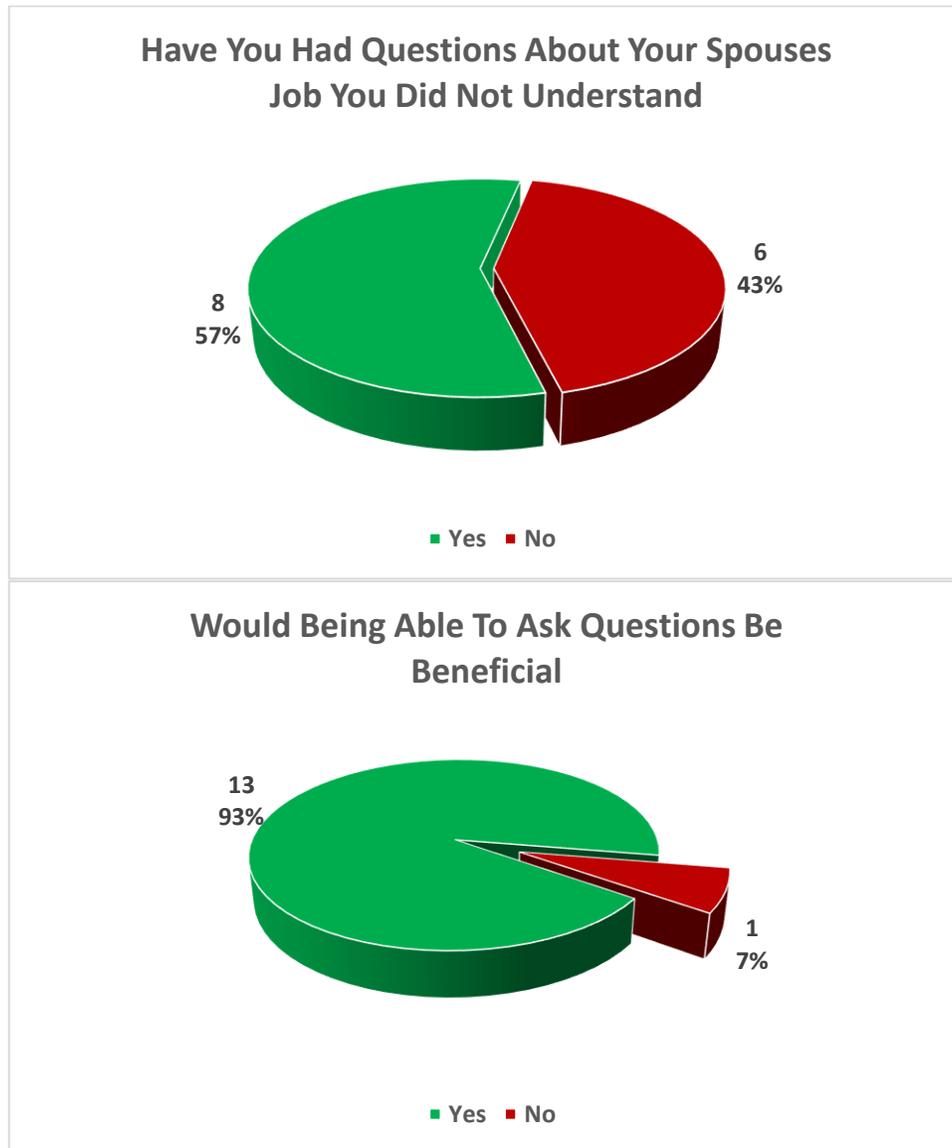
Question 6 asks the participant if they have ever had questions about their spouse's job that they did not understand. They responded with:

- Yes, eight (57%)
- No, six (43%).

Question 7 asks if they thought having a chance to ask any questions regarding things, they did not understand would be beneficial. Their response was:

- Yes, thirteen (93%)
- No, one (7%).

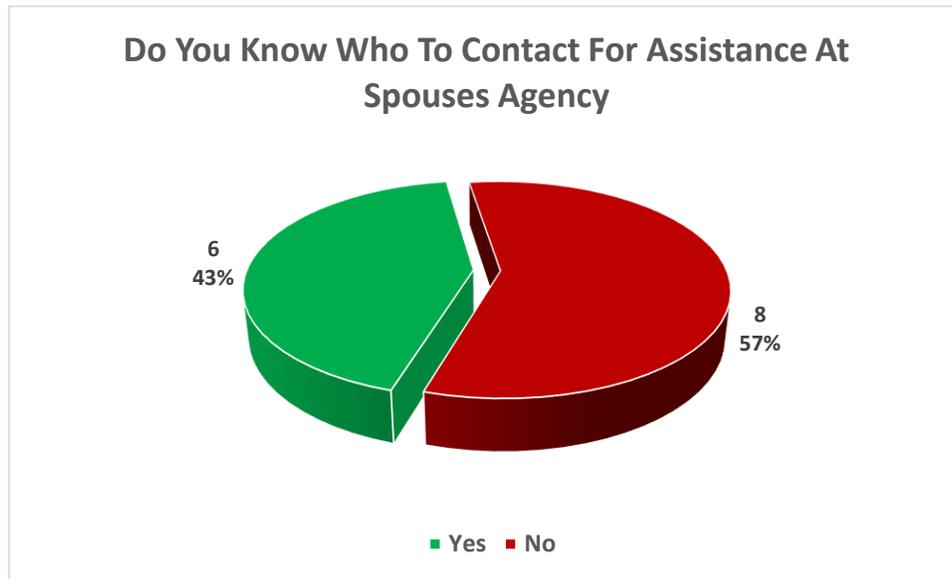
**TABLE 15: Questions About Spouses Job / Would Asking Questions Be Beneficial**



Question 8 asks if the participant knows who to contact regarding needed assistance from their significant others agency. Their response was:

- Yes, six (43%)
- No, eight (57%).

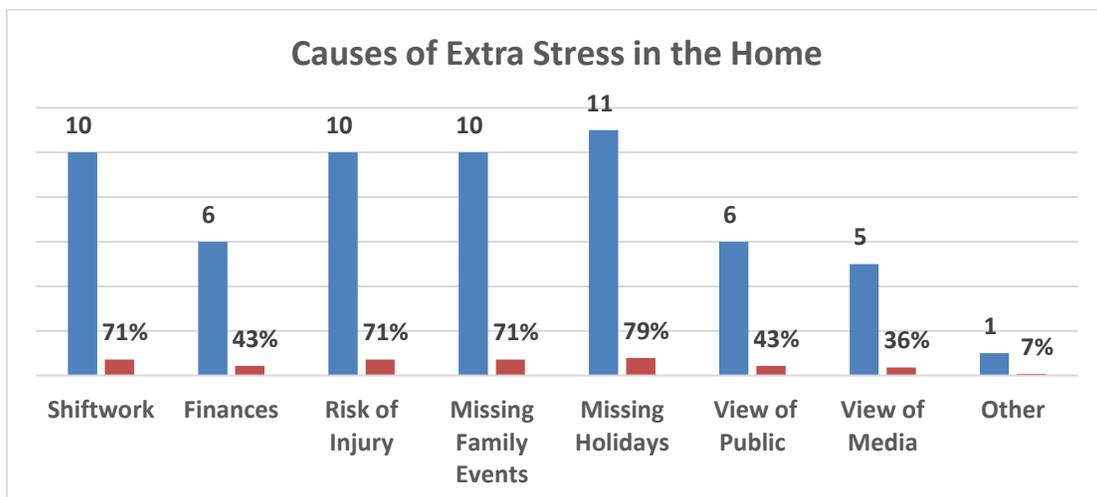
**TABLE 16: Contact at Agency for Assistance**



Question 9 asks if the participant feels extra stress in the home is caused by any of the following and they had the following response:

- Shiftwork, ten (71%),
- Finances, six (43%),
- Risk of significant other being injured, ten (71%),
- Missing family events, ten (71%),
- Missing holidays with the family, eleven (79%),
- View of public, six (43%),
- View of media, five (36%),
- Other, one (7%).

**TABLE 17: Causes of Extra Stress at Home**



Question 10 asks the participant if they thought a family support group involving both deputy and family would be beneficial, and the responses were:

- Yes, fourteen (100%).

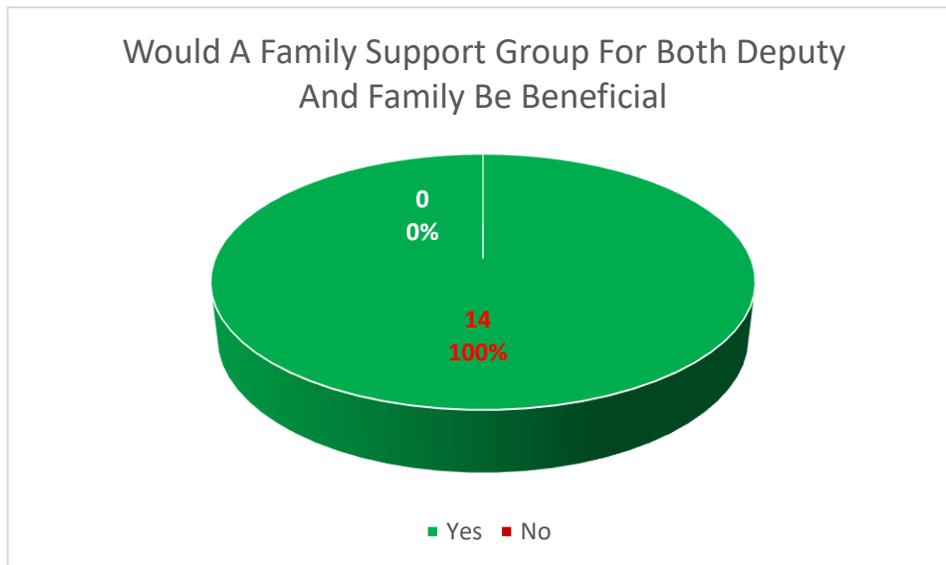
Question 11 asks if a family support group was available would they attend and the participants responded with:

- Yes, twelve (86%)
- No, two (14%).

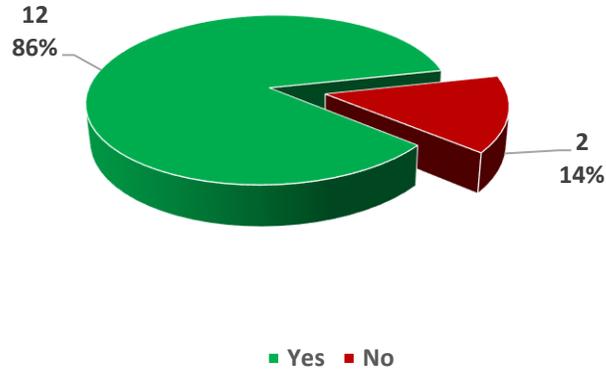
Question 12 ask the participant if they would encourage their significant other to attend the meetings. The participants responded with:

- Yes, twelve (86%)
- No, two (14%).

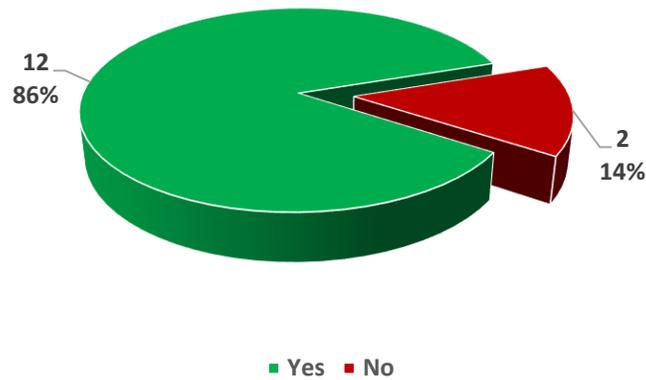
**TABLE 18: FSG for Deputy and Family / Would You Attend / Encourage Significant Other to Attend**



### If A Family Support Group Was Available Would You Attend



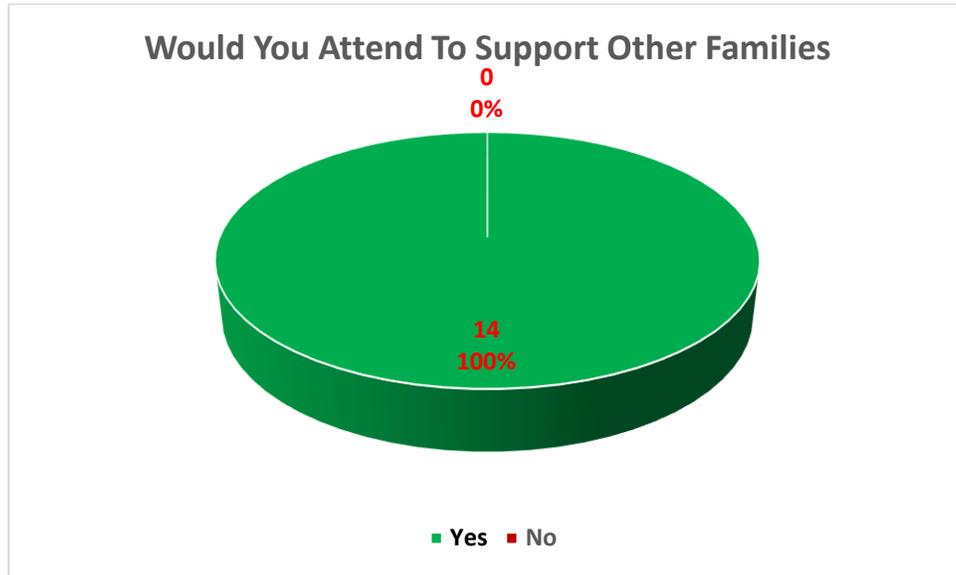
### Would You Encourage Your Significant Other To Attend



Question 13 asks if the participant would attend and support other spouses / families if they had previous experience dealing with stressors related to their significant others job. The participants responded with:

- Yes, fourteen (100%).

**TABLE 19: Would You Attend to Support Other Families**



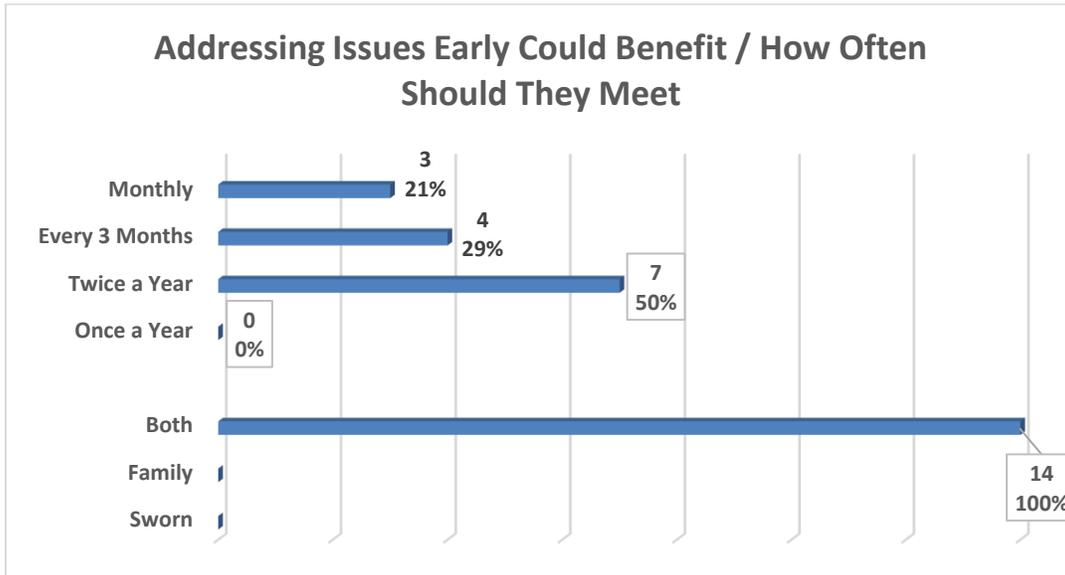
Question 14 asks if the participant thinks addressing areas such as financial management, work stressors, home stressors and changes that occur in the first few years of becoming sworn would be beneficial to the sworn member, family, or both. They responded with all fourteen selecting:

- Both, fourteen (100%).

Question 15 is the last question in the significant other survey and asks if a family support program was available what would be the best minimum timeframe to meet. The following options were given with their response:

- Once a Year, (0%),
- Twice a Year, seven (50%),
- Every 3 Months, four (29%),
- Monthly, three (21%).

**TABLE 20: Addressing Issues Early Could Benefit / How Often Should FSG Meet**



### Discussion

The surveys were somewhat as I expected. I feel that most everyone entering the career field of law enforcement or corrections does so not knowing the effects of the work we do. Even though we as law enforcement have progressed in recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental health issues and it is not a “career killer” as once thought. More documentation is done now than ever before to ensure our employees get or receive the help they need. This is however, usually after the critical incidents or after years of being on the job accumulating minimal stressors from everyday calls for service.

What we are still overlooking is preventive strikes on the issues we know will bring stressors upon our newly hired sworn personnel and their families. What the survey did show was no matter if you are male or female, single or married, law enforcement or corrections our views change as the 92% surveyed have indicated. Some of these stressors are internal like first line supervisors, 72% and agency administration, 69% as the survey has shown. Many of the other stressors are outside sources like accumulative stressors, 69%, and medial portrayal of law enforcement which was 52% in the survey.

Regardless of what stressors we have internal, external, work or home the majority of sworn members suffer from some or multiple forms of stress. The survey shows that many sworn have suffered in the past and currently from anxiety, depression, mood swings, and hypervigilance; all of which are symptoms of stress and PTSD. As most agencies are now addressing these issues it is still only common to address after a specific incident or from the action of a sworn member. As we know sometimes at this point it could be too late. At least 95% of those surveyed are aware of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and over 50% knew of Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) or other forms of counseling. Of those participants in the survey only 84% knew how to access any of these forms of assistance.

In both surveys by sworn and significant others, the participants were affected by issues arising from stress. Both felt addressing issues early could benefit both the sworn member and family. Sworn members or at least 93% thought a family support group would be beneficial however, only 64% indicated they would attend. To help others 90% indicated they would attend if they had experienced something that could help work through and resolve an issue. Command Staff participants indicated they would be in support of a family support program by 96%. Like everything around us changes we must adapt and change ensuring we take care of those following behind us. As the results indicate most law enforcement, corrections, and their families realize both the short-term and long-term effects of this career field. The majority of those sworn participants recognize that both acute stressors likely suffered during a critical incident or accumulative stressors over years of performing their duties will affect their well-being at some point during their career. More members are open to being honest and seeking assistance when needed however, with the stigma of being weak some continue to hold back.

As an administrator we owe it to those behind us to ensure they learn from our mistakes and those of our brothers and sisters that we watched over the years spiral out of control, fearing to be honest with themselves only to still lose. As we create better cultures within the agency for those with tenure, we need to start at the bottom and ensure the new guy knows exactly what changes he or she is sure to see within their first few years of service. Simple things that most of us learn the hard way like working extra details non-stop and living beyond our means.

The small things that took years for us to realize could mean the difference in a new sworn member causing undue stress on themselves and their families. Taking the time to explain how to recognize when not only they are suffering from signs and symptoms of stress but, their peers as well. Ensuring that they know just because you seek assistance it does not mean your career is over or you will be thought of as the weak link. Involving the new families can keep the ones around them informed and educated allowing them to deal with the changes that will most definitely affect them daily. Most significant others only know what their loved one tells them however, as the survey shows they may not always know the answer. Keeping the families informed from the start could keep our employees wellness and mental health in better condition which benefits not only them but, the agency and community.

Most participants from both surveys indicate that they have suffered or currently suffer from some form of mental disorder most likely cause from their service in law enforcement. As they have shown interest in a family support program to either help themselves or others it's up to the leaders of our agencies to create a culture that shows we do care about our members and their families. Not only will we praise them when they are doing good, hold them accountable for their actions but, support them when they are down and help them get back up. As the communities and technology around us continue to change, both creating even more stress and impacting us in ways not seen before. We must change as well, starting with taking care of our own and ensuring we leave them with more knowledge than we had starting out. Having a family support program from the start of a new career supported by veterans and encouraged by the administration can build a solid foundation for an agency to grow on for years.

## **Recommendations**

1. Identify participating sworn members to include administration, supervisors, and deputies, responsible for identifying and creating topics to be covered. These members will be the point of contact regarding support group meetings and responsible for ensuring new hires are contacted to attend.
2. Identify members of the administration to participate, ensuring support is shown from the top.
3. Identify sworn members to participate, ensuring support is shown within from peers.
4. Identify a strong spouse to set up and be a point of contact for spousal contact and assist with spousal involvement.
5. Identify individuals within the mental health industry that will attend and discuss areas of concern.
6. Identify agency point of contact for established programs, EAP, CISM, and Chaplin to attend and disseminate program information.
7. Identify member of the training unit and HR, to ensure sworn new hires and spousal information is disseminated to the proper chain.
8. Areas of concern and identifying individuals to attend and provide needed information will be addressed and/or developed as needed.

Lieutenant Allen Salter has been with the Santa Rosa County Sheriff's Office for 21 years. He started on patrol and served in several different assignments to include Field Training Officer, US Marshals Fugitive Task Force, and GPS Unit. In 2006, he was promoted to Sergeant and served in Patrol, Training Division and Field Training Program Coordinator. In 2019, he was promoted to Lieutenant and served as a Watch Commander, District Commander and currently assigned over Special Operations. Lieutenant Salter is an adjunct instructor at Northwest Florida State College Law Enforcement Academy, has a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice from Troy University and a Masters of Science in Management from the University of Florida.

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## **Appendix A** **Survey Questions**

### **Introduction:**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey by the Senior Leadership program at the Florida Criminal Justice Executive Institute. The purpose of this survey is to identify challenges Law Enforcement Officers and their families face due to job and home related stress and would a family support program be beneficial to managing this stress of our officers and their families.

This survey shouldn't take more than 15-20 minutes of your time, and the information you provide will be vital in helping to identify what, if anything, can be done to improve the management of stress on our officers and families. Please answer the questions candidly and honestly. Your responses to these questions will be anonymous.

### **Deputy / Corrections Questionnaire**

1. Are you
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  
2. Are you
  - a. Married
  - b. Single
  - c. Live-in Significant Other
  
3. If you selected married or live-in significant other and they are not an LEO or Corrections, please provide the Spousal Survey Link to them and select "Yes" if provided. The survey was provided via agency email. (Applies to SRSO Only) If not SRSO select N/A.
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. N/A
  
4. Are you Sworn:
  - a. Law Enforcement Officer
  - b. Corrections

5. Years of Service:
  - a. 0-5
  - b. 6-10
  - c. 11-15
  - d. 16-20
  - e. 21-25
  - f. 25+
  
6. Are you aware of the following programs?
  - a. Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
  - b. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM)
  - c. Other Counseling Covered
  
7. Do you know how to access these programs?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
8. Do you think your views or personality have changed since being sworn in?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
9. During your time employed have you been stressed due to any of the following?  
(Check all that apply)
  - a. First Line Supervision
  - b. Administration
  - c. Shift Work
  - d. Public Portrayal
  - e. Media portrayal
  - f. Risk of being injured on the job
  - g. Critical/Violent Incident i.e., OIS, OID, Homicide, Abuse
  - h. Routine call i.e., Death Inv., Abuse, Domestic Violence, MVA
  - i. Accumulative buildup of stressors over time
  - j. Other
  
10. Do you have any of the following stressors at home?
  - a. Finances
  - b. Spouse or Significant others' lack of understanding of job
  - c. Friends lack of understanding of Job
  - d. Having time to spend with family
  - e. None of the above

11. Do you feel like you suffer currently from any of the following? (Check all that apply)
  - a. Anxiety
  - b. Depression
  - c. Hypervigilance
  - d. Mood Swings
  
12. Have you suffered in the past from any of the following? (Check all that apply)
  - a. Anxiety
  - b. Depression
  - c. Hypervigilance
  - d. Mood Swings
  
13. If any above choices are selected, do you think it is due to the following? (Check all that apply)
  - a. Single Incident
  - b. Accumulative Incidents over time
  - c. All work related
  - d. Outside work (homelife)
  - e. Combination of work and home
  - f. Other
  
14. Do you think addressing areas such as financial management, work stressors, home stressors and changes that occur in the first year of becoming sworn would be beneficial to:
  - a. Sworn Member
  - b. Family
  - c. Both
  
15. If a Family Support Program was available, what would be the best minimum meeting timeframe?
  - a. Once a Year
  - b. Twice a Year
  - c. Every 3 Months
  - d. Monthly
  
16. Do you think a Family Support Program involving both deputy and family would be beneficial?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
17. If a Family Support Group was available, would you attend?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

18. Would you encourage your spouse or significant other to attend?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
19. Would you attend and support others if you have experience in working through stressors due to traumatic events or work-related issues?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
20. If you are part of the Command Staff (Lieutenant or above), would you support a Family Support Program
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. N/A

## **Appendix B**

### **Survey Questions**

#### **Introduction:**

#### **Spouse / Significant Other Questionnaire**

1. Are you
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
2. Are you
  - a. Married
  - b. Live-in
3. Is your spouse or significant other?
  - a. Law Enforcement Officer
  - b. Corrections
4. How long have you been with your spouse or significant while they worked in this career?
  - a. 0-5
  - b. 6-10
  - c. 11-15
  - d. 16-20
  - e. 21-25
  - f. 25+

5. Have you noticed any of the following in your significant other since they have been in law enforcement? (Check all that apply)
- a. Anxiety
  - b. Depression
  - c. Hypervigilance
  - d. Mood Swings
  - e. Withdrawal from Friends
  - f. Withdrawal from Family
6. Have you ever had questions about your significant others job that you don't understand?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
7. Do you think having a chance to ask questions regarding the things you don't understand would be beneficial?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
8. Do you know who to contact regarding assistance from your significant others agency?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
9. Do you feel any of the following causes extra stress in your home? (Check all that apply)
- a. Shiftwork
  - b. Finances
  - c. Risk of significant other being injured
  - d. Missing family events
  - e. Missing holidays
  - f. View of Public
  - g. View of Media
  - h. Other
10. Do you think a Family Support Program involving both deputy and family would be beneficial?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
11. If a Family Support Group was available, would you attend?
- a. Yes
  - b. No

12. Would you want or encourage your spouse or significant other to attend?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
13. Would you attend and support other spouses/families if you have previous experience dealing with stressors of your related to your significant others job?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
14. Do you think addressing areas such as financial management, work stressors, home stressors and changes that occur in the first few years of becoming sworn would be beneficial to:
  - a. Sworn Member
  - b. Family
  - c. Both
  
15. If a Family Support Program was available, what would be the best minimum meeting timeframe?
  - a. Once a Year
  - b. Twice a Year
  - c. Every 3 Months
  - d. Monthly