

Impacts of Public Perception on Law Enforcement Wellness



VALOR Voices Podcast Transcript

Speaker 1: You are listening to VALOR Voices, a production of the VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Program. The VALOR Program is funded through grants from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, BJA, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The points of view and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the podcast authors and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. Here's your host.

Floyd: Hello, I'm Floyd Wiley, the program lead with the Bureau of Justice Assistance, VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Program. I'm glad you're able to tune in today. Today, we have the pleasure of being joined by Dr. Rob Sobo of the Chicago Police Department to discuss a critical topic for law enforcement today, which is public perception and how it affects you, the law enforcement officer, and your families.

Let me start off by giving this disclaimer that I think is very important. We know the vast majority of law enforcement officers honor their oath to do the best of their ability every single day that they go to work, making untold sacrifices across this nation in the jurisdictions to keep the community safe, both on the job and personally, some paying the ultimate sacrifice. However, there is this small entity of individuals that have failed in their duty as law enforcement officers in our profession. And when they do that, it undoubtedly casts a shadow on our good works, even though not a single one of us in law enforcement condones the actions of a few who have chosen to violate the public trust.

Those of you that have answered the call to be law enforcement professionals are part of a noble profession and never ever forget that. So I encourage you, please do not be dismayed, discouraged. Your communities need you, and you are the blanket of security. You're extremely important to our society and our democracy. Without further ado, let me introduce you to Dr. Rob Sobo of the Chicago Police Department. Good afternoon, Rob. How are you, sir?

Rob: Hi, Floyd. I'm doing well. Thanks for having me and for those really well stated and important words that you started with today.

Floyd: Hey, listen, it's always a pleasure to have you within our company because you have had such a major impact within the industry and you're doing an amazing job with Chicago Police Department as well with other officers across

the country. So, can you just tell the audience today a little bit about yourself and how you pioneered officer wellness over the years?

Rob: I am currently the director of the professional counseling division of the Chicago Police Department and clinical consultant to the Seattle Police Department. And over the years, myself and a team, it certainly hasn't been all done by me or by myself, have really been successful at creating very comprehensive, responsible and ethical programs to meet the needs of our department members, sworn, civilian, family members, as well as retired, to make sure that they don't just survive this job but actually thrive in it.

And when there are the inevitable cases where wellness, physical and emotional, is compromised because of the stressors and traumas of the job that we have services to make sure that those officers recover from the harm that has been done to them as they serve the communities and put their lives on the line in service.

Floyd: Well, that's the reason why we're here today. You're working with the second-largest agency in the country and you observed the increase of officers reporting that public perception-based stress.

So, let's start off by talking about how the events occurring in our society have impacted officer wellness. And then, if you can identify some of those things that are the triggers, such as being insulted in the street, some of the epithets, things being thrown at law enforcement officers. So, can you talk about that a little bit and how it affects their wellness?

Rob: Sure. Starting with around March 2020, we started to have COVID and the stressors of society that people being afflicted with illness, fear of illness, isolation, an increase in drug and alcohol rates in the general population, domestics, abuse, violence in the streets because of the stressors that were in society with the introduction of COVID. On top of that then, we soon had political strife, peaceful demonstrations, and riots. And that created a perfect storm of really an explosive situation in our society.

And as first responders, as law enforcement, your jobs were to create peace and safety. Unfortunately, a lot of times our officers were met with anger, hostility, and were perceived as the enemy rather than the protector. And many of our officers experienced being thrown bottles of urine, human feces, rocks; being threatened with bats; being hit with bats and other very dangerous and sometimes lethal weapons.

Floyd: Right.

Rob: That created a lot of trauma and stress in law enforcement, which created an increase in negative consequences like drug and alcohol uptake, feelings of suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, and just symptoms of trauma in our

population. That caused a lot of difficulty for not just law enforcement, but of course, as our law enforcement officers were harmed, then they go home and inadvertently do harm to their families as well. So, we've seen a significant increase in utilization of mental health services in law enforcement than we've ever had in history.

Floyd: So, since you brought that up, and then I do want to talk about some strategies as we move through this, but let's talk about the stress on the families with the public perception as well, including friends, family, as well as the safety issues facing their family members. What did you come across in that area?

Rob: What really gets to what you're addressing is officers who have committed heinous crimes, including murder or alleged crimes that have been violent against other innocent human beings. And many in the community have a picture of the police as being violent, out of control, or having the potential to be abusive or being capable of committing heinous crimes.

So, it's stripped the identity of our officers in terms of themselves as being human beings, responsible law enforcement personnel and individuals and what they bring to this job. It's also created difficulties for family members because I think we forget that we all live in the same communities as everyone else. We are susceptible to all of the same stressors that everyone else is. And so, as people in the communities see these images, they bring them to our family members sometimes and question, "How can your law enforcement family member be a part of this? How can they be in law enforcement?" As if that's such a horrendous, negative, almost ugly thing to be, rather than it being a really noble profession.

And so, our families find themselves having to answer to others and defend themselves and their law enforcement family member. We've had children in school also be bullied, teased, or questioned as to how they could have a parent or a law enforcement person in their family. And so, it creates harm in both the law enforcement person as well as our family members.

Floyd: Right. And so, have you come across or experienced anyone being in a situation where there was a push for family members to exit their careers?

Rob: Yes. I am hearing more and more that new hires who have just been in training for maybe a couple of weeks have succumbed to the pressures of the communities and their families not wanting them to be harmed by the stereotype that has been created of the out of control, violent officer, which of course, as I said, is a stereotype, but the pressure and the stress of that has caused them to change their minds. Or, it isn't that odd that an officer with not too many years on the job, not too much time invested, will leave because of the same pressures.

Floyd: And it's really sad because it's that really small entity of individuals that really tarnish our badge. So, with that being said, what are some of the thoughts that you have in terms of how officers should deal with their families or talk to their children? What are some of the thoughts or mechanisms that they can use to try to reduce this public perception-based stress?

Rob: Well, first of course, I think it is our obligation to help officers deal with the stress and trauma that they have endured. I've been doing this for 24 years and we have never done more trauma debriefings than we have the past couple of years by a long shot, and it is because of the cumulative effects of stress that they endure on the streets.

And we have to help them with that and to cope with it and to regain a sense of identity, purpose, and respect for themselves and the job that they do, and remind them of who they are and how important they are, and that without them who would do this for us, our safety and our wellbeing?

Floyd: Can you break that down just a little bit more? I mean, break that down a little more granularly in terms of them being able to start to look at themselves through a different lens.

Rob: What we do in Chicago is, in our trainings, we talk about all these environmental factors that are creating a more hostile, or shall we say, negative perception of officers, where it's coming from, and help them identify how it might be impacting themselves and their own wellbeing and their family members. And we process that with them. Then, of course, we have individual counseling services. We do group debriefings, and have streaming videos that also discuss all of this. To help them process this so that their wellbeing is restored and when it is restored, they can then in a positive, productive way, talk to their family members about the same issues. They can say, "Hey, you know what? That officer was a bad person. That officer did commit a heinous crime, but that's not me, and that's not the majority of us," And separate themselves from that stereotype, that picture of those officers who have committed heinous and violent crimes.

Floyd: Yeah. And what's so sad about it is that when you really look at the profession itself and the folks that law enforcement officers touch on a daily basis, the numbers are just gargantuan. We're talking about billions of contacts potentially a year of just running into people, having a conversation, helping to change their life through being able to look into windows that most people can't look into.

We have a sphere of influence in which we're able to add value to lives that you may never know, just from that one touch, that one heart, that one contact at a time. And unfortunately, that information does not get relayed, obviously, on the news cycle and a lot of times in the court of public opinion. So, how do officers and their departments, what are some of the suggestions

that we should be looking at in terms of messaging and in terms of motivating our officers to understand what their true sphere of influence is on the public at whole?

Rob: By getting them in touch with the work that they actually do and talking to them about, "Tell me about a time where you made a difference in a person's life. "Why did you become law enforcement in the first place? What made you attracted to the job? Where is that now?" And help them get back in touch with that and really remember and experience the fact that they make a difference and they are essential, and we need them.

Give them value, give them that extraordinary pat on the back, so to speak, for what they provide our communities, so that they are a valued human being and a valued law enforcement personnel and family member.

Floyd: Just across the country, anecdotally, have you run into any messaging that you think that has been very effective from any organizations in terms of this situation of dealing with a public-based perception stress?

Rob: Well, really just the messaging that we've been talking about, about, "You are not the stereotype that has been embedded into our communities through what they see on TV and what is not covered. You are who you are and to get in touch with all the characteristics and parts of your lives, parts of you as a human being that are valuable, that contribute to your family, your friends, and your community. So, that not only do we see you as an invaluable component to law enforcement, but to your communities, your friends, that you are more than just this job. And how important and cherished you are."

Floyd: That part really hits home because at the same time, a lot of the times we don't realize that we're so valued to folks that are outside of law enforcement, in our personal lives. And it's extremely important to recognize that as well, once we take off the uniform, we go home and relax with our families.

So, is there anything else that you would like to add in terms of this perception that we're dealing with and the stressors? Anything else you'd like to close out on that may be of some help?

Rob: Really that it is important to take your identity back in every aspect, as a mother, as a father, as a brother, as a sister, as a child, as a peer. Make your totality known. Make it healthy. Work through the stresses and the traumas of this job because no one deserves to have that taken away from them.

And it is our responsibility in law enforcement to make sure that we have responsible comprehensive programs that address trauma, personal issues, family issues, drug and alcohol usage, that we have chaplains available. That we have a strong, solid peer support program, and that we are available to our

families and friends because we are a culture and we are a family, and it is our responsibility as a team and team players to make sure, as they say, that no one gets left behind.

Floyd: I like that. I like it. Dr. Rob, thank you so much for talking with me today. It has been extremely informative and a very important conversation. I hope that the audience received some of those valuable nuggets of information and takeaways. I know I did. You painted pathways to wellness and resiliency and encouragement. And I can say that in the VALOR Program, we say mission first, but people always, and this is the conversation that we needed to have. And I thank you and I'm sure that everyone listening to this conversation, thanks you as well for your words of wisdom.

And this concludes today's discussion for today. We'll speak again on topics that are related to this. Please visit VALOR's social media accounts and our website at www.valorforblue.org for officer safety and wellness resources. There's a myriad of resources there. Please take advantage of it. Thank you for joining us. I'm Floyd Wiley. Be safe, stay healthy, stay well, and stay resilient.

Rob: Take care.

Speaker 1: The VALOR Program is dedicated to delivering, training, developing resources, and conducting research to improve the safety and wellness of law enforcement professionals across the country. For additional information regarding the VALOR Program, please visit valorforblue.org. Download the app on the Apple or Google Play Store, or follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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