

# COP DOC CORNER

*Helping agencies be proactive about mental health and normalizing the use of mental health professionals.*

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**January 2024 Newsletter Topic: Mental Health Check-Ins**

## **MENTAL HEALTH CHECK-INS Q&A**

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### **What does the law say?**

“All peace officers shall be required to meet with a program service provider once every three to five years for a mental health check-in. The program service provider shall send a notification to the peace officer's commanding officer that he or she completed such check-in. Any information disclosed by a peace officer shall be privileged and shall not be used as evidence in criminal, administrative, or civil proceedings against the peace officer unless: (1) A program representative reasonably believes the disclosure is necessary to prevent harm to a person who received services or to prevent harm to another person; (2) The person who received the services provides written consent to the disclosure; or (3) The person receiving services discloses information that is required to be reported under mandatory reporting laws.” RSMo 590.192 (2-3)

### **What is the purpose of mental health check-ins?**

The law doesn't outline this specifically, but they are obviously for the benefit of the employee. In my practice, the goal is to enhance a law enforcement officer's mental health and resilience and to help identify potential emerging mental health issues. They are also a tool to educate employees on available resources. In the end, check-ins help “plant the seed” that speaking with a mental health professional is normal, and no longer goes against traditional or “old school” law enforcement norms.

## **What do you talk about in a mental health check-in?**

In a nutshell, it's a supportive conversation about how the employee is doing. In my practice, I review areas related to the employee's mental and medical health, stress management, support systems, family dynamics, work relationships, exposure to critical incidents/stress, and protective factors to increase resiliency. I also provide relevant psychoeducation (ex: sleep hygiene tips for night shift workers) and referral information for available services. Each mental health check-in lasts 45-60 minutes.

## **How often should mental health check-ins be done?**

Missouri law requires mental health check-ins every 3-5 years, although agencies can elect to do them more often. A more proactive approach of having annual check-ins is worth consideration, given the highly stressful nature of law enforcement work.

## **What else should agencies consider?**

Some agencies are electing to have non-sworn employees also engage in their mental health check-in program. I strongly encourage this practice, as ancillary folks (e.g., 911 communicators) can be at similar risk for posttraumatic stress as police officers.

Most agencies have employees complete their mental health check-in requirement during a normal work shift (although this can be tricky with overnight staff).

Employees should be well-informed that mental health check-ins are department paid and are not evaluative in any form. They should also be made aware that mental health check-ins are confidential, and that no information discussed in the session will be released to the department other than their attendance (with notable exceptions involving potential harm to self/others or with explicit written consent).

## **Who qualifies to provide mental health check-ins?**

In short, the law doesn't really specify, other than "program service provider." Some departments are using peer support staff or chaplains as their provider. This is an economical approach, but may not be the best option. In a perfect world, a licensed psychologist with the cultural competence of law enforcement would be best, given the purpose of the check-ins. But, I know that cost and access can be prohibitive.

These are some concerns to consider when selecting a program service provider:

- While the check-ins are confidential, utilizing peer support lacks the objectivity that an outside licensed mental health professional can provide. In other words, some officers may not feel comfortable discussing stressors or mental health issues with peer support staff, who are also colleagues.
- Emotionally, it is a big ask of peer support staff to carry the mental burden of the stressors reported by their department colleagues. And then, who provides the mental health check-in for peer support staff?
- Because one of the goals of mental health check-ins is to help identify potential emerging mental health issues, anyone other than a licensed mental health professional may miss the warning signs.

### **Does Baron Psychology offer mental health check-ins?**

Yes, these are offered at \$100/person at my office in Springfield. If your agency and employees are not within a reasonable driving distance of Springfield, I can conduct on-site mental health check-ins at a slightly higher cost to offset my travel expenses. I generally avoid telehealth (ex: Zoom) for a number of reasons. I follow IACP's Guidelines on Wellness Visits when providing mental health check-ins.

*This newsletter is brought to you by Dr. Shawna Baron, a licensed psychologist who specializes in police and public safety. Feel free to reach out for more information, offer an idea for a future newsletter, or to add an email address to the monthly newsletter mailing list.*

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