



Supporting Wellness From Day 1

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Nick: Hello and welcome, and I want to thank you for joining us today for this SAFLEO Sessions podcast. I’m Nick Breul, senior project manager with the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund. I’m happy to be joined today by Sheriff Kory Honea of the Butte County Sheriff’s Office in California, along with Jodi Drysdale, who is the manager of the Butte Strong First Responder Wellness Unit, a wellness program for not only law enforcement but for other first responders in Butte County, California, as well.

The Butte County Sheriff’s Office was recently a finalist in our Destination Zero Program, which hosts the National Officer Safety and Wellness Awards, and today we’re going to talk with the sheriff and Jodi about the programs that they have put together to improve the health and wellness of their first responders. So, I want to welcome you both to the program today. Sheriff Honea, if I could start with you. If you could just give us a little bit of background on yourself and let the audience know a little bit about you.

Kory: Sure, Nick. First off, thanks for having us. It’s a real honor to be here, and I want to take this opportunity to thank you and your organization for doing the great work that you’re doing. As you noted, I’m the sheriff of Butte County. I’ve been the sheriff here since 2014. My career in law enforcement began about 30 years ago. The majority of my tenure has

been with Butte County, but I spent a little bit of time in another county in northern California, but since then, my entire public safety career has been dedicated to protecting the citizens of Butte County.

Nick: Very good. So, 30 years—that's a significant amount of time. And Jodi, if you could, just fill our listeners in a little bit about where you fit into the picture and what your background is.

Jodi: Sure. I have a degree in health education and community service and spent the first six years of my post-college time working, doing community outreach for our county behavioral health department—then, went into the private sector but always stayed involved as a community member in issues and incidences that affected our community and have been in this role, managing the wellness unit, for the last two years.

Nick: Great, thank you. Your agency and your region there suffered a number of what I would consider were significant disasters. Can you tell the audience a little bit about what happened, and how that then sort of influenced where you are today with regard to trying to take care of your people?

Kory: Yeah. The Butte County Sheriff's Office and the county of Butte has developed a rather close relationship with disaster or near disaster over the past few years. I go back to 2017 when our county experienced a situation involving the Oroville Dam, which is the tallest dam in the United States. Back then, the dam was spilling water during a particularly wet season here, and a massive hole developed in the spillway. From that point, they had to shut the spillway down, but the water continued to rise within the reservoir, and a few days after that, it began to spill over the emergency spillway. It was determined that there was the potential that it could collapse. And so, it resulted in me having to order the evacuation of what is estimated to be about 180,000 people from my county and then, subsequently, the counties to the south of us.

Nick: My goodness.

Kory: Yeah. Fortunately, the dam did not break. The spillway did not fail, and crisis was averted, but it was the first real test of our agency and local first responders, in terms of dealing with potential catastrophe or major disasters. It certainly had an impact on our community, and although I didn't recognize it at the time, it had an impact on our personnel. I think I would sum that up by saying that there was a realization that they were

called upon to rush into an area where we thought people might die if we didn't go there to help them get out, and I think that had an impact.

Nick: So, that was kind of a reality check.

Kory: It was, yeah. I don't think we fully appreciated or understood the impact that that had on our community or the impact that that had on our first responders, and frankly, I thought that that would be the biggest event or disaster that I would have to deal with in my tenure as sheriff. As we move forward to 2018, though, the Camp Fire occurred here in Butte County, and the Camp Fire still stands at the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in the state of California, and recently, it was until the fire in Maui was probably the deadliest in the United States. That had a major impact on our community and a major impact on all of our first responders.

We spent the first few days, literally, trying to save as many lives as possible, and then months and months beyond that, dealing with the recovery and the aftermath of the fire. One of my colleagues who had experienced a similar fire, not to that scale, of course, said to me that I needed to be on the lookout for problems with my employees developing down the road. He talked about how some of his employees experienced situations where they acted way out of character and had trouble at work, had trouble at home, and he cautioned me about that.

And so, I really, at that point, started thinking about wellness and the concern for our staff. And so, that was the impetus for applying for the grant that ultimately funded the wellness program that we've developed. After the Camp Fire, Butte County suffered another major fire called the North Complex Fire, also a deadly fire. And again, our local first responders were called upon to respond to that and deal with that, but I had a much better understanding of the trauma that was being visited upon them, both physically as well as mentally, and that propelled us to make our program even more robust, but I knew I needed some help with that. I needed somebody who could help manage that program, who could build relationships across departments and within the first responder community. I had known Jodi for a while. I thought she was the perfect fit, and eventually was able to convince her to come aboard, and since then, she's really helped us put together an amazing program.

Nick: Well, it definitely is an amazing program. I live in the east, but I remember distinctly watching the news reports about the Camp Fire and the devastation that it caused. Was there also that added element

of your deputies and your public safety employees also having to show up for work not knowing or worrying about their own homes?

Kory: Absolutely. Within the sheriff's office, some 50 of our employees lost their homes on the day that the Camp Fire started. All told, over 90 first responders from Butte County lost their homes. That was a fact that really hit home with me early on when I recognized that there were a number of my deputies who had left their homes that morning to serve their community and that, by the end of the day, the only thing they had left was the uniform that they'd put on that morning and the car that we had given them to drive to do their work. Other than that, they had lost every single thing. Obviously, it impacted those people significantly. They've had to pick up the pieces and rebuild their lives, but that said, what I found is that the Camp Fire impacted everybody no matter whether or not they lost their homes. There was trauma visited upon all of our first responders as a result of that experience.

Nick: I'm sure. I'm sure. I mean, and just being exposed to all of those members of your community who are suffering, it definitely, definitely takes a toll. In looking at your program and, Jodi, I'll switch to you now, just if you want to take us through some of the things that you do offer. I was particularly interested in if you can talk a little bit about onboarding day. I thought that was something that was really unique, and it struck a chord with me.

Jodi: Yeah, so I will just say, when I came into this role in September of '21, we had three mental health providers that our staff and their family members could see. We had some fitness programming happening. We also were kind of in the midst or coming to the tail end of some of the COVID impacts. I just want to acknowledge that the sheriff's commitment to wellness, I think—again, not just for his staff but for the community of first responders in Butte County, runs really deep. I think that that has set a tone for the other administrators to really see that this is a priority.

Nick: Yeah, Jodi. That's really important. The point you just made, and this is one of the things that SAFLEO works to drive home, and that is top down, right?

Jodi: I think it's changing a culture, and that's what I've appreciated about this opportunity. I would say that the only thing that, really, I added was this facet of family. How do we support our families and the families of those that are out in these disasters or in the day-to-day work? I didn't grow up in a law enforcement family, but I am surrounded by friends and loved ones who are first responders or have someone in their family

who's a first responder. Just seeing the impacts of, as the sheriff described, those folks leaving that morning of the Camp Fire, and then their families figuring it out on their own because those men and women worked weeks. I mean, those men and women were literally responding to that disaster for weeks without being able to also be present with their families.

So, to get back to your question, I would say onboarding day is a little bit about that. It came from one of our local chiefs, specifically around, "How do we set these new hires up for financial success?" That was kind of the original conversation around it. He's watching these people get strapped into these really difficult financial, long-term commitments. We birthed this onboarding day where we could bring our academy graduates. So, they graduate on Friday, and we typically—the last three academies we've gathered on Saturday with their spouse or partner, and we talk through FTO. We talk through financial management and some basics around setting yourself up for financial success. We have one of our therapy providers come in and talk about communication at home. We bring in seasoned staff and their spouses to talk about things that they wish they knew when they started this career.

It's been a learning opportunity every time we've done this, to kind of refine and continue that conversation. This is a program that we do with all of our agencies, law enforcement in Butte County. So, there's typically four agencies that have cadets or trainees that come out of the academy. Their spouses start with a tour, and then we all gather together. And one of my favorite parts is all of the chiefs, the sheriff, and other command staff join us for lunch. So, again, it's an opportunity for these spouses to meet in a more casual setting.

When we started this, there was lots of conversation of, "They don't need to see the agency. They've already been there," and it's, "No, this is for the spouses. This is for the families to feel like there's an opportunity for connection to the work—kind of the higher vision, and really, the family that is in our agencies." As I said, we're constantly learning and refining, so it's kind of, "How do we give an introduction to these families, setting the positive tone so that we can help inspire them to feel supported and prepared in a new way?"

Nick:

And I wish I had something like that. I served in a law enforcement agency for 26 years, and we had a thing like that, way back when, where the family came to the academy, and they talked to them a little bit about the stressors, but it was nothing as in-depth and nothing that is really as effective as what I see agencies doing now.

You mentioned finances, and that certainly is, I think, for so many particularly young folks in public safety, they can get behind, and especially young couples who then have children, and it adds a whole new element of stressors.

You spoke about the communication piece at home, which is really important. One of the things that we touch on in SAFLEO is that this notion of, “Don’t take your work home with you.” Well, that’s not what we’re preaching. We’re not saying, “Give them all the gory details,” but people need to know what’s going on with you. So, I really think that that’s really important. Are there some common stressors that you see in your folks that you’re regularly addressing?

Jodi: The Fraternal Order of Police had this incredible study that they did in 2018, and they kind of revamped it a little bit in ‘21. Obviously, staffing issues, I think, are a big stressor. I mean, that’s what their survey said. I think also, this balance of community expectations versus professional expectations and intrinsic desire to be of service are things that I feel like we’re seeing in the data that are impacting folks, and people wanting to come into this industry and then stay in this industry. I think one of the things that we are doing most proactively to address those are really, really creating these wellness programs. I mean, there’s a decrease in psychological stress. There’s a decrease in stigma—as we add additional opportunities for people to even just increase awareness of wellness. Obviously, participating is ideal, but even just the fact that we are showing that it matters and it’s of value to us as agencies, I think, is really impacting, kind of combating what some of those stressors are.

Nick: And that was going to be my next question is, where are you seeing your successes?

Jodi: I think that the places where we’re seeing the largest impact—I think the family connection, again, as we already talked about, sometimes that financial piece is around overtime, whether it’s mandatory or voluntary overtime, and so there’s an impact there on families. I think I hear often, a lot of feedback around families feeling more connected, appreciated, and valued in this work through some of the family events that we do.

I think, just looking at our billing from our therapy providers, we have eight on contract that can provide therapy to any of our staff employees, their family members, and then some of our volunteer units. I think that just the fact that people are engaging in that, that those numbers have

increased, we're changing, again, the stigma around what it looks like to receive additional support for debriefing or additional support for processing. I would say those are the two that really stand out to me.

Nick: Very good.

Kory: I would add to that, and it goes along with what Jodi said with regard to reducing stigma, but also plays into the importance of these programs having buy-in from the top. Jodi and I have had an opportunity to talk about this from time to time, but what I'm seeing is that more and more of my command staff or leaders within the organization are reaching out to Jodi when an employee has an issue or a challenge and trying to direct those employees into our program, into those services. I note that we begin to look at challenges or issues with employees from a more holistic approach.

Certainly, there are times when employees do things that require you to conduct investigations into their behavior, and that may result in disciplinary action, but I also find that, when we're talking about the underlying causes of the behavior, there is always or inevitably a discussion around whether or not engagement of the wellness program might help us resolve the behavior or deter it from occurring in the future, and trying to address, again, some of the things that might be going on that we're not aware of at the home or in the background that might be causing an employee to have challenges or difficulties performing their duties.

Nick: And that's so great. You're looking at the causality and taking a deeper dive in learning from it and to see where those services may have been or would be of assistance, so I really applaud you guys for that. Sheriff, if you had to, since you've sort of taken this thing from 2017 to where it is now, if you had to give advice or could talk to us just about that process and what you found—well, first of all, what was the most difficult thing to do, and then what advice would you have for, say, another sheriff or another chief of a municipal agency who really wanted to get something like this started?

Kory: Yeah, so, when I really started looking at this problem in earnest after 2017, I didn't find a lot of resources out there, a lot of information. There was some work being done in the military in terms of dealing with the overall wellness of troops and things of that nature, but it really hadn't become a topic of conversation within the law enforcement community.

So, as I began to look at this, looking at how we could address the well-being of our staff, one of the things that I recognized early on was how

connected our mental well-being is to our physical well-being. My thought was that if we could bring in programs that addressed physical, it'd be a conduit to addressing mental well-being—I thought that especially law enforcement officers might be more willing to engage in programs designed to enhance physical well-being than initially dealing with the mental health piece of it. So, that was the approach that I originally took. I would say that there were a lot of false starts, and we learned a lot from our failures.

Jodi really did come into the program at the best possible time and really helped us propel it forward and get us into a position where we have all of these programs designed to address the entire wellness piece, physical as well as mental. I would say that one of the biggest challenges that we had, and probably still have today, is getting people to engage in our programs preemptively before there's a crisis. Everybody wants to live their lives and not pay too much attention to their physical or mental well-being until it begins to create problems for them. Then, they will come to the services. If I could change one thing or encourage other people to look at that is find strategies to get people to engage in your program early on preventively, as opposed to at the moment where crisis has struck.

Nick: Right. Wow, yeah. And, again, that's getting ahead of the curve and making sure that a problem doesn't develop into a crisis.

Jodi, I'll come back to you. Anything that you're particularly proud of in this program?

Jodi Drysdale : Yeah. So, to add on to what the sheriff said around addressing the physical fitness or physical wellness, my thought or approach has always been, and really, the data supports it—the more programs we can offer, the more supported folks feel, and the stigma decreases.

So, while I might not have someone that wants to participate in seeing one of our clinicians or meeting with a peer support provider, they're going to go to our jiu-jitsu program, and if the need should arise for them to receive mental health care, they're going to just know that it's part of our wellness unit. It's no longer, as the sheriff described, a punishment or something that only happens in negative situations, but it's an opportunity for folks to be proactive about their wellness. I probably receive, I would say, three to four calls a week—whether it's from individual staff who are looking to connect to support or, as the sheriff described, command level staff who are worried about their folks.

I think people don't know how to have these conversations, or they feel like their conversations are going to be tied to their employment or opportunities for promotion. I think that's one of the things that I like most about my position is, I am a civilian. I have no impact, and I'm not involved in any chain of command. And so, folks talking to me—I feel a bit more neutral to them and accessible than them having to necessarily go to their supervisor or go to even another peer on their team. While I think that has also shifted, the opportunity to create the role that I am in and the forethought for the sheriff to create this role has led to a lot of the success and, really, this becoming embedded in our agency and our partner agencies as well.

Nick: Well, that's well said—in terms of confidentiality and perhaps some anonymity, being able to seek out that competent yet third party that reduces that fear of, "Is something going to happen? [Are] other people going to find out? Am I going to be taken off the road, or what's going to happen to me?" I did notice, also, you guys have an emotional support dog, right—Victor?

Kory: That's correct.

Nick: How is Victor? Where does Victor live? Is he in the station, or how does that work?

Kory: Yeah. So, Victor—this is kind of a cool story. Victor came from a program that was in our corrections' division, where we were partnering with our local SPCA to train inmates to train dogs for veterans. Victor was in that program. Our dispatchers came to me and talked about how much they would like to have a dog that lived in the dispatch center. I'd actually read an article about emotional support dogs and the benefit they have on work environments. So, we allowed Victor to essentially be adopted by the department. He lives in our dispatch center, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. He's cared for by our dispatchers. Then, when he needs a break from dispatch, they take him over to the jail, and he spends time with the staff over there. He has got quite the following within the department and even has his own Instagram page that our dispatchers enjoy featuring photographs and videos of Victor and his daily escapades.

Nick: That's great. That's great. Well, listen, I want to thank you both for joining me today. I feel like we could probably have a conversation that would go for a couple of hours, but I want to congratulate you on the program that you put together—and certainly, sheriff, for your foresight and, Jodi, for your experience in handling these really difficult things and being on the forefront of improving officer wellness.

That's the gamut of fitness, as well as mental health, and on being so proactive in what you're doing. So, congratulations to both of you, and again, thank you both for joining us today.

Jodi: Thank you, Nick. I appreciate the opportunity.

Nick: Sheriff and Jodi, I want to thank you for joining me today in this important discussion about the need for agencies to create and support wellness programs that provide resources needed to keep our officers healthy. Remember, a healthy officer is a better and safer officer. Until next time, please be safe and stay well.

Speaker 1: The SAFLEO Program is dedicated to providing training, technical assistance, and resources to law enforcement agencies, staff, and families. To raise awareness, smash the stigma, and reduce and prevent law enforcement suicide. For additional information regarding the SAFLEO Program, please visit SAFLEO.org. That's S-A-F-L-E-O.org. Follow us on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The Bureau of Justice Assistance, BJA, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice is committed to making our nation's communities safer through resources, developing programs, and providing grant funding opportunities to support state, local, and tribal criminal justice efforts. All are available at no cost. Please visit www.bja.gov to learn more.

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