



The Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection Program

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Brandon P: I'm Brandon Post with the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers or SAFLEO Program and host for this SAFLEO Sessions podcast. I recently retired from the Provo, Utah, Police Department after over 20 years of experience, and I'm excited to be with you today. I am joined today by our guest, Acting Section Chief Amy Blasher with the FBI Criminal Justice Information Services Division. Now, prior to this assignment, Ms. Blasher was the unit chief of the Crime and Law Enforcement Statistics Unit. She has also served as the program manager for the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program with oversight of the nation's law enforcement and crime statistics. Amy, thank you very much for joining us today.

Amy B: Pleasure is mine. Thank you.

Brandon P: So, today's discussion is centered around the new Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection Program. Now that's a really long title. So, at some point, I'm sure I'm going to start calling it the LESDC Program, if that's all right. But by the end of this session, we expect our listeners will have a better understanding regarding what is the program, why we need this program, what data needs to be

reported, and then how law enforcement agencies can report this data.

So, start off—could you please just give us some background on the Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection Program, what it is, and how it came to exist?

Amy B: So, the Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection Act was signed into law on June 16th, 2020, and charges the Attorney General acting through the FBI director to establish a data collection where law enforcement agencies must submit information about their officers who have died by or attempted suicide for the purpose of compiling national statistics on these tragedies.

Brandon P: I could only imagine the amount of work that goes into creating a database that can allow that many agencies to respond and the questions. And well, why do we have this program? What is the program hoping to accomplish?

Amy B: The program—the collection is really wanting to glean an understanding of the circumstances that led up to such events for a law enforcement officer. It's really felt that if we can understand the circumstances, learn from this community—they're faced with many challenges in their day-to-day activities and help us examine. Do we have the right, across the nation, wellness program? Do officers—do agencies have the resources necessary to help their officers really get through the day-to-day challenges that they're faced with? And really, it's through this collection that we can start to learn those circumstances that led up to such a tragedy and make sure we have the programs in place, whether for resiliency—again, wellness and the resources to help our officers.

Brandon P: I think that's very well stated. We know we have a problem in law enforcement. We know that more officers die by suicide every year than by assaults and on-duty traffic accidents combined. We know that the of data that we do have shows that law enforcement officers are more likely to die by suicide than perhaps somebody who isn't in law enforcement. And I love the point that to find a solution for a problem, we first have to identify it and gather data to really grasp the full scope and understanding of the circumstances surrounding that problem. I loved what you said about developing effective programs than to combat it once we have a fuller understanding. But obviously, step one then is gather data to understand the problem. So, what data or circumstances are you looking to gather with this?

Amy B:

Sure. So, within the Act—and then, again, I think it's really important to talk about how we were able to develop this collection. We did not do it solely here at the FBI, but instead, really leaned on our partners across the country. We had a very diverse task force comprised of federal, state, local, tribal agency representation. We pulled within the major law enforcement organizations' subject-matter experts in this field of law enforcement surrounding mental health. Again, very diverse group.

We were handed a set, if you will, of guidelines as part of the Act. So, what we're going to collect will be the circumstances and events that occurred before each suicide or attempted suicide, the general location of such events, the demographic information of each law enforcement officer, and then the occupational category. So, something that was a little different for us with this Act is it did not follow the traditional law enforcement officer definition that we have for other collections. It was more expansive. So, the occupational categories that we're looking to collect these events on will include criminal investigators, correctional officers, line-of-duty officers, 9-1-1 dispatch operators—again, for those officers who died by suicide or attempted suicide, and then there's also categories within the questionnaire, the method used for the attempt or the suicide, as well as—we ask a series of questions regarding wellness programs. So, we want to learn—again, it ties into what the end goal, how can we prevent these incidents in the future? So, we ask a series of questions regarding the agency's wellness program and resources that were afforded to the officer.

Brandon P:

I think that's brilliant, to really expand the definition of what a law enforcement officer is because I think, perhaps—first off, we didn't talk about this at all. And then now that we've begun to talk about it more, I think maybe our focus is a little too narrow on patrol officers or certain designations, but I mean really, dispatchers, correctional officers, federal agents—I think we're all exposed in this law enforcement career. We're all exposed to things that are outside the bounds of normal human experience. And to get a full scope and understanding the problem, you got to gather data for all of them. I think that's brilliant. Well done. You've kind of already covered this, but I'd really like to touch more on the why—like, we know why the program exists, but why should an individual agency take the time and effort to try and report this data to you guys?

Amy B:

So, I think again—just making sure that we are offering our officers across this country the resources, prevention programs that they very much need and that we want them have, but also I think the

importance can also better prepare our staff. So, maybe this data can be used for new recruits coming into the profession— understanding, again, where we've been with such events, training new cadets. And again, I think it just goes back to making them aware that there are definitely challenges they're going to face in the day-to-day activities, and it's okay. There's help out there. And what can those agencies as employing agencies do to help them? So, when they're having that bad day or they're going through that rough spot, they've seen something tragic, whether that's the 9-1-1 dispatcher—think about the types of calls that they're taking every day. They know that there's—I think of the old slogan, goes, "It's okay to not be okay."

And just getting to that new staff or that staff that's been there for a long time that knows that there's help out there. I think there's been—from early on when we were establishing this task force and working through again, the guidance that we were provided when the Act was passed, what we heard loud and clear from the law enforcement community was there's such a stigma about raising our hand saying, "We've seen something. We're not okay with it." Again, depending on where you are in law enforcement—again, that 9-1-1 dispatcher, the correctional officers, those prosecutors, dealing with this every day, I think sometimes we just think, "This is what they were called to do," but we really, really need to understand that sometimes, we just need to make sure that we have the resources in place to prevent these events from happening. And really to understand this, it's going to take complete participation across all of those occupational demographics to understand.

I think they're different. They have different titles, but at the end of the day, I really think everyone—the challenges are the same. There's some common ground there that we can learn from.

Brandon P:

Yeah. I love that part. You're getting enough data to kind of move from mere correlation to causation, to really boil down. Can we better understand this? And with that better understanding, can we develop better programs that are more effective and give better resources? Which, I think you'd mentioned earlier—that's one of the things I thought was interesting is part of the data you're looking to gather is, if this person died by suicide or attempted by suicide, what access to what resources did they have and were they taking advantage of those resources? And I think that'd be interesting data to try and use to help resolve this. And then, if individual agencies, they have a vested interest in the health and wellness of their employees. So, I think taking the time to do this should be—we can't

encourage it strong enough. And then one other point I would imagine in the future, if—let's say there's any federal programs or there's some federal funding for suicide awareness, therapy, prevention, or anything like that in this area. If federal dollars are going to be attached to it, I would imagine the LESDC is going to be one of the very first places they look to gather data, to understand the scope and justify funding for a program. So, I think your numbers is going to be pretty important.

Amy B: I agree. And I think that's why it's incredibly important that we make law enforcement aware that this collection exists. And I think even behind that is the why. Why do we encourage agencies to participate? Because it really is more than just a number. It's more than just, "Yeah, it's a statistical collection within a broader program." I think there's some real stories to be told that this data is going to be able to show to help us move the profession where it needs to be, and again, to help build a resiliency, manage the stress that the officers are going through, and to work on their physical and mental health and wellness. So, it's more than just a number.

Brandon P: Yes, very well stated. I think for years and years, there's many of us in law enforcement who have been saying that this is a problem, and we need to divert some resources to get help on this. Step one is gather the data. So, I think what you're all doing is very important. Now, one other thing I wanted to ask about—those of us who are familiar with LEOKA, the data that you all collect on officers who are killed in line of duty, we know that that program collects information that identifies individual officers and for good reason. But will the LESDC Program collect that information as well that identifies individual officers who may have died by or attempted suicide?

Amy B: Thank you for asking that. That is definitely a question in a short period of time, as we launched the program, that we're being asked. And the simple answer is no, we will not collect officers' personal information. We will not collect their name, badge number, and such. Again, LEOKA has a different purpose of what we use that name for. And quite frankly, we don't publish the officer's names for our LEOKA releases. It's used more internal, but we will not collect the officer's personally identifiable information for the Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection.

Brandon P: I think that makes sense. I can see some family member—I mean, this is sensitive information. There could be some family members that perhaps don't want the personally identifiable information out there. So, okay. So, we understand the why and the what with the

data now. How does an agency actually report their data to the LESDC Program?

Amy B: So, the data is collected in a portal that sits behind, if you will, our Law Enforcement Enterprise Portal or LEEP. So, the first step is, an agency would need to get a LEEP identity account. There's directions for that out on our resources. And then once you receive that access, then you'll need access into the portal. And that's just another layer of security, so we don't have general LEEP users going in and looking at this data. So, once those two steps—and it, that's a fairly quick process. We can expedite those accounts for law enforcement agencies. And honestly, a lot of agencies already have this access, because there's a lot of services on LEEP that they're already taking advantage of. So, once they're into the portal, if you will, for this collection, it's been designed to be the least burdensome that we could for the officers. We didn't want to build a complicated collection or database, because then that might deter folks from wanting to enter this information.

So, once they're in, it was designed to be a short, user-friendly electronic form out in the portal. No narratives are collected. The form is divided into sections for the administrative, personal, incident circumstance, and then that wellness and information that we spoke earlier about which the submitter can answer by typing short phrases, selecting preset answers, using drop-down menus, and selecting multiple choice responses, so we don't need the full narrative that, I think, folks might think that's being collected. It's a very short, radio button type drop-down functionality within the portal.

Brandon P: And just to be clear, it's an agency or an agency representative, better stated, I guess, that goes in through LEEP and reports it on behalf of the agency. Is that right?

Amy B: Yeah. Someone at the agency—it would be up to the agency head to determine which staff member has been granted access to go in and submit this data on their behalf.

Brandon P: All right. So, it's the Law Enforcement Enterprise Portal. Got it. So, I'd be interested just kind of a final note from you. So, what do you wish, of everything else we've discussed—or if you could have one message out there to the law enforcement agencies that we're trying to get this data from, what do you wish everyone understood about this program?

Amy B: I think what I would want the takeaway to be is, it just goes back to recognizing the challenges our law enforcement officers, again, the whole criminal justice community, really, is being faced with—the demands they're being faced with, the challenges of their day-to-day work activities. And again, I don't want them to see this collection as, "Now I'm just going to be a number, a statistic in a national collection," because I really do believe it's much more than that. Really understanding the circumstances that led up, I think, is going to be invaluable to under what we can do better to help these men and women who are helping each of us every day. But I think with that, we have to get the word out to agencies that this collection even exists. They're going to be better off for it in the long run, being a participant and, again, understanding the data and what we're going to be able to show with this data next year, the year after and what we can do together to provide our officers better programs, the help that they may need, the wellness programs that they may need, but it's really going to take all of us collectively submitting this data to the collection.

Brandon P: Yep. I am very glad that this has been approved and is now moving forward. And this program was launched in January of 2022, correct?

Amy B: Correct.

Brandon P: And like you said, I think it was a perfect summary. I just think, in law enforcement—and I'm biased, obviously, because I'm a retired cop from over 20 years, but I think it is such a noble profession, and we do so much good, and there's so many good reasons to be involved in law enforcement. And there's so many rewarding experiences that we can have, but part of the job is going to the dark places where the bad things are, and you get exposed to some darkness and as human beings, that impacts us. And what I love about this program is, as we understand more about the circumstances surrounding officer suicides, that we can develop more effective and comprehensive programs and resources to combat it. I think this is an important program that we all need to participate in.

Amy, thank you very much for your time today. I really appreciate you sharing this information about this new and very important program with us.

Amy B: Very welcome. Again, the pleasure is all mine. And on behalf of the FBI, thank you for allowing us to spend some time with you in

getting this word out to the law enforcement community that there is a collection—it's built around, I think, in essence, to help us all understand what is going on, and how we do better to serve this community.

Brandon P:

Yep. And for our listeners, thank you for joining us as well for the SAFLEO Sessions podcast. Again, and Amy summarized it just perfectly. But if there's a point from today's discussion that I could emphasize, I guess that resonated with me as well, it'd be this—that to remove the stigma associated with officers requesting mental health, because we are not the greatest at asking for help with our mental health, we're great at taking care of others. We've done some great things for our community. But when it comes to asking for our own help, we're less than great at that. And to remove the stigma against that, we need to better understand the scope and cause of law enforcement suicide. And to accomplish that, we need data, and the data will help us understand the problem and develop better and more meaningful resources to improve our wellness and prevent officer suicide.

From my understanding, that is what this program seeks to accomplish. So, I'd just like to strongly encourage all law enforcement agencies to please report the data that we have discussed today to the Law Enforcement Enterprise Portal in the Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection Program. And also, if you found this podcast valuable, I'd like to encourage you to please visit the SAFLEO website, safleo.org. That's S-A-F-L-E-O.org. There, you will find more information on this topic and other resources focused on officer wellness and suicide prevention. At SAFLEO, we firmly believe that a healthy officer is a better and safer officer. So, until next time, be well, stay safe, and be courageous.

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 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 community 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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