



Accountability Partners: Open the Door for Vulnerability

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David P.: Hello, I'm David Perry, program manager with the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program, also known as SAFLEO. I'm your host for this SAFLEO Sessions podcast. I work as a lead instructor, and it's my pleasure to bring to you today a talk about a resource that we think falls nicely within the officer safety and wellness portfolio. It started off being an accountability partner, so I can't wait to talk to you more about this concept.

Our guest today is Mr. Alsender Miller with the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice. Alsender, we thank you for joining us today. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about your background?

Alsender M.: Thank you for having me. My name is Alsender Miller. I've been with the Department of Juvenile Justice for 17 years. I worked up the ranks from a juvenile correctional officer to the Office of

Professional Development, basically training. I've worked with kids in some form or fashion since 1995. So, interacting with other people, dealing with students with mental health issues, working at a residential care for kids with mental illness helped me in a lot of areas when it comes to working with students in the Department of Juvenile Justice.

David P.: I really want to ask, and our listeners want to know, what is an accountability partner? Is this something that you have received training on? Or just tell us about the concept.

Alsender M.: Well, to be honest with you, we were just thrown into the situation. My training program manager decided that we were going to all have accountability partners to make sure all our work was getting done, that we were challenging each other to make sure things were getting done as far as training, leadership, learning, and growing. It's a big thing as a trainer to be the subject-matter expert, but also to lead by example. So, growth and doing things right is very important. Our situation was a little bit different because we took it to another level. We began to become really close with our conversations and talking about everyday life things, stressful things, job stress, concerns, and things like that, and it morphed into basically a mental health accountability partner from just a traditional accountability partner.

David P.: Okay. So, for our listeners, you received no training—literally, you arrived to work one day, you started on your list of things to do, and a manager or someone said, “Hey, Alsender, you're going to have an accountability partner. Go forth and do good things.” Is that kind of how it was sprung on you?

Alsender M.: Yes, exactly how it was sprung on us. So, there was a list that was put out, and we were all anticipating, “Who's going to be my accountability partner?” My accountability partner, he lives about nine hours away from me.

David P.: Wow. So, you all would meet via technology, right? So, no in person connection, which also probably added to the barrier of this new concept. How did you feel after being voluntold that you're going to do this and then had to overcome the technology challenge? How did that turn out?

Alsender M.: It was definitely voluntold. At first, it was kind of hit or miss. We had several months where we were just going through the motions, “Hey, how you doing? You doing your work? Okay, okay.” I made my accountability partner call, so we’re good.

Well, he started having some issues at his facility, and my father passed away, so we began to talk a little bit deeper. He was one of the first ones to call me, and I might even get a little emotional right now thinking about it.

David P.: It’s alright. Take a moment, Alsender.

Alsender M.: He was one of the first people to call me when he found out that my father passed away. Just a little bit on that story—I’ve never really had a relationship with my father. I’ve only met him four times. But the great thing about his passing is that I got to meet some brothers and some sisters that I never met. I have about 10 to 12 nieces and nephews that I hadn’t got to meet until then. It was a little different, but it also helped me through that trying time of questioning about missed opportunities. A lot of times going through grief, people—when they’re connected, it’s really heavy. Mine was a little different. As a youth growing up without him, I was always dealing with, “Why does he not care? Why is he not here? Why did he not keep promises?” Things like that from when we did interact, so my accountability partner helped me through that situation, and we became a lot closer because of it.

David P.: Wow, that’s very, very, very impactful. Thank you for sharing that. Can you tell me and the listeners—how many times had you met with your accountability partner, and where did you start to see a breakthrough prior to the passing of your father?

Alsender M.: Well, we would meet at required trainings, interact, give each other the little hug and everything, and talk briefly and then move on—that had only been maybe four or five times before my father passed away. But we had began to get a little deeper in the conversations. I think it was a situation where I was having some problems getting some training, and I was frustrated with the process and with him having some problems.

David P.: Right. And giving you a space, that it was a healthy space, not just completely complaining, but you talked it through, so to speak, it sounds like.

Alsender M.: Right. Well, what we did was we talked through some things and gave each other some suggestions and talked about resiliency, praying, and support teams, things like that. So, it's important to get some of the emotions that we have and stress off of our chest, and one way of doing it is just talking to each other and being a hundred percent honest about your feelings. That was extremely powerful to hear him say, "I need help with this."

David P.: Right.

Alsender M.: And for him too.

David P.: Yeah. We say, "It's okay not to be okay," but we also want our listeners to be reminded, "It's not okay to stay in that place." It sounds like you might have been in a place before that call, but then after the call, you were in a little different space.

Alsender M.: Most definitely. It's okay not to be okay. Yes, that's great. But when you don't get it off your chest, if you don't express those emotions and feelings, it can lead to other things. I was one shot away from making the Olympics. I had one qualifying tournament to go to and participate. Well, an injury caused me to not be able to make that tournament, which ruined my Olympic dreams at that time. I went into a depression, and as a young black male, we're told to just deal with it. You have to be strong. You don't cry—all these other things. Don't show weakness. I was that guy at the time.

However, through my depression, it showed up in a whole bunch of other different ways that I didn't think was depression, like showing up late to work because I couldn't sleep, and then when I did sleep, I couldn't get up. I hear the alarm, hit the snooze button, and go right back to sleep. Not eating right, things like that kind of showed up. It was my supervisor who realized something was going on with me, and he's like, "Hey, look, I think we need to get you talking to somebody about some things that you're dealing with." So, I went to a therapist and talked about those things, and that helped me out. So, I was able to learn how to express myself and be open with him.

David P.: Man, you just said a whole lot about the resources that SAFLEO provides because it sounds like you were in the cycle of despair and not in a healthy way dealing with the stress. But a supervisor

who is one of the most powerful people in an organization saw you and saw your struggles and said, "Look, I need to intervene." And they stepped in to assist you in a time where that depression, anxiety, and stress was in the basement working out and it started to show itself in some of your job performance.

Alsender M.: Yes, yes. That is a hundred percent correct. Growing up without a father and not knowing how to express emotions, gratitude, and love for people—my relationship with my supervisor grew to another level because of that act of compassion and noticing and understanding what I was dealing with. I tell people in my classes all the time, especially my leadership classes, that people don't care what you know until they know that you care, and people will fight through or break down a wall for you when you genuinely care for them. That was very big for me.

David P.: So, from your lens, why do you feel members of your team or in your profession struggle to access resources timely—almost like the position you were in?

Alsender M.: Well, it's kind of like what you were saying just then. We're taught, "Suck it up buttercup, and keep it moving." We're told, "Just deal with it. You got to continue doing your job." But we are vulnerable, and we deal with a lot of extra stress day to day. In a secure facility, you deal with youth who have been traumatized, and they can become extremely aggressive quickly. Dealing with some of the emotional trauma and secondary trauma that you can have from hearing some of their stories is real. Seeing students assault other students or having a student assault you based on gang activity or gang initiation can lead to a lot of stress, a lot of trauma.

David P.: Absolutely. You carry that, and if it's not dealt with in a healthy way, it tends to add up. As I said, store up energy and may come out, as you said, not sleeping, not interacting properly. I would venture to say relationships were strained during that time. Other things in your life may have also been going on. I wonder if you're able to notice that as well.

Alsender M.: I did suffer a divorce during that time. So, yes, just like law enforcement, correctional officers, and mental health working in secure facilities, we deal with a lot of extra stress—that trauma that goes along with it. The suicide rates are kind of high there. While I was working at Murphy-Harpst Children's centers, I had

two of my coworkers commit suicide, one was my mentor. So, yeah, it can be real, real heavy, but we have to talk about the things that we're dealing with and seek opportunities to learn more about what we're dealing with.

David P.: You're saying opportunities, and a light bulb came on for me again to really ask you so the listeners could understand, the opportunities came about only because you were willing to be vulnerable with this coworker. Tell me how you navigated opening that door to vulnerability and how important that was to set your partner up to come back and help you in your time of need.

Alsender M.: To be honest with you, it was about trust. I got to a point where, I mean, I needed some help. Because I had gone through the therapy before, I'm in—very touch with my own emotions. I was just frustrated, feeling heavy, and he was there. The call helped me to feel like I could trust him, that he cared enough to check on me. With that being said, I just opened up with him about what I was dealing with, and that led to the mental health accountability. The more we do this, the safer our environments can be, the healthier staff members and our coworkers could be.

David P.: Alsender, you mentioned trust, and that's a very important component to the accountability partner project—to have trust is one of the foundational pieces, but I think another important foundational piece is confidentiality. Can you talk to our listeners about what the expectation was for confidentiality throughout this engagement?

Alsender M.: Confidentiality is extremely important. We made it abundantly clear with each other. What is said here between the two of us simply stays between the two of us. Unless it was something where it was a safety issue, if the person—we never had that problem, but it's understood that if it goes beyond just normal talking and you need some help, and you're refusing to get help and it becomes a safety issue, then and only then should I speak or seek help outside of our mental health partnership.

David P.: Almost like if you were in person, right? If you saw and heard a coworker saying things that you know through your experience and training that they were either going to harm themselves or

harm others, you had an obligation to report that up. Is that similar to what your agreement was?

Alsender M.: Yes, you're obligated no matter what. If you know someone has made some threats that's to harm themselves or says anything that remotely makes you feel like their life might be in danger, it is your duty to get help for that person. Sometimes, people don't know exactly where they are or how deep they're into a situation, especially if they're not expressing it enough and dealing with that stress and trauma appropriately.

David P.: So, for our listeners—Alsender, what advice would you give them if they were interested in starting a similar program? Maybe laying a foundation about accountability partners, talking about the goals and objectives of the program that you want to accomplish, and how this can help not only with productivity, but also help each other just have some place to talk and vent through challenges, but also find solutions, right?

Alsender M.: That is a hundred percent correct.

David P.: Alsender, if you don't mind, I want to go back to an important component of your journey to wellness, and that's when you said that your supervisor noticed some things about your behavior. Can you talk to our listeners about the importance of a supervisor being trained, having their antenna up, and being prepared to responsibly address a question or an issue when it's presented to them? Because it's one thing for someone to have the courage to come forward, come to that supervisor and say, "Look, I need help. I'm struggling," and that supervisor not be prepared or give the wrong response that pushes them back in a corner.

Alsender M.: Yes. Training is very, very important. As leaders, it's important to know your people and notice little things about your people that help you to make decisions. So many supervisors, they're just so focused on getting the work done. However, when you're focused on the work and not your people, then your team can eventually fall apart, and problems and other issues can happen there.

It's definitely important to know who you're working with, personality traits, building a rapport with your team as you do the job. So, that helps out tremendously. Taking training on things

like that also would help—finding out some different resources in that area, like SAFLEO.

David P.: I'm giving you a fist bump virtually. I wish you could see me because you hit the nail on the head, that management having their finger on the pulse. So, responding appropriately is key because I would venture to say—I'm not going to put words in your mouth, but if that manager had not paid attention, or if you got the courage to come forward and say, "I need some help," and they say, "Well, Alsender—come on, man. You know we're busy. I need you to work with those young people. Get back on it." I don't know. How do you think you would've responded to that?

Alsender M.: I probably wouldn't have stayed as long as I did, to be honest with you, your job was only a summer job. I was only going to be there—my goal was to make the Olympics, and I was only there to make a little money for the summer, and I ended up staying there for ten years.

David P.: It just shows, and I hope our listeners are really tuning in on the importance of every individual interaction with staff. It matters because look at the exponential effect you've had over the years and the young people that you've been able to touch in a positive way. But if you weren't in a good space, you didn't get that help, then we don't have an Alsender speaking life into those thousands of juveniles in the system who needed it.

Alsender M.: You gave me goosebumps there, bro.

David P.: I'm just telling it the way I see it.

Alsender M.: I understand it. No, it's very important to be mentally healthy in order to do this job. When I get to a moment where I feel like I'm not sleeping well or I'm dreaming about the kids or the facility or my job, I know that I'm not in a good, healthy, mental—healthy place, and I need to take a vacation, some personal leave to get away from that so I can get back and do a little relaxation of some, just getting back to normalcy.

David P.: You just helped ten of our listeners who are going through the same thing, who are envisioning spreadsheets, looking at time clocks, and thinking about work and need to really unplug and reinvest in themselves. Your discussion today has been very

helpful. Can you tell the listeners, as we get ready to close, is there anything else your agency is doing innovative in the area of officer wellness, employee wellness, anything in that space?

Alsender M.: We have a wellness program, and we have speakers come in—we call it a lunch and learn. We also partner with the Georgia P.O.S.T. Council in teaching resiliency to all law enforcement in the same area. We're learning and growing in those areas. We also have a victim impact service.

David P.: I just want to give a few takeaways. One, for our listeners, SAFLEO can provide training, resources, and technical assistance to law enforcement, corrections agencies, juvenile justice authorities, and the like. I do want you to be reminded that stress is a part of the job and how we respond to that stress is important because if we don't respond appropriately, it will continue to lift weights in the basement and come out during a time when we least expect it. We provide a variety of resources and outlets for men and women in the profession, and it's a vital step for supervisors to learn these identification tools and techniques to help mitigate the impacts of stress in human trauma seen by our men and women each day. And don't forget family members—they are impacted, and they can also benefit from the resources and the care provided by SAFLEO.

If you found this podcast to be valuable, I'd like to encourage you to please visit the SAFLEO website, safleo.org. There, you'll find resources focused on officer wellness and suicide prevention. At SAFLEO, we firmly believe that a healthier officer, healthier employee is better and safer. 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 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

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