

Honoring Heroes who Suffered in Silence

When President John F. Kennedy signed the Proclamation in 1962 recognizing May 15 as Peace Officer Memorial Day, the Nation as a whole began honoring peace officers, “who, through their courageous deeds, have lost their lives or have become disabled in the performance of duty.” President Kennedy also designated May 12-18 as National Police Week. Since its inception National Police Week has been held annually and thousands of people descend on Washington, D.C. to honor our fallen heroes. The officers honored on this date were designated as having died in the line of duty which did not include suicide.

The Public Safety Officer Benefit Act (PSOB) was enacted in 1976 in part “to offer peace of mind to men and women seeking careers in public safety and to make a strong statement about the value American society places on the contributions of those who serve their communities in potentially dangerous circumstances.” This act has been amended several times since 1976 but until 2022 families of officers who died by suicide were not eligible to receive this benefit.

Survivors of Blue Suicide (SBS) is a non-profit organization that was created in 2020, because of the generous hearts of Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.) and Law Enforcement United, to support the families and co-workers of officers who die by suicide. It is modeled after C.O.P.S. At the time of its inception suicide was not considered line-of-duty and these survivors had very few services available to support them. SBS gives survivors hope and support reminding them they are not alone in their journey and their officer will not be forgotten. [Memorial Video](#)

On August 16, 2022 President Biden signed into law the Public Safety Officer Support Act (PSOSA) (Public Law 117–172). This was a significant change in the way law enforcement and the nation perceived the act of a law enforcement officer taking their own life. More officers die each year by suicide than at the hands of others and yet it took four officers taking their own lives following the incident at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, to encourage our legislatures to address the very real issue that the traumas and stressors, suffered throughout a law enforcement career, takes a toll on the physical and mental wellness of officers.

PSOSA recognizes among many things, that there is “Psychological evidence which indicates that law enforcement officers experience significant job-related stressors and exposures that may confer increased risk for mental health morbidities (such as post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal thoughts, ideation, intents, and behaviors) and hastened mortality.”

There are two tracks for an officer’s suicide to be recognized as a line-of-duty death:

Track One:

- 1) They must be a public safety officer.
- 2) The officer died or was permanently disabled.
- 3) The actions were consistent with a psychiatric disorder.
- 4) The officer died or was permanently disabled within 45 days of exposure to one or more traumatic events.

Track Two:

Includes 1-3 above

4) The officer died or was permanently disabled more than 45 days from exposure to one or more traumatic events.

5) Exposed to one or more traumatic events and it was a substantial factor in the officer's action. It does not have to be the only factor, just a substantial factor.

Definition of Traumatic Event:

- 1) Homicide, suicide, or the violent or gruesome death of another individual (including mass casualty, fatality or shooting.)
- 2) Circumstance posing an extraordinary and significant danger or threat to the life or serious bodily harm to any individual.
- 3) An act of criminal sexual violence committed against any individual.

For post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), acute stress disorder, or trauma and stress related disorder to be considered factors in an officer's suicide, there are two requirements outlined by the Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program (PSOB):

1) The officer must have been diagnosed by a licensed medical/mental health professional.

-or-

2) The officer has contacted or attempted to contact the employee assistance program of the agency or entity that the officer serves, a licensed medical or mental health professional, suicide prevention services, or another mental health assistance service in order to receive help, treatment, or diagnosis for PTSD, or acute stress disorder.

If an officer is under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of their death, this alone does not preclude the payment of benefits to the family.

All too often people will make comments such as, the officer died because their spouse served them with divorce papers or they got caught cheating by their spouse. People are served divorce papers and caught cheating on a daily basis, but they seldom take their own life. There is more going on under the surface with these officers than anyone may know.

After an officer suicide the agency should submit their part of the application for PSOB. Let the Department of Justice make the determination if it is a line-of-duty death and benefits should be paid. There is no financial cost to an agency to complete the application. Agency leaders need to remember that they may not have been privy to issues or injuries suffered by the officer. Officers often suffer in silence. By completing the application the leaders send a clear message to the family of the fallen officer that they support them and their officer will not be forgotten. Do not let personal bias regarding an individual officer, their family, or the fact that they died by suicide, be the deciding factor on completing the application.

After the passage of Public Safety Officer Benefit Act (PSOSA), Survivors of Blue Suicide (SBS) and Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.) began working together and will be co-hosting retreats for surviving families and co-workers of officers who die by suicide regardless of their End of Watch.

Always remember it is about honoring the officer's service to the agency and the community and the life they lived, it is not about how they died.