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Counselors: support local police by sharing your skills

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Counselors: Support local police by sharing your skills

Earlier this year, in an article for the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, we proposed that interpersonal skills training is fundamental to effective performance in all aspects of police work. We argued that although police officers receive expert training in tactical and legal skills, and that their mastery of these skills can be documented, it is unclear whether they are routinely taught interpersonal skills or how these skills are evaluated, if at all.

Actually, in preparing our article, we noticed that police officers rarely if ever receive basic interpersonal skills training, even though they are in dire need of developing these skills. Where can police officers find resources to assist them in the pursuit of these skills? One answer lies with counselor education programs and practicing counselors.

Counselor education programs provide curriculum and methods for teaching and evaluating foundational interpersonal skills. Counselor educators, practicing counselors and counseling interns can serve as coaches to teach, demonstrate, supervise and evaluate police recruits in the use of these skills. Counselors can also help veteran police officers to review, practice and upgrade performance in these skills.

There is no requirement for counselors to have specific knowledge of police work to help in this area. Rather, all that is needed is a willingness to share their skills. Police academy instructors are the ones who can then apply these skills to the training needs across the police academy curriculum.

Why police need to strengthen 'talk' skills

Police officers work with the public to create safe and crime-free communities. To be successful, they must display strong tactical and legal capabilities and also convey verbal and nonverbal interpersonal skills that communicate respect, diffuse conflicts, reduce violence, instill public partnership and demonstrate a professional demeanor.

The reality is that police engage on a daily basis in two activities: They talk to people and they touch people. The "touch" factor is represented by a concern for officer safety. Police are trained and evaluated in the handling of firearms, motor vehicle stops, self-defense, arrest and control, and responses to crimes in progress. "Talk" skills are essential to the execution of these tasks.

Talk skills are also necessary for police officers to create and maintain environments that encourage a tone of civility in their interactions with the public. It has been documented that the police and public have different expectations and attitudes that can raise tensions when the police and the public interact. These tensions can be further intensified today in an increasingly multicultural society in which a number of challenging issues and factors, including an uncertain economy, can lead to domestic or workplace violence, abuse, stealing, rage and bullying. Faced with these challenges, police officers must demonstrate a competence level with talk skills that is on par with their touch skills. Only by putting talk skills at the forefront of their training can police expect to contribute to their desire for a tone of civility, which is essential for maximizing a level of collaboration with

the public that can lead to safe and crime-free communities.

Counselor educators, practicing counselors and counseling interns are an identifiable and critical resource to police in achieving a high level of training in interpersonal skills. Once basic interpersonal skills are in place, counselors can help police focus on other important skill sets, including how to give and receive feedback and how to succeed in leadership tasks.

Enhancing skills for giving and receiving feedback

Once police recruits complete classroom instruction, they enter what is called the officer field training program. This is where, under intensive supervision, police officers translate all learning experiences to date into acceptable performance in motor vehicle stops, criminal investigations, and domestic violence and conflict situations. In field training programs, officers receive mandatory feedback for a period of 10-14 weeks on their encounters with the public. This is analogous to the feedback process that counseling students engage in with site and university supervisors during their clinical training.

Here again, counselors can help supervising officers in field training programs learn effective ways of giving, receiving, clarifying and exchanging feedback, particularly if that feedback is corrective in nature. Many tools and approaches are available in the counseling literature, as well as in clinical supervision curricula, to help make the best use of supervision that leads to growth and competence as counselors. These same resources can be adapted for use in field officer training programs, allowing

supervisors to enhance the professional development of police personnel, while helping officers to gain an appreciation of feedback and its link to their personal and professional development.

Enhancing skills for leadership tasks

Upon mastery of interpersonal skills and feedback skills, a natural progression is to focus on group facilitation skills. These skills are needed in a variety of situations common to police work, including debriefing meetings, block watch groups, and team or divisional commander tasks.

Here again, counselors possess the skills to provide training and supervision on a range of basic leadership competencies, including how to build interaction and gather information; how to draw members out, cut off extraneous conversation or shift the conversation to focus on the desired topic in a meeting; and how to use attention to the here and now to address nonverbal behaviors that might negatively affect the work of the group.

Group work literature offers many models and ideas for counselors to use in helping police officers understand group dynamics and assemble a skill set that supports success in their leadership duties.

Sharing our skills: Who benefits?

With a solid grasp of basic interpersonal skills, police are in a better position to respond with competence and sensitivity to potentially volatile situations in their daily work. Additionally, as police gain mastery of interpersonal skills, feedback skills and skills for facilitating leadership tasks, they can model and transfer these skills to all members of the organization. A new generation of trained police

personnel will emerge with proficiency both in human relations skills and tactical skills.

The timing is excellent for this type of collaboration between counselors and police. The medical profession is already addressing the need for physicians to learn how to communicate with patients and work as a team. Like doctors who listen carefully to their patients, police officers must listen to and understand the public to gather pertinent information, supplement their technical knowledge and build more civility and trust between themselves and the public they are sworn to serve.

By pursuing partnerships with police personnel, counselors will be fulfilling a call to share their skills with others in their communities. In addition, counselors will gain visibility for their expertise and contribute to the betterment of their communities.

Together, police officers and counselors will benefit through improved communication and increased understanding of what the other group does. In the end, communities will reap exponential benefits as a result of the collaboration between these two disciplines.

Contact your local police department today

You might believe that police organizations are insulated and difficult to reach as a counselor. We think such connections are possible, however. The key concepts to consider are creativity and opportunity.

Do you know a school resource officer in the local schools who might be willing to exchange ideas about training, or is there a training division within your local police department? You could take a copy of our 2012 *FBI Law Enforcement*

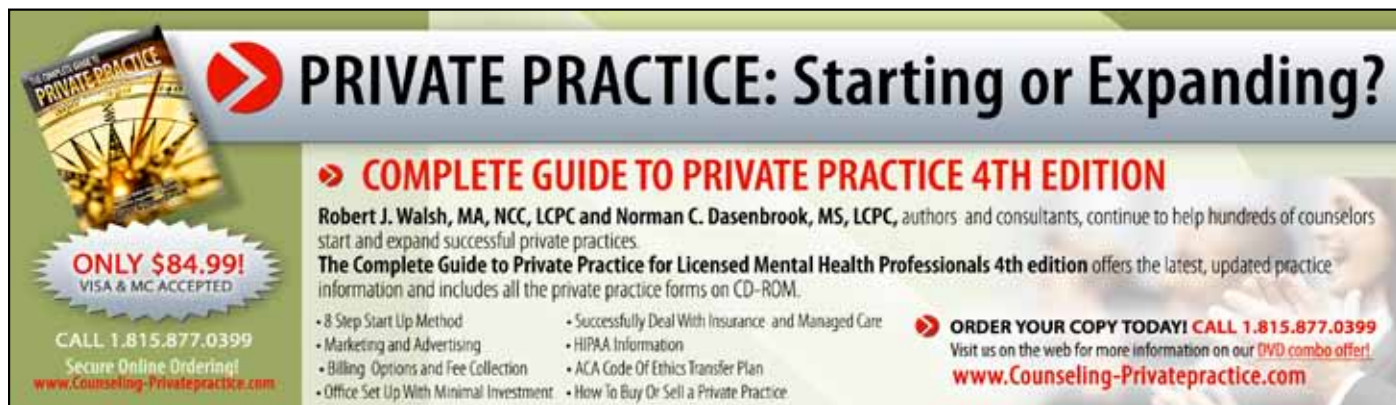
Bulletin article, "Interpersonal Skills Training in Police Academy Curriculum," and offer your assistance in providing skills training to young recruits or refresher sessions for veteran officers. We have written two other articles (one in print, the other in press) for the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* that could serve as resources for your outreach efforts, and we are available to talk about our initiatives in the state of Connecticut.

The potential rewards for collaboration across the disciplines of counselor education and law enforcement are many. Such collaboration is a great way for counselors to share their important skills, helping police personnel to use improved interpersonal skills to achieve their mission of better communication with the public and safer, crime-free communities. ♦

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