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ALL IN POLICE DEPT. FACE COUNSELING

Sessions Meant to Ease Stress in Wake of Sept. 11 Attack

By RICHARD LEZIN JONES

The New York Police Department has ordered all 55,000 employees, including uniformed officers, to attend mental health counseling to relieve the stress and strain imposed by the attack on the World Trade Center and its aftermath.

The counseling sessions, the first to be made mandatory for everyone in the nation's largest police force, are partly inspired by a similar plan used for rescue workers after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and will be financed by the Police Foundation, a private nonprofit service group for officers, and conducted by mental health professionals at Columbia University.

The proposal was welcomed yesterday by many rank-and-file officers.

"It can't hurt," said Officer Mike Walch of the 115th Precinct in Queens, standing on Dey Street just outside the World Trade Center site. "Everybody's tired, they're strained. It's especially hard on the families." The Police Department lost 23 officers in the attack.

Department officials acknowledged that mandatory counseling ran counter to the muscular culture of the department. Indeed, officials acknowledged that officers had been reluctant to seek voluntary counseling, which has been available for many years, in part because they believed that any perceived weakness might damage their careers.

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Officials decided that the stigma attached to counseling would be reduced by making it compulsory. That way, the thinking goes, emotional distress related to the attacks will be seen not as an individual failure but rather as a simple fact that has to be confronted by the entire force.

"Everyone from a clerk at Police Headquarters to the commissioner has been affected," said Pam Delaney, director of the Police Foundation. "We wanted to destigmatize it so no one thinks that they are being singled out because they are having a problem, but rather to universalize it so that it is clear that it's a problem affecting everyone."

That said, some officers said they believed that the sessions should be elective. Officer Robert Garay said that he could understand requiring those who responded first to the World Trade Center on Sept. 11 to seek counseling, but that sending everyone was not necessary.

"If I'm ordered to go, I'll go," said Officer Garay, 32, who works in crime analysis in the Bronx. "But I think the department should leave the decision up to the cop."

The foundation is raising about $10 million to help pay for the three-part program, which began 11 days ago. The first phase is made up of the mandatory counseling sessions.

Organizers face the task of providing counseling for a department whose membership of 55,000 is roughly equal to the population of Flagstaff, Ariz.

Every member of the department will be required to attend a group therapy session, configured like a town meeting or informal rap session. In those meetings, they will be able to discuss the events of Sept. 11 and their aftermath with one of 500 mental health professionals who have volunteered their services. Each meeting will also be led by one of the retired or active police officers who now serve as peer counselors. Officers are scheduled to attend the sessions with other members of their units in groups of about 20.

The second part of the counseling effort involves the creation of an emergency telephone line and a referral system, which allows members of the department to schedule free, anonymous counseling at Co-

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lumbia University for themselves or their family members. Columbia will send bills anonymously to the Police Foundation, with no record of specific officers who have received counseling.

The third phase involves what organizers describe as a health fair, including discussion groups led by counselors in which spouses and other family members of those in the department can discuss whatever emotional health issues or other concerns they have stemming from Sept. 11.

"We just want to get this out there so people know that it's there," Ms. Delaney said.

Although the program has been designed with the police in mind, foundation officials said they were willing to work with the Fire Department to develop a similar plan.

The Fire Department, which lost 343 people in the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, has not instituted mandatory counseling but has added $3 million to the department's counseling unit to deal with stress from the terrorist attack. Mental health professionals and peer counselors have been sent to group counseling at each of the 75 firehouses that lost members. Individual firefighters who seek further counseling are able to visit the department's own counseling unit or can arrange to speak to someone outside the agency under their medical insurance plan.

The mandatory police sessions, which are being held in locations like church basements and recreation centers, were conceived in the days after the attack. Department officials acknowledge that they are only part of a mental health treatment plan that is still being completed.

"The stress management sessions represent only the first component of what will be a multifaceted process," Police Commissioner Bernard B. Kerik said in a statement. "Ultimately, our goal is to do everything we can to help the members of the N.Y.P.D. and their families make it through these difficult times."

The compulsory sessions were welcomed by those who study how emotional health is affected by large-scale disasters.

Richard M. Gist, a psychology professor at the University of Missouri at Kansas City, who for 15 years has been a mental health consultant to the Kansas City Fire Department, said it was often helpful to foster workplace discussions after catastrophic incidents like terrorist attacks, but cautioned against using such talks as the sole basis for more formal mental health treatment.

Organizers said they were careful to avoid doing so. Ms. Delaney said the discussions were mainly informational and focused on such issues as recognizing and dealing with stress and making sure members of the department knew where they could seek help.

"This is not about diagnosing a mental illness," she said. "It is just to get people talking, maybe about how your kids are handling it, or how your spouse is handling it. How do you feel about this? To get people to recognize they might not be handling it that well. That they are having nightmares, or are irritable or can't sleep."

At his post on Dey Street, outside the ruins of the World Trade Center, Officer Walch said some officers might be suffering emotionally without quite realizing it. He said he had begun to grind his teeth when he slept and he did not know why.

"This isn't normal," he said. "Your body is just so tired."

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