

Promising Practices

The New Castle County Police Department's Holistic Officer Wellness Program



Police officers experience mental health symptoms at a higher rate than the general population—a [2020 study](#) reported that 26 percent of officers experienced mental health symptoms compared to 21 percent of the general population. The higher rates for officers are likely due to high stress and reoccurring exposure to trauma, and a lack of access to services and support. In response, officer wellness programs have spread across the country, bolstered in part by the larger societal movement toward behavioral health support and services. One promising model is Delaware's [New Castle County Police Department \(NCCPD\)'s](#) Holistic Officer Wellness (HOW) program.

Realizing there was a gap in officer mental health support, NCCPD embarked on creating an officer wellness program in 2021. The first step was to bring a trauma-informed yoga and meditation teacher on staff as a consultant. NCCPD slowly began adding program elements with a focus on mental and physical health. The program's services are available to, and tailored toward, the needs of public safety personnel, including police, EMS, paramedics, dispatchers and civilians. The resources and support provided through HOW are available to officers and their families throughout their careers from [hiring until retiring](#).

About the How Program

The HOW program includes a variety of offerings, ranging from financial literacy education to a workout facility hosted on the grounds of the headquarters. A nutritionist on staff, who is also a police officer, advises officers on their diet and provides customized nutrition planning for improved health. Online and in-person yoga, meditation sessions and group workouts are conducted regularly. Additionally, NCCPD remains vigilantly committed to improving officer wellness and has created a wellness committee, consisting of representatives across departments, to brainstorm new initiatives.

The HOW program focuses on and emphasizes officer wellness in both the short and long term. The department has a Critical Incident Stress Management Team (CISM), consisting of trained

officers who respond immediately after a critical incident to provide acute support. To help after the acute moment of crisis, NCCPD created a peer support team to complement CISM's work; these dedicated officers proactively check in with officers across the department and provide long-term peer-to-peer support for mental health challenges.

One innovative program offered as part of HOW is its smartwatch program. The pilot program began in April 2023 and watches were distributed to officers who had volunteered to participate in the wellness program by the end of May. The smartwatches, from Garmin, measure and monitor key data points from participating officers such as stress, sleep and fitness levels. The watches, worn 24 hours a day, seven days a week, are worn by any interested officers, including leadership and police academy students. Officers can track their health performance and work toward specific goals and health-conscious

behaviors. The HOW program makes wearing the smartwatches fun—gift cards, provided by the Fraternal Order of Police, are handed out to officers who meet certain metrics, and other friendly competitions are conducted periodically. Since the smartwatches were implemented, participation in yoga and meditation courses has increased by [200 percent](#). A January 2024 survey found that 93 percent of respondents made positive health changes such as decreasing the amount of alcohol consumed, improving sleep patterns, increasing fitness levels and improving stress management. Each month participating officers receive a survey asking for basic information such as their average stress score—this data is utilized for grant reports and general project management and improvement—importantly, no one has direct access to the data contained within the officers’ watches.



Funding and Support



Funding for the program has primarily come from federal grants. In July 2021, NCCPD received a [Byrne Justice Assistance Grant \(Byrne JAG\)](#) from the [Delaware Criminal Justice Council \(CJC\)](#), for an app run through Aetna targeted toward providing first responders with mental health support. While NCCPD elected to go in a different direction for their wellness support, much was learned from this initial app experience. Later that year, NCCPD was awarded over \$121,000 from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) through their [Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act \(LEMHWA\)](#) program to build out the HOW program. The COPS grant was paired with another grant from the CJC—a \$15,000 Byrne JAG investment toward the purchase of smartwatches.

In the spring of 2024, NCCPD’s police academy became a CrossFit affiliate called Code98 CrossFit. Additionally, NCCPD has requested additional Byrne JAG funding, through the CJC, to partner with the founder of NeuroSmart, a Stanford School of Medicine researcher. This project, if awarded, would involve issuing wearable devices to police academy recruits, as well as officers, to study and monitor stress during scenario-based training. The HOW program represents an excellent model of officer wellness through its holistic approach, wide range of voluntary opportunities, commitment on behalf of the agency toward valuing its staff and its sustained engagement from participants themselves.

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