Suicide rates jolt police culture

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By John Ritter, USA TODAY

The warning signs that police officer Steve Martin was a suicide risk were clear enough in hindsight: erratic behavior, disgust with his job, heavy drinking, a strained marriage. But the lack of foresight is what leaves his wife, Debbie, angry more than a year later.

"When officers came and told me what had happened — and I have a roomful of witnesses to this — they said, 'We knew he was in serious trouble,' " she says. "I remember thinking, OK, so why didn't you do anything about it? How can you sit there and tell me after he put a gun to his head that you knew he was bad off?"

What happened in Wichita is tragically familiar across the country, say psychologists and former officers who have studied law enforcement suicide. The crime-fighting culture is about strength and control, and most officers think asking for help is a badge of weakness. Police are supposed to solve problems, not be the problem.

"These folks are taught to suppress their emotions and soldier forward," says Elizabeth Dansie, a psychologist who works with California police agencies in the aftermath of suicides. "It's very difficult for them to admit they need help."

More law enforcement agencies are trying to prevent suicide in their ranks.

Changing the culture

The California Highway Patrol (CHP) is developing training for suicide awareness and prevention after eight troopers killed themselves in eight months last year, for a total of 13 since September 2003. The CHP toll is "the largest cluster I've seen for a department that size," says Robert Douglas, executive director of the National Police Suicide Foundation.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police is circulating a proposal, obtained by USA TODAY, to make suicide prevention tools available to all of the nation's nearly 18,000 state and local police agencies. "Current police culture … tends to be entirely avoidant of the issue," leaving suicidal officers with "no place to turn," a draft of the proposal says.

The suicide foundation says it has verified an average of 450 law enforcement suicides in each of the last three years, compared with about 150 officers who died annually in the line of duty. Douglas says no more than 2% of the nation's law enforcement agencies have prevention programs.

Suicide rates for police — at least 18 per 100,000 — are higher than for the general population, according to Audrey Honig, chief psychologist for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

Large departments (New York City, Milwaukee) and small ones (Holland, Ohio; Lavallette, N.J.) had suicides last year.

Police departments in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and the Washington State Patrol are among the few agencies with comprehensive programs, including videos, brochures and posters, peer-support training, coaching on warning signs and psychological outreach.

The Los Angeles sheriff's program started in 2001. Since 2002 the force has had just two suicides among its 9,000 officers. "Our personnel are receptive to getting assistance when they need it," Honig says.

In the past, law enforcement suicides often were ruled accidental deaths, and they are still underreported, Dansie says. "Most of us agree that the statistics are probably much higher than we actually know,

because of the shame factor."

CHP's reaction was typical, says John Violanti, a former New York state trooper and now a professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Fallout from suicide, he says, "lasts a long time, and morale goes down the tube. I've seen entire departments go into states of depression."

CHP will hire a clinical psychologist to oversee a broad prevention program called "Question, Persuade and Refer," says deputy chief Ramona Prieto. "It won't just be putting up a few posters and hoping people understand," Prieto says. "It will be training at every level for every employee."

Police bear the same stress from work, family and illness that civilians do. What's different is the stress of the street and the access to a gun. "Research has always shown that availability of firearms, comfort with firearms, increases suicide rates," Honig says.

Police acquire "image armor," says James Reese, a former FBI agent who started the bureau's stress-management training in the 1980s. "It's their need to always be in control, always be fine, always be right. We never hear cops say, 'I'm afraid. I made a mistake.' "

The FBI has no mandatory suicide prevention training outside of its stress program, says spokeswoman Cathy Milhoan. Since 1993, 20 agents have killed themselves, she says.

Avoided counseling

Steve Martin, a 6-foot-6, well-liked veteran of the Wichita force, was 44 when he shot himself on Halloween 2005. Debbie Martin says she tried repeatedly to get her husband into counseling.

"He kept canceling the appointments," she says. "He said he was afraid the department would find out he was going, that he had a serious drinking problem, and he'd be fired."

Martin couldn't leave the job at the station, and what he saw over 15 years, several on a gang unit, began to wear him down, his wife says. He couldn't let go of one incident — finding a 2-year-old girl in a car, shot in the head after a gang shootout.

The couple separated but spent a lot of time together. Martin was drinking daily, cursing his job, she says. He threatened her and once pulled his gun on her.

Martin's suicide threw the force of 690 officers into turmoil. "A lot of people were in denial," says Lt. Sam Hanley, his former sergeant. "A lot of them were angry at Steve himself, because they worked with him and he hadn't said anything."

Hanley was ordered to develop suicide-prevention training, and Wichita officers attended mandatory four-hour sessions.

"Suicide has always been kind of hush-hush in the police community," he says. "When it happens to one of your people, all of a sudden everybody wants information."
