

Spike in cops seeking mental health help

Program staffing lags; at least 5 officers have died by suicide since July

The Chicago Police Department's mental health assistance program has more than doubled its contacts with officers and their families since 2013 without any significant increase in clinical staffing, records show.

The sharp rise in appointments and consultations raises questions about whether the program is overburdened at a time when the department is coping with a [cluster of officer suicides](#). At least five Chicago police officers have died by suicide since July, most recently an off-duty officer on New Year's Day.

The department's employee assistance program, or EAP, offers mental health services such as counseling and debriefings after traumatic incidents.

It registered just over 5,000 consultations and appointments in 2013, according to data released by the department following a Freedom of Information Act request from the Tribune. By the end of 2017, the EAP had more than 12,800 such contacts with officers and family members.

During the same time, clinical therapists on staff rose from three to five, though a department spokesman says there are plans to hire more counselors.

But outside experts wonder [whether those plans are enough](#). "That service is already being overtaxed," said Arthur Lurigio, a professor of psychology at Loyola University who has studied police officers and mental health.

Lurigio said the EAP has likely been underused for decades, given stigmas in law enforcement about seeking mental health help. With many rank-and-file officers historically reluctant to seek counseling, the department may not have been motivated to invest in counseling services.

The rising numbers may indicate the stigma is lessening, or that officers have been under more stress in recent years, experts say. One mental health professional suggested the rise in 2017 could stem from the rise in shootings in 2016, the city's deadliest year since the 1990s.

"The Police Department should take this seriously and put a lot of resources toward such programming," Lurigio said.

The caseload figures show a steady increase each year, with the exception of 2015, which saw a slight decrease. In 2014, staff clinicians handled more than 7,900 appointments and consultations, followed by about 7,400 in 2015. The number jumped in 2016 to more than 9,000.

By 2017, the caseload was more than twice what it was four years earlier.

The department plans to hire six more clinicians, bringing the number to 11, according to Chicago police spokesman Anthony Guglielmi.

“We have been taking this issue of suicides very seriously,” Guglielmi said, pointing to the hiring in progress as well as an expanded peer support program and clergy added to the department’s chaplain ministry.

Under the peer program, an officer can call a number anytime to talk to a fellow officer, confidentially. Peer program volunteers also show up at scenes of “traumatic events.”

Guglielmi attributed some of the EAP caseload to the department’s work to increase awareness and outreach for its mental health offerings.

The planned hires would bring the department into compliance with a consent decree that requires the EAP staff at least 10 full-time clinicians by 2020.

The mandate stemmed from a 2017 report by the U.S. Department of Justice. The report noted that EAP clinicians were already overextended in 2015 when there were just three clinicians.

“Every day, counselors check the phones and ‘triage,’ many times having to rearrange scheduled appointments, shorten meetings to fit in more people, or cancel others to address more serious crises,” the report stated.

Since the Justice Department investigation, consultations and appointments have increased by more than 70 percent while the number of clinical therapists has risen by just two.

The department hired one of the clinicians in November 2017 and the other in May 2018, according to the response to the Freedom of Information request. It’s not clear when the department will hire the six other clinicians. Guglielmi said the hiring process was ongoing.

Lurigio said the need for more help is critical.

“Any time police are on street, it’s stressful,” he said. “Most of the time it’s quiet, with nothing to do, then you go from zero to 60 to 100 mph responding to violence, accidents, child abuse, domestic violence, the worst things people do to one another.

“That vicariously affects them.”

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