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### **POLICE SAY LEADERSHIP IS IGNORING PTSD.**

Tiffany Thomas

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# Police Say Leadership Is Ignoring PTSD.

**By: Tiffany S. Thomas**

It was a warm early morning in 2007 when active duty police officer, Mark Dibona was sitting in his cruiser in-front of a fire station in Sanford, Florida.

Dibona was taking notes in his police logbook when a woman carrying an unconscious infant approached him frantically asking for help. “My baby isn’t breathing!” Dibona recalled the woman saying. He performed CPR but he was unable to revive the infant. The 3-month-old baby boy died at a nearby hospital.

Dibona blamed himself. In the following weeks, Dibona said he became withdrawn and started to drink heavily. After his shift, he and other colleagues took trips to a bar and drank to alleviate the stress. He spiraled into depression and was later diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

“I ask myself several times why did I sign up for this job. It’s a thankless job, it’s an evil job,” Dibona said. “If I knew the dirty little secrets of law enforcement, I think I would’ve taken another route because I couldn’t even imagine committing suicide.”

Nearly one in every five officer has symptoms of PTSD according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Depression, PTSD, anxiety and suicidal thoughts are all results of unmanaged stressors. These issues can have a huge impact on an officer’s physical and mental well-being, and can accumulate over the course of his or her career. As police are under fire for a series of killings of innocent black people, they believe their PTSD issues are being overlooked.

Police officers are on the frontline of violence and high risk situations but the toll on their mental health is often overlooked. Many are reluctant to seek help fearing that they will be identified as weak and incapable of doing their job. Even though there are programs implemented at local and national levels for them to properly cope and destress, some police officers and officials say they are inadequate.

“One of the most critical issues in police training to help police officers deal with mental issues and the stress on the job is stress management training they do not receive,” said Dr. Maria Haberfeld, the co-director of NYPD police studies program at John Jay College. “The same way they need to be qualified for firearms twice a year, it has to be mandatory to go to stress management. It cannot be left to officers alone because they won’t go. It needs to be institutionalized in the training process,” Haberfeld said.

Dibona now works for the Seminole County Sheriff’s office in Florida. He is among the 19 percent of officers in the U.S. who are struggling with their mental well-being. He finds it mind boggling that there aren’t enough programs for law enforcement to cope.

“When I became a cop in 1985, we were told nothing should bother you, just keep it moving,” Dibona recalled. He said he didn’t know where to go or know who to talk to. “Cops don’t like to show their emotions,” he said. “They don’t want to talk because they don’t want to show weakness or for the public and their colleagues to think they are weak.” Instead, officers like Dibona often opt for unhealthy coping tools like drugs, alcohol or simply bottling their emotions.

After witnessing the infant’s death, Dibona says he couldn’t live with the mental turmoil. He thought his best way of relief was to vent to his boss. He said with all the fear and guilt playing back and forth in his mind, he mustered enough strength to approach his supervisor.

But, Dibona says, his boss provided no help. Instead, he was told to “go home and have a beer. The feeling will eventually die. Toughen up.”

Dibona said he felt his only choice was to bottle up his emotions. Soon he began having nightmares. He recalls dreaming of collecting mails from his mailbox and finding the lifeless 3-month-old baby inside the mailbox.

“It was really scary because until this day, I can feel the warmth of the baby on my arm. I can still feel when the baby was drooling down my arm when I was doing CPR,” Dibona said.

“There are still moments today where I close my eyes and still see the drooling baby in the emergency room and the doctors looked at me at goes, this baby is dead and there is nothing more we can do.”

The tragedy affected Dibona’s job performance and personal life. With his boss dismissing his feelings and threatening to fire him, Dibona became suicidal. On two separate occasions he put his gun to his mouth but couldn’t bring himself to pull the trigger.

Dibona said he planned out his death. He wrote two suicide notes, one to his family and the other to his agency. He remembers sitting in his car with a gun in his mouth, but the pain he thought he would cause his family brought him to his senses.

Dibona has no children. He says his wife and God are precious to him and keep him grounded. With most of his time devoted to work, he finds little time to take a vacation or spend quality time with his wife. He credits her for supporting him through his mental state by making sure he attends counseling.

Suicide is a major issue among officers. According to Badge of Life, a police suicide prevention program, an officer commits suicide every 81 hours and each year, there is an average of 130 suicides.

“The key issue isn’t suicide, it’s mental health,” said Ron Clark, the founder and director of Badge of Life. A retired cop who runs the program, Clark also suffers with PTSD and depression

as a result of trauma incurred while on duty. “More officers die of suicide than from gunfire and traumatic events combined,” he said.

For Clark, he realized that his coping mechanisms like consuming alcohol and not verbalizing how he felt weren’t helping, they were dragging him down a path from which he couldn’t come back.

“I saw that I needed help because I would just do things and regret them later. I would drink uncontrollably, not realizing that I was emotionally unstable,” Clark said.

“This has been a part of police cultures for generations,” Haberfeld said. “They talk to each other, they go for a drink and this is the reason why police officers have a higher rate of alcoholism than other professions because that’s how they destress. It’s sort of a venting process than a coping process.”

Groups like Clark’s are looking for solutions. “One answer to this lies in the implementation of annual and voluntary mental health check-ups with a therapist of the individual’s choice,” Clark said. Now, with increasing awareness of officer mental health, there are several peer support programs available at the national and local level.

Laura Usher, NAMI’s senior manager for criminal justice and advocacy, agrees with Clark. “It would be a good idea for an annual mental wellness check to be a part of their fitness training and recertification. This will help officers to get familiar with mental health resources and simply introduce them to the topic.”

Now that he supervises nine officers, Dibona said there is a shortage of programs for law enforcement emotional needs and wishes for it to be addressed on a national level. Like Haberfeld, Dibona said, “It should be mandated in training, in the academy, while on duty and after retirement because a lot of officers die shortly after they retire.”

“I blamed the agency for the stresses of the job. They didn’t have my back and wasn’t fair to me,” Dibona said. Today, he struggles with PTSD, depression, and anxiety. He relies on God, his wife, daily medication and therapy to remain emotionally healthy.

Stress from the job and serving in hostile communities has left officers like Dibona to cope with the additional stress of the public’s mistrust.

Deadly encounters between black citizens and police in recent years across the U.S. have sparked countless debates and protests like #AllLivesMatter, #BlackLivesMatter, #StayWoke and a slew of others that questions police conduct and their methods in dealing with innocent black men.

In February 2012, an unarmed African-American male, Trayvon Martin, 17, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, 28, a former neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, Florida. Zimmerman claimed that he was attacked by Martin who was on his way to his father's house carrying a pack of skittles and a can of Arizona iced tea.

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Zimmerman was later arrested and was found not guilty by a jury made up of six female-white and an African-American. Even though the jurors reached a consensus of not prosecuting Zimmerman, there were talks of racial undertones which fueled the race debate on how young black males are treated in the criminal justice system.

Since then, communities have been convulsed by killings of black men and women by white police in places like Ferguson where riots met the killing of Michael Brown, 18. Nationwide there is widespread mistrust and loathing of police in black communities.

For cops like Dibona, that has meant they have to be extra cautious in their policing. While he is immensely sympathetic to the anger, he said it has only added to his mental anguish.

Dibona said he has noticed dramatic changes and disconnect within the community he serves since the Black Lives Matter movement. "The media, protests and riots and things like that have turned people against the police. It is very difficult to go to work wondering if they hate me or like me you know what I mean or even worse," Dibona said.

He recalled being in a convenience store and was fixing a cup of coffee when a kid walked in. Dibona smiled at him. Unexpectedly, the kid raised his hands and goes, 'hands up, don't shoot.' "I thought he was kidding," Dibona said. "I always say the majority of people lost respect for police officers. They talk crap about us but we still have to protect them," Dibona said.

Usher believes that there's a "huge disconnect and lack of trust with the community and law enforcement that causes stress on police officers."

"Whether you're white or black, everybody deserves the same protection and respect," Dibona said. "They don't see the officer that does CPR on the dying baby or the officer who had to shoot and kill somebody and it's taking a toll on them mentally. We don't wake up day-to-day and say we're going to kill somebody. I truly think our mental health has taken a backseat to everything that's going on today," Dibona said.

Their symptoms and health are often overlooked hence why they have to be on the defense, Dibona said. "I believe that we are always on the defense, but we have to be transparent and

show the public that we are human beings, that we have emotions and that we get stressed out,” he said.

Community Affairs Officer from New York’s 73rd precinct, Keith Jermott said he doesn’t recall experiencing blatant disrespect in his 15 years as a police officer. Surrounded by cases of bottled water to his office roof and files scattered on his desk, Jermott said that if anything, the public misconstrues the true purpose of an officer.

The 47-year-old said that the communities they serve fail to understand that “we are like them. We are everyday people. We are sensitive to your plight. We feel and hear your cry. But most of all, we are human and at the end of the day our job is to instill order to maintain,” Jermott said as he squeezed on two tension balls.

With more attention drawn to law enforcement wellness, more resources are accessible to lessen the load of the stress caused by the profession. There are peer supports and chaplains but “the stigma will still be there no matter what,” Dibona said. “There has been a big change with how they deal with law enforcement’s emotional health and we still have a long way to go.”