

Officer Safety Corner—Yoga and Mindfulness Program: City of Falls Church Police Department

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The City of Falls Church, Virginia, Police Department (FCPD) is addressing the safety and wellness of sworn and professional staff by integrating yoga and mindfulness practices into the culture of the organization. There is evidence that mindfulness-based programs can mitigate the impact of stress on physical, psychological, and emotional well-being.¹ Mindfulness practices also help build resilience, increase the capacity of practitioners to respond soundly under pressure in the face of extraordinary challenges, and help individuals connect meaningfully with each other. What started as a positive and profound personal experience for one officer has been incorporated into the strategies and work plans of the agency; mindfulness is quickly becoming integral to the culture of the FCPD.

City of Falls Church

The City of Falls Church is a historic city situated just six miles from the U.S. capital and considered a part of the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area. Working in proximity to Washington, D.C., requires officers to maintain a constant state of heightened awareness for potential large-scale threats, including acts of terrorism, while simultaneously operating and coping with the day-to-day challenges faced by all municipal departments.

Demonstrated Need

The pressures on law enforcement personnel place them in the highest risk categories for cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other stress-related diseases and conditions.² FCPD officers usually work 12-hour shifts accompanied with long commutes to and from work, which does not allow for much downtime. Budget constraints in the past six years have cut personnel positions and resources, impacting staffing and adding additional pressure and workloads on all departmental personnel. In the past 18 months, 7 of the 32 department members were on light duty as a result of injury or illness.

According to the American Psychological Association, resilience is “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress—such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors.”³ The very nature of law enforcement requires officers to remain hyper-vigilant for long periods of time. This sort of stress response actually can decrease their capacity to think clearly and adapt quickly to different situations. Understanding and managing one’s own response to stress is critical, and to do so requires a level of mind-body awareness that strengthens the capacity to self-regulate and adapt quickly.

At the heart of FCPD’s approach to wellness is a mind-set that an increasing number of stressors has to be met with an innovative approach to wellness—one that is preventative, is sustainable, and gives officers the practical tools they can use on a daily basis in their professional and personal lives. What strength training does for the physical body, mindfulness does for people’s entire way of being; it is an embodied practice that becomes a way of life.

Background

The program was spearheaded by Master Police Officer/Detective Jennifer Elliott, whose primary care physician prescribed a private yoga session as a means of rehabilitation while she was recovering from an injury. A one-hour session of breathing practices and gentle movement had such a positive effect for this self-professed skeptic that Detective Elliott adopted yoga as a regular practice. Elliott became even more aware of the impact that stress was having on her and her team and began thinking of how to start a program for her coworkers in the Criminal Investigation Division.



There are many styles and ways of teaching yoga, but it was not just the yoga that Detective Elliott wanted to bring to the department; it was the teacher. She was convinced that she had found someone who would be able to teach to the culture of law enforcement. Mary Partlow Luttamus, a resident of the City of Falls Church and an experienced practitioner in private practice as a yoga therapist, has taught classes and workshops in therapeutic yoga for a number of years. Her instructions are clear, concise, and designed to help deepen the mind-body connection. She brings components of mindfulness practice into all of her classes and allows time for seated practice and meditation instruction at the end of each class. Luttamus is also the director of the master of science in yoga therapy at Maryland University of Integrative Health and is committed to developing the yoga and mindfulness program for the FCPD.



Detective Elliott approached the command staff and received approval for weekly classes, and the human resources department agreed to incorporate yoga into an existing agreement that allows officers to take an hour and a half each week to work out. Detective Elliott recruited fellow officers and detectives to attend the weekly yoga class, and within a short period of time, all participants reported positive benefits of the practice. What started with one yoga therapy session for an injury became a project for Detective Elliott and a regular practice open to departments in the City of Falls Church government that have direct interaction with the FCPD.

According to FCPD Chief Mary Gavin, the program has been successful because of the out-of-the-box thinking of Detective Elliott and the selection of an experienced and passionate yoga instructor. This program gained interest with other officers because it was created by one of their own. The program was also endorsed by command staff and approved by human resources, which is a testament to the skilled approach taken by Detective Elliott in identifying a need and offering a solution ready for implementation.

The Program

The weekly yoga class includes both physical practice and a mindfulness component. The physical practice is designed to enhance flexibility, increase range of motion, teach balance,

and build strength. The goal of the yoga class is to provide officers with a practice that addresses the most common sources of pain and injury for law enforcement. Every class is designed to target a specific area, such as the lower back, head and neck, shoulders, or hamstrings; when a student comes to class with a specific issue or pain, that area may become the focus of the class. Classes are designed specifically to meet the individual needs of the students.

The mindfulness component of each class is both instructional and experiential. Students are introduced to the foundational principles of mindfulness through guided meditation that focuses on breathing; sensations in the body; and observing thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Guided meditation may include a body scan or progressive relaxation that is designed to deepen awareness and encourage relaxation. Both the body scan and progressive relaxation are usually practiced lying on the back with eyes closed while the teacher guides participants in a systematic way of bringing awareness of sensation in various areas of the body. Typical sessions are 15 to 30 minutes, and participants learn to practice on their own while lying down or seated.

Individual mindfulness is an important component of officer safety. Presence, words, and actions define the culture of an organization and influence the way the culture is perceived by the community. Eventually, the mindfulness culture established by this program will become ingrained in officers' everyday lives, similar to the routine of donning their bulletproof vests, wearing their seat belts, and professionally interacting with the community. Chief Gavin recognizes that this program contributes to both officer and community safety.

Next Steps

FCPD has embraced the practice and resulting benefits of mindfulness, as demonstrated by the following steps taken or planned by the department:

1. Under the leadership and guidance of Chief Gavin, FCPD's 2014 Strategic Plan contains workable objectives that "provide opportunities for the enhancement of physical fitness and emotional wellness." Lieutenant Joe Carter has been appointed by Chief Gavin to be the department's safety and wellness coordinator.
2. The FCPD Emergency Services Unit trains together once a month. Beginning in March 2014, one hour of the training became devoted to teaching mindfulness skills to individuals and to build cohesiveness and support within the team.
3. An eight-week mindful resilience program designed specifically for the FCPD, which incorporates the tools of mindfulness and yoga to help reduce stress and increase resilience, has been implemented. Personnel have been given tools to assist them in both their professional and personal lives.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that officers and civilian staff in law enforcement agencies face enormous stress that, if unchecked, can lead to conditions that have a negative impact on physical, psychological, and emotional health. Officer safety and wellness can improve when agency leaders are willing to support a shift in the culture that is innovative and supports mind-body approaches to health and well-being. ♦

Representatives from the City of Falls Church, Virginia, Police Department will be discussing this program at IACP 2014 as part of the Smaller Agency Track during a workshop being held on Saturday, October 25, from 2:30 to 3:30 p.m. in Room W110B of the Orlando Orange County Convention Center.

Notes:

¹Alberto Chiesa and Alessandro Serretti, "Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction for Stress Management in Healthy People: A Review and Meta-analysis," *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 15, no. 5 (2009): 593; Paul Grossman et al., "Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction and Health Benefits: A Meta-analysis," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 57, no. 1 (2004): 35; Bassam Khoury et al., "Mindfulness-based Therapy: A Comprehensive Meta-analysis," *Clinical Psychology Review* 33, no. 6 (2013): 763-771; William R. Marchand,

"Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy, and Zen Meditation for Depression, Anxiety, Pain, and Psychological Distress," *Journal of Psychiatric Practice* 18, no. 4 (2012): 233.

²Steven Pitts, James Greenwald, and Robb Wolf, "Resiliency as a Path to Wellness," Officer Safety Corner, *The Police Chief* 79 (December 2013): 18–24.

³"FYI: Building Your Resilience," Practice Central, American Psychological Association (2014), <http://www.apapracticecentral.org/outreach/building-resilience.aspx> (accessed May 29, 2014).

Please cite as:

Jennifer Elliott and Mary Partlow Luttamus, "Yoga and Mindfulness Program: City of Falls Church Police Department," Officer Safety Corner, *The Police Chief* 81 (July 2014): 12–13.

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The official publication of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

The online version of the *Police Chief* Magazine is possible through a grant from the IACP Foundation. To learn more about the IACP Foundation, [click here](#).

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