

#29 (BILL WALSH)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hi, I'm Jerry Ratcliffe with Reducing Crime, a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

Bill Walsh is a lieutenant with the Voorhees Police Department in New Jersey. We chat about his work as their health and wellness coordinator, integrating police families into a comprehensive program geared towards officer wellness and resiliency.

Welcome to Reducing Crime, episode 29. The guest theme tune from the previous episode was Hawaii 5-0. If you didn't know that one, then your youth is showing. This time around we have a true classic, perhaps the classic, a police drama that had 146 episodes from 1981 to 1987, a memorable and understated theme tune that you just heard, and over its seven seasons, the show garnered an incredible 98 Emmy award nominations.

This series was the pioneer of the gritty urban realism that inspired NYPD Blue, Breaking Bad, and of course, The Wire. What made this show so memorable was that it blended the multi-cultural on and off duty dramas of what the producers described as 13 characters living through a Gordian knot of personal and professional relationships.

That seems so appropriate because how police officers manage those stresses of a complex work life bleeding through to their home life and family is the subject of my chat this month with Bill Walsh.

Lieutenant Bill Walsh is patrol bureau commander and health and wellness coordinator with the Voorhees Police Department in New Jersey. His work in areas of office wellness programs, police family wellness, and early intervention systems has been published and presented through various organizations, and he serves as a consultant to the IACP, that's the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and US Department of Justice's CRITAC.

Bill holds a master's degree in administrative science and is current working towards a second master's degree in clinical mental health counseling. In 2019, he is named as one of the IACP's 40 Under 40. This award recognizes 40 law enforcement professionals under the age of 40 from around the world that demonstrate leadership and exemplify commitment to their profession.

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His work has led development and implementation of supervisory and agency health and wellness programs that include automatic one-on-one wellness visits with a board-certified police psychologist, family wellness seminars and programming, financial wellness, and a culturally competent employee assistance program.

You join us just as we're settling in to a socially distant brunch, well, it was lunch for him and it was brunch for me, on a lovely autumn afternoon at brew pub in the town where he works and lives.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I should get out of your way, shouldn't I? Thank you.

Server:

And it's long enough, I know when to stop.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good man.

Server:

[crosstalk 00:03:25] for you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Cheers.

Server:

There's lemons and sweetener.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Lemons. Lemons in tea, such an American invention. Cheers, thanks.

Server:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh my God, have you eaten here before?

Bill Walsh:

I have. It's good.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Anything that's not good?

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Bill Walsh:

The fish and chips are good but obviously probably have had much better.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Everybody thinks every British person is a connoisseur of fish and chips.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah, I can see that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We are. It's true, but I'm trying to be healthy because COVID-19, my alcohol intake has gone up, attempts at fitness have slided. No gyms have been open. I'm haven't been going to any yoga. I've been doing stuff at home but the alcohol intake has definitely increased.

Bill Walsh:

Agreed, same here.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's been a lot of comfort food, right? COVID-19 equates to comfort food.

Bill Walsh:

Helps you relax.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And now I'm looking at all this stuff and I'm like, "Yeah, I can have the fried chicken sandwich for breakfast. I can do that."

Bill Walsh:

With a side of nachos.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, they put green onion and pepper on it so that's a least serving of vegetables right there on the nachos, right?

Bill Walsh:

It's like a salad, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What strikes me about this whole officer wellness side is how quickly it came to the fore out of nowhere. It seemed to have been the Obama Presidential Commission really started highlighting it, and then it became just something that we were talking about, I think worldwide, really.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah, when I first started doing the research on it when I was going for my master's, I started exploring suicides in policing because I was impacted by two of them personally, friends of mine, within a month of each other. And when I started doing the research I couldn't believe how big of an issue it was.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Two police officers?

Bill Walsh:

Within a month.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Really.

Bill Walsh:

One had retired two weeks prior to his suicide, and the other one was still an active police officer. One was older and the active officer was 30 years old. Worked with him and the other one I considered a family friend and uncle, essentially, so that made me start shifting my research into police suicides, and that was back in '09, 2010, around there, and back then, we didn't, as a profession, I don't think we really even recognized that suicides were an issue and it wasn't something we really talked about. I always used to say it's like a dark family secret.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, and also policing is very much in your family, isn't it?

Bill Walsh:

It is, yeah. So my dad's a police chief in a municipality near here. My uncle just got sworn in as Police Chief in another municipality near here, and then here I am in Voorhees, so it's definitely a family tradition so I saw it from the lens of being the kid of a police officer and how scary that could be, and now I see it as a police officer and as a father, how scary it can be, possibly not going home and things like that but all the things that you can bring home with you.

Bill Walsh:

It's interesting to see the shift now as more towards, all right, we know that there's a problem we're finally recognizing there's a problem and let's try and start putting things in place to prevent it more seriously and actually use research as we do those things and actually use partnerships and collaboration instead of just the traditional police response, which is, "Let's make a officer, so-and-so the mental health expert now, and he's going to run this program, but she's going to run this program." Now we're actually collaborating partnerships with professionals.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, read this one article and police chief you are now the expert and you're now teaching at the Academy.

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Bill Walsh:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Isn't that how we make experts in policing now?

Bill Walsh:

Absolutely. Yep.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it feels like the last six months, the last year, it seems to have got so much worse.

Bill Walsh:

It has frontline workers in general, especially, from my experience as a police officer, I've seen the pandemic and how that's impacted policing and how it's impacted our safety and our wellness and the fears that we had about going to work we're confronting violent individuals. Now the fears we have going to work is, "Am I going to get sick? Or worse, "Am I going to bring something home to my family and get them sick?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Policing doesn't stop.

Bill Walsh:

It doesn't stop, and before when you go to work, you worry about your vest and that was it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And neither does the aviation industry, apparently.

Bill Walsh:

Right. And we're right at PHL Flight path here, I think. But yeah, you'd always worry about putting your vest on and making sure you had your right equipment and then it became, "All right, do I have my vest? Do I have my body camera?" And then this year it became, "Do I have my vest? Do I have my body camera? Do I have my N95 or P100 mask with me?" And it was kind of something where we're used to seeing our threats and this one's one we didn't see. And then we had the civil unrest shortly thereafter. It was like one thing after another compounding and impacting the officers and their families too.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The civil unrest after the horrific death of George Floyd was I think something that was really interesting because that seemed to be something that touched every Police Department. Now, don't take this the wrong way, but you're in a Police Department in a really nice town. I mean, it's not like a major war zone in any shape or form, but it seemed that

not necessarily the unrest, but certainly the change in the public's attitude towards policing seems to have affected every department.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm still talking to a lot of cops and I'm doing ride alongs in Philadelphia and other places and that seems to have been pervasive. The change in public attitude and how they feel about policing and how they talk about policing seems to be affecting a lot of officers.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah, we're blessed, the community we work in is very supportive of our Police Department, but still you can't escape social media and there's still going to be very vocal people out there who want reform and a lot of agencies do need reform. Our agency [inaudible 00:08:23] we have a very good agency with good policies, procedures, and really great officers. But these incidents, they go across the board, they spread worldwide and now you're dealing with officers who are having family members posting things on social media that are derogatory towards our profession or bringing things up... training they don't understand and it shifted almost overnight.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, what strikes me about it, that change in tone has become much more acceptable. So it's like what political scientists call an Overton window, that window of what is reasonable to discuss has moved in terms policing. And now people can be much more openly vitriolic about policing and much more critical of policing, and in some cases it's justified. And I don't think anybody sensible in policing is going to deny that in the slightest, but a lot of the time it's uninformed or unrealistic, but then to go home to that and to go onto social media or Facebook and see family members and people that you meet for barbecues and Thanksgiving posting that kind of stuff. I can't imagine how that makes many officers feel.

Bill Walsh:

No, and a lot of the sentiment that I heard and that I even experienced personally was I understand where you're coming from, I understand your frustrations with policing, but why haven't you picked up the phone and called me and had a conversation with me to discuss some of the things agencies are doing, or some of the things that do work or work for us here before you post these things or help me to help you understand it a little more from the lens of a police officer before you post these things. But, I agree people have an absolute right to be frustrated, angry, demand change, but some of the things as you put up probably it was viral. Some of the stuff people were posting.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I was out on a ride along the other night, we pulled up and chatting some cops and one officer was just telling me, he was out the other day and....

Server:

You're good?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But at some point we've got a band coming past, right? There's going to be a marching band-

Bill Walsh:

I think so, marching band. Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... coming by this way, yeah. And he was saying, a small child, maybe four or five years old, because this is North Philadelphia, right? Small black kid came up to and said, "Are you going to shoot me?" And that just got to him. That absolutely just got to him. That was the one of the first things that he ended up talking about and he'd been carrying that around that some idiot cop does something truly awful, a thousand miles away. And the repercussions flowed down to that small child being informed, I'm hoping drastically incorrectly, nowhere near accurately that this police officer, instead of being somebody who would help this little girl and help this child in a time of crisis is somebody who would try and kill her.

Bill Walsh:

That's a very drastic example of it, but we've had instances and I've been through this personally where we're just in line getting coffee or getting a sandwich for lunch when we're in uniform working and there'll be a kid in front of us with their parent and the parent will say, "You better behave or the police officer is going to take you away." And it's not something people should be telling their kids. We're there to help them and it's frustrating when an officer does leave their family to go protect strangers and serve strangers for their shift that day and that seems to be a sentiment that's pervasive...

Bill Walsh:

But I always remind officers those are the people you're hearing from. There's plenty of other people out there who are very supportive of you. So it really is about reframing things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We definitely shouldn't be complacent-

Bill Walsh:

No.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But there's always work to be done.

Bill Walsh:

Always.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But I certainly feel and perceive an increase in stress and a lack of morale. And so the work that you've been doing is really trying to help officers that. So, this seems really timely at the moment because society generally is down in the dumps. I mean, 2020 has just been a shit year. I'm just waiting for the meteor strike just to cap the whole thing off nicely, right?

Bill Walsh:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Policing it's been particularly bad. I've never known morale as low as it is.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah. And you hear more officers talking about retiring, even hear officers talking about, "Let me go find something else to do." Even if they're not eligible to retire. We've been talking for years now about recruiting and retention being a crisis in law enforcement before any of this even happened. Recruiting is absolutely getting destroyed right now. People, they're either signing up for the test and not showing up or they're going for the test and then deciding, "No, I don't want to do this." And backing out of the process.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So even if we can recruit people, very new generation, when did you join policing?

Bill Walsh:

2003.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

2003, and I joined in the '80s back in the Neolithic era and there was no sense of looking after officer's mental health. There was no discussion of mental health. You had a British, stiff upper lip, you dealt with whatever you saw as in anybody in policing. And I worked at Inner East London, you see horrific stuff, you deal with horrific stuff. one of the first cases I worked on an assignment to a detective's office was an infanticide of a baby.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you just see all this kind of stuff and then there's no dealing with it. And then there was no expectation. You just went home and you came back the next day. And it really wasn't deemed something that you really talked about unless you hang around with a bunch of the guys and you went to the pub.

Bill Walsh:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think there was a sense that that was your release, but kind of working through stuff with copious amounts of alcohol was clearly for some people, not the best way forward.

Bill Walsh:

Absolutely. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that seems to have been pervasive until fairly recent.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah, fairly recently. Absolutely. As I said, I started in 2003, that was still the culture. We still had choir practice, which for people who aren't familiar with the term was drinking after work together as a squad. And we did discuss a lot of this things we saw during that particular tour of duty or maybe things in the past that were bothering us might come up in conversation. We might talk about our first or most recent events, but it wasn't doing anything good because we're surrounding around a depressant alcohol. And we're talking about negative feelings.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, we're talking about negative stuff, but we're not talking about our feelings.

Bill Walsh:

No, that's true that's a good way to put it, we didn't talk about our feelings we just talked about the negative event.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. And often it would be kind of gory and we would talk about that, but we never talk about how it affected us.

Bill Walsh:

No, or how it affected those around us, or how it affected whether or not we were even going to tell those around us.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And we never had mechanisms for dealing with that in any way, shape or form. You never left any kind of hint that you had any psychological problems. That was like a ticket to nowhere.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah. You didn't do that. I mean, your interaction with a psychologist was to get hired and it was adversarial. It was something where you go in there, you're nervous, you want to make sure you get job because it's a job.... for whatever reason, you really want that job and you have to pass a psychological, most agencies at least have that. You're pretty much told that's the only time you should be in front of them, try to avoid them at all costs for the rest of your career.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And of course, on top of that, you've got the testosterone fuel culture, which is the culture drive in the sense that, "Well, don't be a pussy and man up."

Bill Walsh:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think now we have to capitalize on this and I remind like police leaders all the time, don't shut down this new generation that's coming in.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're very different.

Bill Walsh:

They're very different. They're very open to talking with people. They're very open to discussing their feelings and our emotions around others. That stigma isn't there, it's still there, but it's not as bad as it was.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's really weird to see having come from 30 years plus of being around that environment where you do not talk about this shit-

Bill Walsh:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... to see these young cops who had been kind of like, "Oh man, I felt terrible and blah, blah, blah." They just talking about their feelings and their emotions and all these kinds of things. It's like, this seems weird, but it's healthy.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. Change your viewpoint, Ratcliffe. This is actually, okay, this is good. We should have been doing this.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right?

Bill Walsh:

And it's interesting to take like a time machine trip when we hear some of these things officers are saying, and you're like, "All right, let me think about if I said this 10 years ago." But it's also very promising to show how far our profession is common. Now, recently I read one of our quarterly performance evaluation reviews. And it was from a Sergeant who discussed this things going on with his platoon, morale, things of that nature. And it said how his officers are so happy and pleased with the fact that we have a mental health program and how it's helping them cope with what's going on in 2020.

Bill Walsh:

The fact that we're even putting that on paper.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Bill Walsh:

You would've never even documented that before.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I think this is a great thing. It's great for people in policing and as a a knock on benefit, it's going to be great for the community to have police officers who are better able to deal with all these stresses and emotions is a good thing. But especially with the older guys, and it's generally guys, right?

Bill Walsh:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Who've been around policing 10, 15, 20 years, there's still resistance, right? And they are so influential within shifts within squads, within platoons, within districts. Is it easy to move the older folk?

Bill Walsh:

It's been an incredible challenge with some of the people who've been on the job for a while, even some of the people that have been on the job...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That feels like an understatement, "It's been an incredible challenge."

Bill Walsh:

Well, it's trying to use their experiences to benefit the greater good. They do realize it's a positive. It's just how you elicit that out of them. So we'd have a training session and I'd ask, "Who in the room knows an officer who died by

suicide?" And generally most of veteran cops, their hands are up. And then I ask them to tell the class about that person, not about the suicide, about the person who died by suicide.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That must be powerful.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah, because now once I go into the whole spiel afterwards, about how important Officer Wellness Programming is, they're buying in more. And then our younger officers are seeing, "Oh, wow, look at that. That could be me and my buddy 10 years from now."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I can imagine that's kind of a lump in the throat kind of stuff, right?

Bill Walsh:

You can actually see it break through to people, and some of the testimony that I heard from some of these trainings I've done is powerful. And I think to myself afterwards, "How long have they been holding on to that?" And getting buy-in in a process like this and talking about mental health, talk about feelings and the things we generally, as a career have been trying to block off is something that you have to do very tactfully and you have to be very thoughtful on it, but you also have to make sure you're not doing any harm in the process either. So really you have to... That's why I lean a lot on professionals who were in the mental health industry to vet ideas by them to make sure that I'm not causing problems by what I'm trying to do or what our agency is trying to do for our officers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is one of the things I found really interesting with the new program that you've initiated, which is that you've been working closely with a psychologist.

Bill Walsh:

Yes. We're working with Dr. Jennifer Kelly. Who's based right out of Haddonfield, which is not too far from here. And she has a board certification in Police & Public Safety Psychology. So the term cultural competence, you can't understate the importance of cultural competence, she gets policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So there's a whole certification, there are other people out there who have this certification in Police & Public Safety...

Bill Walsh:

Psychology.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Psychology. All right. So Police Departments could find other people in the area who have that skill.

Bill Walsh:

Absolutely. Yep.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, here we go. Cool. Thank you very much [crosstalk 00:18:59].

Server:

Anything else? Another orange juice. Another tea?

Bill Walsh:

I'll take another ice tea, please.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I'll hit you up for some coffee in a bit, but not right now.

Server:

Okay.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Thank you.

Bill Walsh:

Thanks.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Bon appétit, amigo.

Bill Walsh:

Hey, appétit.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's what I'm saying to other Police Departments can find people with this level of skill.

Bill Walsh:

And there's so many damn carpetbaggers out there right now for wellness stuff.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, that's the thing, isn't it? So it's become such a new thing after the presence of President Obama's Commission, the officer Wellness was one of the main pillars. Now, apparently everybody's an expert.

Bill Walsh:

That's scary because programs could do harm.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's something I think is really under appreciated because there's that one area that has been evaluated outside of policing, but found to be problematic, which is the critical incident, stress debriefing. There's not been any real positive evaluations of it, yet Police Departments still keep doing it.

Bill Walsh:

It's something where the research is very mixed on that. The research, a lot of it doesn't specifically look at law enforcement and critical incidents. There's even research that shows that it could do harm, but it is something that's... Agencies, "Well, at least we're doing something." Well, that's not the right approach because your something may be actually harming your people. So in our agency for critical incident debriefings, they go to the police psychologist and it's one-on-one, we don't do group debriefings.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it's confidential?

Bill Walsh:

It's confidential. It's protected conversation between a licensed mental health professional and the officer who's in there. And the other thing is it's their appointment. They can discuss whatever they're feeling, whatever they want to talk about, whatever they want to educational resources on it. It's their time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The idea of sending somebody off to a critical incident to go and see a psychologist. Have you run into resistance with that?

Bill Walsh:

We actually haven't because of the fact that we initiated a program last year, where every officer from the chief to the newest officer goes and meets with our police psychologist for an hour automatically annually.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was a real innovation that you started the idea that just across the board, regardless of your health, your background, regardless of anything that's taken place, even if you're working in an office, right? Everybody...

Bill Walsh:

Everybody.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Everybody goes to see a psychologist once a year?

Bill Walsh:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do people take... some people must've resisted, right? They must've had some concerns?

Bill Walsh:

There weren't too many concerns. It was interesting we did a very slow and purposeful rollout of the program, where we tried to address any concerns during in-service trainings leading up to it for about a year. We talked about a lot. We talked about....

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, you really laid the groundwork about what this was going to be like?

Bill Walsh:

Oh yeah, there was a lot of foundation that was laid out before we even tackled the institution of, "You're going to do this." Really we didn't have too many concerns, a couple of people had questions about it. And we answered those questions about confidentiality and things like that, and all things that our psychologist explains at the beginning of the appointment too. But because of the fact that there's already a familiarity there, which is one of the reasons we wanted this program is they know they're psychologists. They have a relationship with the psychologist already. We don't want our officers go into meet the psychologist for the first time after they'd been through something traumatic.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I wonder if that's an important part is to establish the groundwork of normalcy, that this is a normal thing. And this is how we do things rather than "Well, that was a weird incident and I think you should be sent to a psychologist."

Bill Walsh:

I think it is because it eliminates any kind of an angst or insecurity or anything leading up to that visit where you already know what the office looks like. You already know what sitting there feels like you already know the psychologist. I think most of the anxiety is just the procedural anxiety of, what is counseling? What is, what is a wellness visit? What is a critical incident stress debriefing? What is this person going to say? I think a lot more officers have been through therapy than they will let on.

Bill Walsh:

But I think there's also probably a higher number of officers who haven't and don't know what it looks like and one of the things that stresses officers out a lot is the lack of control when we're out a visit with a psychologist we're not in control of that. After the critical incident and the dust settles, we're not in control of how they're responding.

Bill Walsh:

I like how you put it. When I talk about critical incidents, I always say the things you're going to have to normal reactions to an abnormal thing that you went through that you shouldn't have seen. No human beings are wired to see some of the things that we see in this job and acknowledging that and normalizing the fact that we want you to go and have some mental health first aid, essentially. I think, it helps remove the stigma. So that when there is a big problem. We hope that you're more inclined to pick up the phone and call when there's something going on in your life, whether it's personally, professionally or both.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Stigma is exactly the right word for the majority of policing, just any kind of discussion or thought of treatment or care for somebody around mental health carries with it's stigma because certainly in the United States and I used to be a firearms officer in the UK. Any discussion of mental health came with it, the idea that they were going to take your gun away.

Bill Walsh:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because if you think about it, I would, as soon as somebody was getting mental health and getting better if they're carrying a gun than bottling up some of the that people are carrying around with them.

Bill Walsh:

Right. Absolutely. It brings up two good points. One is, fitness for duty examinations, which is what everyone refers to as, "I'm having my gun taken away or I'm being benched." If you actually look at the percentages there, there's a very low percentage of an officer who is sent for fitness for duty, actually having their gun taken away and being relieved permanently from their position.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Should it be higher?

Bill Walsh:

I think if somebody is at a bad place in their life, the purpose is to get them better. So I think, fitness for duty, doesn't say, "Right, you can go back to work tomorrow." Fitness for duty could say that, but it could also say, "You need some more counseling, but we could probably get it back there." And you might be benched for the time but you're not losing your job, but there's still a lot of misconceptions about that whole process and what they're truly supposed to be used for.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think people see that it also comes with a stain. If for any reason you got your gun taken away from or you got bench for a while, I think people are worried it's going to have career implications down the line for the rest of their career.

Bill Walsh:

And that's still a big part of the stigma around mental health that we have to crush. Police officers over identify with their symbols of authority a gun or badge. Sometimes I feel like police officers and I've been here too. So I'm not preaching... I'm not up here on a pedestal. We put our profession above ourselves as a human. And we lose sight of the fact that we're human first doing a police officer's job. And one of the things I try to tell everyone when I teach officer health and wellness is we're all renting our badge. It's just a temporary thing. It's your job. At some point, you're going to have to retire at some point, God forbid you may get injured. But there's a shelf life on your shield.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That is a great way of putting it, renting the badge.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah. You're not a cop forever. You're a human being forever, but you're not a cop forever. And I think we put too much effort sometimes on focusing on staying on the job and we kind of lose sight of staying in a thriving human being, taking care of our family, enjoying life.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That notion of stigma is so pervasive after being with my ex-wife for 20 years, I found out I was getting divorced. And for the first time in my life, I went to counseling and it was incredibly helpful, but I had to overcome that stigma within myself. There was a part of me that was saying a sense of going to counseling was an admission of failure. And of course it wasn't, but I felt that sense of stigma, right the way from having been in policing since I was 17 turning 18 years old. Whereas the reality was it was actually, "No, this is like a medical treatment and it will help me get better." I got much better as a result of it, my ex-wife would probably disagree.

Bill Walsh:

That's their job, right? To disagree. I think that is a point that we need to shift and I think some agencies are doing a really good job at it. Others need some work still.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

For me, the stigma of seeking help for mental health was really deeply, almost felt culturally ingrained in me for departments that have a culture that drives that. And we have to remember that a lot of that's masculine culture and we only have say 13% of police departments across the board are women and it's worse than State police. They like 7% are women, which is just preposterous.

Bill Walsh:

Preposterous.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you have this really sort of macho testosterone-driven culture. How do we overcome that so that we can more normalize the idea that people in incredibly stressful job can actually get some help with that aspect of it.

Bill Walsh:

I think by reframing things to allow officers to realize that they need more assistance with things is brave. And that it's a symbol of strength.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But how do we do that?

Bill Walsh:

I think we need to increase self-awareness. I think we need to really educate our officers on exploring what's going on in their minds or what's going on in their lives, educating their families on things about what's going on at their jobs, how they can best support their loved one and how their loved one can support them. Because the police family deals with the stress, just as much as we do, if not more in some instances.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's another aspect of the program that you initiated, which is not just an annual visit to go and see the police psychologist. But you've also got a program that involves the family.

Bill Walsh:

I presented at IACP 2017 in Philly, on officers' families as kind of a missing part of this whole officer wellness piece. And so many people came up afterwards and most of them were family members who were attending the IACP with their loved ones. We're incredibly thankful that this is starting to be explored and that they feel that they've kind of been overlooked and neglected.

Bill Walsh:

And it kind of spurred me into thinking, "All right. Well, what else can we do for them?" I started really reflecting back to my time as a kid with a father who's a cop and some of the stress I went through when he was on the... he's still on the job, but when he was working patrol, wondering, "Was dad going to come home that night, when I woke up in the morning would dad be there?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is that a common thought when you're growing up?

Bill Walsh:

It was, yeah. Especially a period of time there in South Jersey. We had a lot of police officers, even from smaller non urban Police Departments who were dying in line of duty, they being murdered.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When was this?

Bill Walsh:

This is '95, '96 right around, so it was about [crosstalk 00:28:38].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It was a rough time?

Bill Walsh:

It was. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just after the peak and crime was still really high and a lot of violent crime across the US, yeah.

Bill Walsh:

Yep. So I remember that and I remember a couple of other incidents of thinking, "Oh wow, is my dad might not come home today." And my uncle too same thing, you worry about them out on the streets, as I thought more about it. And I'm like, "You know what, there's an opportunity here. One of the things I've really wanted to focus in on was let's not leave a families out."

Bill Walsh:

So we decided to conduct a family seminar and the family seminar was offered up for our police officers and their families. They could bring their spouse, their significant other, they could bring parents, they could bring in-laws, they could bring really whoever they considered their support system. The other thing is we wanted to make sure we weren't causing stress by having this event. So we had childcare, so the officers could bring their kids to the police station.

Bill Walsh:

There was another room in the police station when movies on and games and crowns and coloring books and things like that. And then we were in the main training room and they knew their kids were safe and they were in the other room they were being supervised. We provided dinner. We had it at a time that was convenient after everyone else would've gotten done work.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You really made it the whole family day.

Bill Walsh:

We did. And some of them were excited even see the police station that was the first they ever been there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I like the fact that you recognize the possibility that a program like this could be harmful. There are so many studies and evaluations and research done on policing and in and around policing that seem dubiously unaware that there is a possibility that programs can be harmful and not just helpful. It's often kind of, is it helpful or did it not work? But there's a bigger scale than that. Is it helpful? Did it not work or was it actually iatrogenic? Here we go, the fancy word for today. Did it cause harm? So you created this whole kind of family day, and then what did the program that you put together involve?

Bill Walsh:

Our police psychologist presented on common themes with family stress, common themes that are unique to being a law enforcement family, shift work, missed holidays, missed kids sporting events, things like that. Time management and ways for the family to navigate through that together so that they were at least reducing the stress and anxiety surrounding being a police family. But also ways that get so locked up into things like the social media things. So the questions at parties, or the avoidance it forced overtime.

Bill Walsh:

Some of the things that come with it. So some kind of ways to build some more resilience in the family, as opposed to just focusing completely on the officer. We also were able to put in their resources and confidentiality concerns. So if you're the spouse or if you're a partner of an officer and you're noticing these problems, and that's a common theme in some of the work I've been doing is, should the family be part of your early intervention system?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. So that's an interesting question and I'm sure you've got a whole range of different options there because that puts a whole new onus on the opposite to try and make those decisions about how much they want to share with their family, how much they worry that their family can take it and understand some aspects of the job. How was that taken?

Bill Walsh:

So, it was kind of interesting. So we got more pushback on the family nights that we did ongoing and sit in front of a police psychologist for an hour.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Really...

Bill Walsh:

Nothing drastic, nothing incredibly negative, but there were questions, there was anecdotal stories afterwards where a spouse would come up to me and say, "Oh, thanks for putting this on. I was told not to ask questions." But she, or he

was legitimately told not to ask any questions during the presentation. And then obviously you have some officers who are hoping to advance in their careers and they're worried about what their significant others may say that could be looked at as detrimental to the agency, things that are out of our control, but you know, where the officer thinks, "Oh, my spouse says that, they're going to think I'm complaining about the job all the time."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You can't really control what your other half is going to say.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah, and again, it goes back to what we talked about earlier about the control thing. It's a position that we're putting our cops where they're not in control and they're not comfortable with that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Billy, you recognize the potential harm. So that's important. And so benefits?

Bill Walsh:

Benefits are we're able to empower the families, not just the officer now with the resources. So if you see something going on that's out of line for your significant other, who's an officer. Here's how to get ahold of our police psychologist, here's how to get of the Employee Assistance Program, here's the confidentiality protections that these programs are for you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So is there an option for family members to come and say, "I'm really stressed about the fact that my significant other in this current environment may not come home. Can they get help?"

Bill Walsh:

Yeah. So, the beautiful thing is we have a very culturally competent Employee Assistance Program that compliments our police psychologist. So we have a couple different options officer can use and our chaplains as well. So our Employee Assistance Program, our chaplains, they're available to the spouses. They're available to the kids. They're available to the whole family.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That is fantastic.

Bill Walsh:

And unless you tell the family that they're never going to find out, because you give the police officer's literature to take home they [inaudible 00:33:18], Yeah it's like hallmark, "Is it really making it home?" "Yeah." "Can we get an electronic signature from your spouse saying they're aware of these resources that are out there?" But some of them after the fact that was some of the most rewarding conversation I've had during this whole experience with developing

a program. And I give our chief a shout out Chief Louis Bordi, he's been incredible with "Yes, do research. Yes. Let's put these interventions in place. Yes, let's do more than most agencies are doing. Let's explore building this program up."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What other resources were available.

Bill Walsh:

IACP, International Association of Chiefs of Police put out an Employee and Family Wellness Guide book. So we work closely with them to kind of tailor it specifically to our agency's needs and we included a lot of information in there. We kind of adapted what they have included information specific to our department in that book. And then we made that available to our family. So I can definitely share a link with that for the IACP version. And you can edit it for your own particular agency.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay, great. So I'll put a link to the IACP version up on the website for this podcast. It should be at reducingcrime.com/podcast.

Bill Walsh:

Perfect.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What else is going on the national stage with on the wellness officer's safety and wellness side?

Bill Walsh:

So there's two major things that are on the horizon. We're going to see an increase in the use of peer support teams. And we're going to see an increased focus on retired officers or officers who are getting ready for retirement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The peer support teams.

Bill Walsh:

The way I described peer support teams, it's almost like an air traffic controller. You're having officers who are coming to you for advice or telling you about the issues they're having. And your job generally is to be a good listener and then refer to resources if needed. So officer has this particular issue is presenting these things that we've educated the peer support team member on the officer may say, "You know what, it would be beneficial for you to speak with an Employee Assistance Program or with our police psychologist or chaplain. Can I facilitate setting that up for you?"

Bill Walsh:

So the theory behind peer support teams is the officers may only feel comfortable talking with somebody who's walked through it. They'd rather talk about an incident that someone else has been in the shoes and can be empathetic with.

So we're getting ready to start... we actually have our first meeting tomorrow multi-agency peer support team, but the key to all this is, and I caution agencies a lot on this is you can't have these things in place without having a good foundation of qualified mental health professionals.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The cops are supposed to be the experts in everything but the reality is we all know that police officers are kind of Jack of all trades, who are kind of acceptable at a bunch of things, but nobody's [inaudible 00:35:37] to be an expert.

Bill Walsh:

No, and we can't keep pushing more things on the police officer. The important thing is having that, which we do at our agency. We have qualified mental health professionals in place and a qualified mental health professional has to be a part of that team has to be integral to that team to make sure it works effectively. Make sure the officers, the peer support people aren't doing harm to make sure that people aren't taking on the role of a counselor or a therapist or a psychologist and provide recurring training, make sure they get it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There is always those few people, every platoon or every shift, you always know that there are those officers who were the same rank as everybody else, but they just carry more weight and influence. They're just that kind of natural police or as the world would say natural police. Who not only a great on the streets and are but respected for their work there, but also just seemed to have the right kind of balance of calmness, nothing flusters them. And they're often the people within that platoon or shift that people look up to, they sound like the ideal people to get on board to start opening discussions about better sort of behavioral health, right?

Bill Walsh:

Yeah. They're the people we want. We want people who are self-aware, we want people who are naturally helpers, but we also want people who are able to come and say, "I need a break. I'm taking on too much of other people's problems. I need a break from peer support for a little while." We need that level of self-awareness for these people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. So, because we need peer support for the peer supporters.

Bill Walsh:

Correct. Now we're starting another team with another acronym.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Somebody's going to get promoted over this.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah. Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You see the younger police officers coming in now and they're going to be kind of saying, "Well, what's the behavioral health support program like, and you can just see these grizzled gets going, "The behavioral fucking what?"

Bill Walsh:

Yeah. And you've even seen it now in some recruiting ads for more progressive agencies and we have a comprehensive officer wellness program. That's awesome. That's [crosstalk 00:37:22].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. That's fantastic. Because too many recruiting adverts are just, people abseiling out of helicopters and I'm sick of seeing that.

Bill Walsh:

Right, [crosstalk 00:37:28] I still haven't done yet.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. There's like four people out of 800,000. I'm the helicopter abseil guy. "When have you ever used that skill set?" ... well in training.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah, absolutely. For the recruiting ad?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah. So I'm happy to see that. I think our profession is changing in the right direction. It's a giant ship to turn around, but it's turned around more rapidly than I expected it to. I really am. It's kind of been need to be on this journey, seeing it where a very short time ago we were rejecting the notion that we had a suicide problem. And now we're trying to get ahead of it, being proactive and actually including our wellness options as part of our recruiting strategy. I think that's huge.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think it's massive. Yeah. It's funny the noise now. And we were worried about one plane flying over before and now the place is packed up. At least everybody's socially distanced somewhere outside.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah, exactly. It's a beautiful day out.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I mean, that's another thing that's going to affect people's mental health, is it as we get into the winter. So you've just got this COVID-19 is not going away the political situation, regardless of what side of the spectrum you're on is a complete nutter cluster. You've probably the lowest public opinion on policing that I've seen in decades. And then on top of that, it's just getting darker and less sunlight and there seems to be no end to this and the weather's going to get crap and just it's really all piling up, isn't it?

Bill Walsh:

Really, isn't it. Resilience will get you so far. But you need to make sure there's other stuff there too.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How is your resilience? I don't know. This guy keeps stabbing me. I think about that in a minute.

Bill Walsh:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What do you do about the stress, you play computer games, don't you?

Bill Walsh:

I do, yeah. I play Call of Duty. Some of those like investigative games and things like that, things to get you thinking. That's kind of a cool stress reliever for me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's better to have an outlet than to constantly hit an adult beverage. Even though my alcohol intake has gone up with COVID-19.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah, that absolutely have something. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm afraid I've become addicted to World of Warships.

Bill Walsh:

I was wondering, I texted the other night. I'm like, "What's he playing?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, at the moment I'm getting beaten by a 12-year-old in his mom's basement. Thank you very much.

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Bill Walsh:

And they talk so much crap, don't they? I got that new Call of Duty and every time I'd parachute out of the aircraft, I'm getting shot while I haven't hit the ground yet. Some 12-year-old kids talking crap to me on there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I thought, I had some tactical awareness as my battleship gets destroyed by a 12-year-old who humiliates me, this is apparently helping my stress.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah, exactly. Next thing you're yelling at the TV screen, like, "Yeah, maybe this isn't the best outlet for me."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's right. Yeah. Some opposition player completely outsmarts you tactically and then says up on the chat, "I've got to go and do my homework." Oh, fuck off.

Bill Walsh:

Yeah. I'm wondering, "Is police work really the best job for me?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Really is.

Server:

Just for your convenience, if you have been [inaudible 00:40:15] anything [crosstalk 00:40:15].

Bill Walsh:

Okay. Perfect.

Server:

[inaudible 00:40:17] I can [crosstalk 00:40:17].

Bill Walsh:

All right. Thanks so much.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Thank you very much.

Bill Walsh:

Appreciate it.

REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hey, look at us. We didn't have a drink.

Bill Walsh:

Yep. Proud of us. [laughter]

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Cheers, though.

Bill Walsh:

Cheers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 29 of Reducing Crime recorded in New Jersey in October 2020. As always transcripts of every episode are available [@reducingcrime.com/podcast](https://reducingcrime.com/podcast) and new episodes are announced on Twitter at [@_ReducingCrime](https://twitter.com/_ReducingCrime). A link to the IACP, Employee and Family Wellness Guide covering a range of topics that we discussed and more can also be found at reducingcrime.com/podcast just look for this episode.

As a character in the classic TV series featuring the theme tune you're listening to, so merrily reminds everyone, "let's be careful out there".

Be safe and best of luck.