

## When we first get the badge

**Regardless of our current rank or the time we've served in law enforcement, we all remember the day we graduated from the Academy.**

We had passed all the tests, and proven ourselves intellectually and physically ready. We were eager to get out into the "real world" of policing.

On graduation day, we ironed our dress uniforms, stood tall at the ceremony, and grinned in pictures with our families – feeling like superheroes with shiny badges, eager to protect our communities even at the cost of our own lives.

Yet, at some point across the span of a career, the badge becomes heavy. The reasons we first joined law enforcement become murky. The initial pride we felt can become a distant memory that almost feels like it belongs to someone else.

There is a general consensus that the criminal justice system is broken for a significant portion of our society. But there has been little discussion about the impact of this flawed system on the lives of individual police officers and their families.

**66** *The initial pride we felt can become a distant memory that almost feels like it belongs to someone else.*

# What does it take to sustain a career in law enforcement today?

*An interview with two officers*

## The reality of the job

Officers face the reality of engaging with repeat offenders, an increase in violence against first responders, a lack of compliance and respect from community members, and overwhelming workloads. Add the increased and constant scrutiny, and it becomes evident just how challenging the situation has become.

The cumulative effect of these factors is cynicism, burnout, and the danger of constantly swinging from apathy to hypervigilance, often all over the course of a single shift.

The reality of policing strikes all of us at different points in our careers, regardless of our rank or position. After the 2020 death of George Floyd and the subsequent protests, research shows that voluntary resignations by police officers across the nation increased by more than 200% compared to previous years.

**In this new era of American policing, what does it take to work for 20+ years and retire with your physical and mental health intact?** How do you stay motivated, ethical, and productive and prevent bitterness, cynicism, and burnout years before retirement?

To find answers, we spoke with two officers from different departments at different career stages. Here's what they said.

## A conversation between leaders



**Kim Harris** is a commander with the Arlington Police Department and left the mental health profession at age thirty to become a police officer.

**Erik S. Welling** is a sergeant with the Toledo Police Department and has been with the department for twenty-two years.

**How have you stayed motivated and mentally healthy during your career and specifically at your current rank/position? When have you struggled in your career?**

 **Commander Harris**

**I thought I knew what I was getting myself into when I joined the department.** I was older and had a lot of life experience before I changed careers to be a police officer and I came from the mental health field. I thought I knew what being a cop was all about and that I was prepared. Yet, within just a few years, I had already changed.

The transformation in your views and your personality are incremental. They sneak up on you as the years go by. You don't just wake one day as an angry, cynical cop, burnt out and struggling with PTSD or other mental health problems. It happens over time.

You look around and everyone else on the shift is just like you. You start to develop blind spots and believe that the community as a whole is against you. [laughs] And I have a mental health background and knew the risks coming into the profession. The mental health classes at the Academy for cadets are well-intended, but they go in one ear and out the other because you're so excited to be a cop that's all you can see at that point in your career.

Eventually, you suffer from cumulative stress from every negative life experience you collect at work...dead kids, abused kids, runaways, victims who won't be a witness and are eventually killed.

You collect those cases in your brain and the thoughts build up and interrupt your normal thinking until you find some way to cope. We all know better intellectually, but we usually choose negative coping strategies, not the positive ones.

**66** *You collect those cases in your brain and the thoughts build up and interrupt your normal thinking until you find some way to cope.*

At this point in my career, I have more experience and I am proactive about looking for clues that either I am struggling or the people around me are struggling. I'm aware of my own behavior and mental state, and I try not to always be in "cop mode."

**My advice to officers at any rank would be to protect your mental health by being proactive and not reactive. If your department provides mental health training or has other programs, take part and make your mental health a priority.**

### **Sergeant Welling**

**As I advanced in the department, I adjusted my focus as my level of responsibility changed.** In the beginning of my career, my motivation was to put suspects in jail to protect the community.

When I joined SWAT as an officer, my motivation was to be 100% accountable to my brothers in the unit and to focus on our collective effectiveness.

Once I was promoted to sergeant and returned to patrol operations, my motivation became mentoring younger officers and keeping them safe. I returned to SWAT as a sergeant for three more years and was accountable for the safety of the team as we conducted between 300–400 raids each year.

By then, my personal life had also changed and I was married with children and I was responsible to someone besides myself. I transferred to the training division, which had better hours, but also created a paradox for me. I didn't put anyone in jail for a long time and had to come to terms with not being a street officer. Now, I stay motivated by focusing on training new officers and educating others in the department about mental health, wellness, and the pitfalls of the profession that can lead to negativity if left unchecked.

I wouldn't say I ever lost my motivation, but I have struggled as society changes. Sometimes, I questioned why we put our lives on the line for a society that doesn't seem to hold criminals accountable and doesn't value the police.

## What impact does your career have on your family and how do you involve your family when you are at a mental low point?

### **Commander Harris**

**As a younger officer, I coped by playing video games nonstop.** If I was playing video games, I couldn't talk to anyone, and more importantly, no one could talk to me. One day, someone told me that I had changed. That person wasn't another cop. It was my ex-spouse. Now I am careful that I don't let my career choice impact my children. I protect them from that part of my life.

### **Sergeant Welling**

**My family knows that I am not a fan of large crowds or tight spaces, so we avoid those types of events, when possible.** Sometimes, it's unavoidable like at my kid's school orientation when there are a lot of people in the same space. I tend to think the worst about everything and I don't have a need to meet new people. My wife and children are aware of how I feel and understand it's a byproduct of my career.

## If you were to look back and give yourself one piece of advice on having a successful and healthy career, what would it be?

### **Sergeant Welling**

**Find an outlet.** Read, work out, spend time with your family...be proactive about doing something positive to get away from the profession each day. Allow yourself time to reset and decompress and protect your mental and physical wellness.

### **Commander Harris**

**Be more aware of the illusion of making a difference.** Helping people as a police officer is largely incremental and isn't always connected to a big incident where you are the hero. The reality is that the majority of what you will see is negative so you have to redefine what making a difference actually is in the real world. Just being there when someone has lost a loved one, holding someone's hand when they are dying, simply listening to someone's story or treating someone with dignity and respect even when they don't deserve it...those are small things that make a big difference.

## Looking to the future

Sustaining a law enforcement career in 2023 and beyond presents unique challenges. The resilience and adaptability officers show in the field are the same characteristics that will help them implement practices to sustain long and healthy careers.

Maintaining physical and mental well-being is necessary for career longevity. **Officers that manage day-to-day stress effectively and create routines that support their physical and mental health have the best chance of sustaining long and productive careers.** But doing so requires the right resources.

**PowerLine is a wellness app built specifically to support officer well-being.** Officers get 24/7 confidential access to a comprehensive wellness content library, access to a nationwide network of peer volunteers, and one convenient place to find existing department resources. PowerLine puts wellness support in your officers' hands, ready to access whenever and wherever they need it.

To learn more about PowerLine and how it can support wellness and career longevity in your agency [click here](#).