



Too Close for Comfort Negotiating with Fellow Officers

By SANDRA D. TERHUNE-BICKLER, M.S.

While driving home, your cell phone rings. You answer and hear a woman crying. You recognize her as the estranged wife of your friend and fellow officer Rob. The woman asks you to come over because Rob has been drinking and has locked himself in the bathroom with his off-duty pistol and their 3-year-old son. She said he keeps yelling that he “can’t take it anymore...can’t take it anymore....”

Though not a circumstance any member of law enforcement wants to face, personnel of all ranks need to prepare for how to

handle, supervise, or delegate this type of situation. Incidents requiring crisis negotiations often are difficult, highly emotional, embarrassing, and dangerous. When the subject in crisis is a colleague, the emotions of everyone involved are deeply affected. Though most law enforcement agencies have specialized crisis/hostage negotiation teams, members of law enforcement may attempt to resolve the issue on their own because the subject in crisis serves with their agency. Both the officer placed in the position of the sniper who deploys lethal

force when the barricaded suspect is a fellow member of the agency’s special weapons and tactical (SWAT) team and the commander who placed the officer in that sniper position face difficult predicaments.

Research

Although limited published research is available on officers negotiating with fellow officers, crisis negotiations involving law enforcement personnel do occur. According to the FBI’s Hostage and Barricaded Database System (HOBAS), 22 incidents involving either a barricaded or

suicidal officer were reported in the United States between 1995 and 2002.¹ Of these 22 reported incidents, 3 resulted in suicides. However, law enforcement suicide incidents may occur more frequently than the number actually reported. Some of the most common reasons given for suicides among law enforcement include relationship problems, legal trouble, psychological problems, and work-related stress.²

Recently, the author interviewed several crisis negotiators from the FBI and the police and sheriff's departments in both Los Angeles and San Diego, California, regarding their experiences with officer-involved incidents.³ These negotiators reported that they had experienced or knew of an incident at their agency involving a suicidal or barricaded

officer. Some of those interviewed negotiated with an in-crisis member of other departments and others negotiated with members of their own agency. One of the interviewees reported negotiating with a relative, although the officer in crisis did not know the negotiator's identity. Interview results have shown that negotiating with another police officer does not constitute a phenomenon but, rather, an issue that agencies must confront and handle.

In an attempt to protect fellow officers from embarrassment or potential disciplinary action, some members of law enforcement try to resolve the situation privately, even covertly. Law enforcement suicide, like law enforcement domestic violence, is not a topic comfortably discussed.⁴ For officers to

admit that they feel suicidal or have domestic problems is close to admitting that they have lost control. In a profession that expects its members to always be in control, law enforcement can be unforgiving or ill-prepared to handle an officer's admission of personal or interpersonal problems. This does not mean that officer-involved crisis incidents could be prevented if law enforcement culture became more accepting of vulnerabilities among its own personnel. Rather, it is important to acknowledge that these situations do occur and law enforcement agency personnel must remain mindful of how best to respond to that unexpected, dreaded phone call.

The Appropriate Response

When responding to an incident, most law enforcement personnel probably would say that they act tactically, logically, and compassionately. However, would their response be the same if the subject was a fellow officer? Perhaps, the responder would consider using the lowest level of intervention with a colleague, trying to engage him in conversation.⁵ This may prove a viable option when a low level of intervention can resolve a particular situation. For this reason, agencies should have a well-respected peer support program that encourages employees to call a coworker for mental



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Officer Terhune-Bickler serves with the Santa Monica, California, Police Department, is a crisis negotiator, and coordinates the department's peer support program.

health referrals and resources. However, when the officer in distress needs more immediate crisis intervention, well-intentioned colleagues may find themselves in an overwhelming circumstance.

When dealing with an in-crisis law enforcement officer, the responding officer should determine which agency to call first, the employing agency or the agency nearest the in-crisis officer's location. Although the right answer may seem obvious, the employing agency may respond, even if the incident did not occur in its jurisdiction. In an attempt to subdue the crisis, decision makers may place themselves in situations for which they are dangerously unprepared. Should officer safety be disregarded because the suicidal subject is a fellow member of law enforcement? Suicide-by-cop does not only apply to civilian personnel. Is protecting a fellow officer from potential embarrassment an adequate reason for not notifying the jurisdictional agency when a tactical intervention is necessary?

If the officer in distress lives in the city where he is employed, the ethical response should occur as it would in any standard critical incident. It is easy to speculate about the right way to respond, but harder to assume what actually would occur. Officers may find it difficult to respond to a crisis situation if they

have a personal stake in it (i.e., a family member, friend, or colleague is the one in crisis). Commanders from both the employing and the jurisdictional agencies should share in the decision-making process and take responsibility if lethal force is required. In this circumstance, mutual aid reinforces objectivity in tactical response and procedure. Agencies should have contingency plans, such as mutual aid agreements, in the event a tactical intervention seems likely; asking

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for assistance is not admitting an inability to handle a situation. For example, FBI agents are regular members on the San Diego, California, Police Department's crisis negotiation team. Though no officer ever should have to use lethal force against another, it remains an unfortunate possibility.

Negotiation Decisions

If the officer in distress will speak only to a particular person, should agencies put that person

on the phone? Should the crisis negotiator be someone the officer in crisis knows? Some law enforcement agencies have no other choice. One of the benefits of allowing a colleague to speak to the in-crisis officer is the rapport already established between them, which may help the distressed officer feel more comfortable and understood. If handling the negotiation in-house, information on the officer is easily accessible. Additionally, when the distressed officer's agency handles the negotiations, it may have easy access to third-party intermediaries who could communicate with that officer.⁶

However, problems sometimes occur when the in-crisis officer's agency responds. Even though many agencies have crisis negotiation teams, upper-level administrators may neglect to use them—they may attempt to solve the situation by themselves. Similar to citizens who encounter a distressed or suicidal relative, well-intentioned members of law enforcement sometimes inadvertently allow their emotions to interfere with their judgment, which can result in mistakes and tragedies. For example, if the officer in crisis sees the department as the source of the problem, he may perceive the negotiator as “one of them.” Also, the officer in crisis may be too embarrassed to speak to someone he knows. Because he understands departmental

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Dynamics Supporting Negotiations

- Rapport already may be established; in-crisis officers are known and know the negotiator
- Easy to obtain information about in-crisis officers
- Negotiator may be able to relate common problems/themes with in-crisis officers
- Third-party intermediaries are known and easily controlled
- Keeping the problem in-house may give in-crisis officers the illusion that it is “not a big thing”

Dynamics Harming Negotiations

- In-crisis officers may see the department as the source of the problem
- In-crisis officers perceive the negotiator as “one of them”
- In-crisis officers are too embarrassed to talk to someone they know
- Negotiator may be too emotionally attached to be objective/effective
- In-crisis officers know what the department will deliver
- Suicide is a high possibility
- In-crisis officers may be armed
- Negotiator is a secondary victim if the resolution ends in death

For additional information, contact Officer Terhune-Bickler at sandy-terhune@santa-monica.org.

procedures, he may not trust supervisors' promises. Realistically, when negotiating with a member of law enforcement, responders must assume that the in-crisis officer is armed, making suicide or suicide-by-cop possible.

Conclusion

Determining and conducting an appropriate response to situations involving in-crisis law enforcement personnel can prove overwhelming even to seasoned managers. Team leaders and department commanders

should ensure that they are prepared to deal with the secondary victimization of their officers when handling a suicidal or barricaded situation involving one of their own employees.

Because crisis negotiations can prove a difficult and emotionally draining process, negotiation teams should consult with mental health professionals. When the subject in crisis is a police officer, the rules remain the same, but the losses can be more tragic, as well as everlasting. Further, agencies should take advantage of mutual aid

relationships. In addition to the combined resources of both agencies, this alliance eliminates negotiators from having to negotiate with a fellow officer from their own department.⁷ By establishing certain protocol for these tragic incidents, agencies will be better prepared if, unfortunately, negotiating with one of their own becomes necessary. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Based on statistics from the FBI's HOBAS database, 2002.

² Michael G. Aadmodt and Nicole A. Stalnaker, “Police Officer Suicide:

Frequency and Officer Profiles," in Donald C. Sheehan and Janet I. Warren, eds., U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Suicide and Law Enforcement* (Washington, DC, 2001), 383-398.

³ The author interviewed several law enforcement officers from these agencies. Due to liability issues, interviewees agreed to share their experiences but requested that their names and identifying information of the in-crisis officers remain anonymous.

⁴ For additional information, see Donald C. Sheehan, ed., U.S. Department

of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Domestic Violence by Police Officers* (Washington, DC, 2000); Ronald D. Lott, "Deadly Secrets: Violence in the Police Family," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, November 1995, 12-16; Thomas E. Baker and Jane P. Baker, "Preventing Police Suicide," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, October 1996, 24-27; and Paul Quinnett, "QPR: Police Suicide Prevention," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July 1998, 19-24.

⁵ For clarity and illustrative purposes, the author refers to all in-crisis officers as males.

⁶ M. J. McMains and W.C. Mullins, *Crisis Negotiations: Managing Critical Incidents and Hostage Situations in Law Enforcement and Corrections*, 2d ed., (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing Co., 2001). For more information on third-party intermediaries, see Steven J. Romano, "Third-Party Intermediaries and Crisis Negotiations," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, October 1998, 20-24.

⁷ Lieutenant Jim Barker, San Diego, California, Police Department, interview by author on December 4, 2002.

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