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COMBAT VETERANS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

During the IACP's 2008 Annual Conference in San Diego, a panel including a representative from the Department of the Army, two police chiefs, a veteran officer, and a psychologist discussed the transitional issues that veteran officers face. Some of the panel's findings are presented below along with other information relevant to post-deployment re-integration

Panel Findings

- Veteran Attributes-Veteran officers and leaders recognize several areas that are typically strengthened by combat experience including: leadership, physical fitness, patriotism, discipline, and critical incident response
- Negative Mindset Impacts Transition-Readjusting to receiving rather than giving orders, trusting others, and changing rules of engagement take time
- Health Issues are Real-Depression, anger, withdrawal, and family issues create a low tolerance for citizen complaints and heightens the reintegration process
- Desire for Comprehensive Training-veteran officers want inclusive and flexible retraining programs that take advantage of their skill sets
- Educate yourself on the differences between the mindset and performance requirements for the skills used in combat and those necessary for domestic policing.
- Set up a meeting with department leaders to share your experiences and give them an opportunity to better understand your needs during your transition period.
- Be up front and honest about any negative impact your physical health and wellness might have on your ability to safely perform the tasks required of your position. Keep in mind that a physical impairment or injury is not in and of itself a barrier to sworn officer positions.
- Recognize the common symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)-anxiety attacks, depression, nightmares, aggressive behavior, flashbacks, sensitivity to noises and movement, and a numbing of emotions. Be aware that PTSD symptoms may not develop until 6-12 months after your return from combat but can be effectively treated

Post-Deployment

- Recognize that even after returning to work, some transition time is necessary. A survey of veteran officers reported that a transition time of approximately six months is to be expected.
- For a short time upon return (approximately 2-6 months) veterans may react, mentally and/or physically, to the environmental indicators of danger they encountered in combat environments. For example, veteran officers report some hesitancy when approaching cars during traffic stops, they avoid driving over potholes, and they drive under bridges at a different place from where they entered.
- Be cognizant of your reactions, behaviors, and perceptions and seek the guidance of peer support groups, your military liaison officer, or an experienced mental health professional if you or a loved one identifies any concerns. The approach you take to your return to duty can potentially have an impact on your health and welfare, your effectiveness on the job, your department, and the community you serve.