

Helping Troopers Confront Stress Participants Urged to Discuss Feelings

By Tracy Gordon Fox, *The Hartford Courant*



Sergeant Troy Anderson.

State Police **Sergeant Troy Anderson** thought he knew Victor Diaz. They were partners who taught DARE, the anti-drug program for youths, together and they would take youngsters from their classes to New York Mets games. Even after the two were assigned to other barracks, they spoke regularly.

Sergeant Anderson was shocked when in November 2005, Diaz, a veteran Trooper, shot his girlfriend, Newington Police Officer Ciara McDermott, and then turned the gun on himself. He started to wonder what, if anything, he and the department could have

done to help Diaz before he began a downward spiral, starting with domestic problems that led to a drunken-driving arrest and, finally, the shooting.

"I thought I knew him and I had no idea what was coming down the pike," **Sergeant Anderson** said. "As I looked back at what happened with Victor, I wondered, if we had a program in place would it have helped? Maybe if we had some training, I would have seen something."

Two years later, **Sergeant Anderson** heads the department's first intensive peer counseling effort, a program that is transforming the stereotype of stone-faced Troopers unaffected by the broken bodies, crumpled cars and violent deaths they see on a regular basis.

"If these things didn't affect us in some way, they would clinically say something was wrong with us, that we're crazy. We all have feelings," said State Police **Union President Steven Rief**, who helped to launch the program.

Now, Troopers are urged to talk with their colleagues about their feelings and about what they have witnessed before the stress boils over into domestic violence, or worse.

Shortly after the Diaz incident, **Sergeant Anderson** wrote a four-page letter to the State Police administration, advocating peer counseling for Troopers. About the same time, then-Lieutenant Governor Kevin Sullivan; Sullivan's wife, Carolyn Thornberry, a West Hartford councilwoman; and other legislators were thinking the same thing.

"[Diaz's] behavior in a number of ways telegraphed he was a threat to himself, if not to others," Sullivan said. "Mental illness often hides in plain sight, particularly in paramilitary organizations."

The program, State Troopers Offering Peer Support, or STOPS, went into effect in October. The act establishing it stipulated that the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services establish a pilot program of peer counseling within the Department of Public Safety.

"There is a cumulative effect, whether you are going to an autopsy or a traumatic death," said **Union President Steve Rief**, who spent 11-1/2 years on the major crime squad. "How many dead bodies do you have to see before it takes its toll?"

The answer may be different for every Trooper or police officer who responds to a scene, each with a different personality and background.

Among those who signed up to be peer counselors is **Sergeant John Rich**, a 19-year veteran who spent 12 years in the major crime squad. Squad members are responsible for photographing often-gruesome crime scenes, collecting evidence, watching autopsies and working to solve the case.

"I have to openly admit there is a culture in policing where you are expected and other people expect you to soldier on, and



State Police Sergeant Troy Anderson, left, the head of the department's first intensive peer counseling effort, speaks with a Trooper after a deadly crash on I-95 in East Lyme.

you shouldn't be affected," said **Sergeant Rich**, who was a psychology major in college. "That is impossible for the typical human being."

Nearly 300 police officers commit suicide every year nationwide, and many more struggle with alcoholism, or become involved in domestic abuse. Those types of cases were highlighted in a report conducted by the New York State Police on the Connecticut State Police's internal affairs unit, problems that some say could have been avoided through peer counseling and other interventions.

Public Safety Commissioner John A. Danaher has offered his full support to the program. He said he was so impressed with it that he has asked Anderson to set up a similar one for civilian public safety employees. "It is an easy program to support," Danaher said, adding that even though Troopers receive psychological screening before they enter the academy, "they are all human and exceptional stress takes a toll on everyone at some point."

Troopers do not have to go to headquarters or a barracks to participate in the program: **Troy Anderson's** office is tucked away in a State Police building at Brainard Field in Hartford. Troopers can meet with another Trooper anywhere, even talk cruiser to cruiser in a parking lot or in a coffee shop, **Anderson** said.

Law enforcement began to recognize the need for peer support starting with the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, and even more after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, said Wayne Dailey, a spokesman for the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

"One of the things we recognized is the best way to support first-line responders is by having peer support to help them address the kind of issues they confront," Dailey said. "They need this kind of stress reliever and understanding that comes from an ability to talk things out with people who really understand. Those are their peers."

The 6-foot-2, 245-pound **Troy Anderson**, a U.S. Army veteran who sports a buzz cut and has the body of a football player, may seem an unlikely coordinator for such a touchy-feely role. But **Anderson** realized the need for peer counseling before the Diaz incident, when he went to a training session in late 2004 about peer support.



Trooper One arrives at the crash site on I-95 in East Lyme.

"I started to do research on my own, online and in books. The internal affairs [problems] started not long after. Then there was Vic Diaz," **Anderson** said. "Studies have shown the quicker you get to the problem, the better the long-term effects."

To design the program, State Police turned to other agencies that had successful peer support efforts, among them the Pennsylvania State Police. When five children were killed in an Amish school in that state in October 2006, a peer counseling team was on the scene within a half-hour, said Corporal Govan Martin, a 24-year veteran who supervises the Pennsylvania program.

Those Troopers not only were offered peer counseling that day, "but we are going to be dealing with those people and checking in for the rest of their careers," Martin said.

"You can't escape the tragic nature of what happened there. It affected them all," he said. "What helps is to manage it."

Troy Anderson knows that there will always be some Troopers who never sign onto peer counseling. But the program has gotten wide support across the department, with 40 Troopers already signed up to be peer counselors. By the end of the year, **Anderson** said, he hopes to have 70 Troopers trained.

Anderson responded to the horrific accident on I-95 in East Lyme, involving a tanker truck, four passenger vehicles and a tractor-trailer, which killed three people.

"I just never want them to feel they are alone when they are going to these kinds of calls," **Anderson** said. □

Emergency Responders Face A Grim Scene

For a short time after a fatal tanker truck accident, emergency officials allowed vehicles onto the Exit 75 entrance ramp to Interstate 95 north. A slow parade of wide-eyed rubberneckers gaped at the scene to their left, a triple-fatal accident involving a tanker truck that had lost control and jumped the center median, hurtling into oncoming traffic.

Onlookers saw an incomprehensible scene: the debris, crushed cars and cabs ripped from trailers. But they were at a distance. Emergency officials, the first responders, came upon the disaster and got in the middle of it.

State police Lieutenant Louis J. Fusaro, Jr., Commanding Officer of Troop E in Montville, made a call to the Public Safety Employee Assistance Program for those emergency personnel who may have needed counseling or other assistance, either on the scene or in the coming days and weeks following the crash.

"There were agencies out there, unlike police and even fire to some extent, that probably don't see that as often as we do, and I thought it was a good idea if we had someone to offer assistance to people if they needed it," Lieutenant Fusaro said. There were also representatives from an early intervention program, a pilot program run through the State Police, on hand.

Sergeant Richard Crooks, the East Lyme Resident State Trooper, arrived at the scene between 15 minutes and a half hour after the accident. Firefighters were spraying foam on the fuel spill, and **Sergeant Crooks** said his first thought, as always, was to determine what needed to be done.



State Police Sergeant Richard Crooks, right, says responders learn to "detach."

"I've seen everything that you can possibly imagine," **Sergeant Crooks** said. "It's gruesome sometimes, but you have a job to do, and you're the person that the public turns to, to make things right and stabilize situations like this; and you have to be able to function when confronted with situations like this."

Sergeant Crooks said responders "detach" until the situation is taken care of. "I think my family and my wife end up dealing with things like this, too, because you go home, and you talk to your family and work things out," Crooks said. **Sergeant Crooks** said a State Trooper from Troop E in Westbrook was first on the scene.

Lieutenant Fusaro, from Troop E said, "We see a lot of things that the average person doesn't get to see in a lifetime. And we see it all too often." □