

# Employing Returning Combat Veterans as Law Enforcement Officers



SUPPORTING THE INTEGRATION OR RE-INTEGRATION OF MILITARY PERSONNEL INTO FEDERAL, STATE, LOCAL, AND TRIBAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

SEPTEMBER 2009



**BJA**  
Bureau of Justice Assistance  
U.S. Department of Justice

**klein**  
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A Division of Applied Research Associates, Inc. 

“I AM HONORED TO HAVE SERVED ALONGSIDE THE BEST OF WHAT AMERICA HAS TO OFFER. IN THE WAKE OF 9/11, YOUNG AMERICANS COURAGEOUSLY STEPPED FORWARD TO PROTECT OUR SECURITY AND FREEDOM. WE OWE A GREAT DEBT TO THESE VETERANS.

AS POLICE CHIEFS, WE HAVE A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO HONOR THEIR SELFLESS SERVICE AND TO EXPLOIT THE MULTITUDE OF SKILLS READILY TRANSFERABLE TO A CAREER IN LAW ENFORCEMENT. I STRONGLY ENDORSE THE IACP INITIATIVE, EMPLOYING RETURNING COMBAT VETERANS AS LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS, AND ENCOURAGE EVERY POLICE CHIEF TO IMPROVE THEIR ORGANIZATION THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN THIS PROJECT.”

-MARK RAY  
CHIEF OF POLICE, BEVERLY PD, MASSACHUSETTS  
LTC, ARMY NATIONAL GUARD, RETIRED  
OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM VETERAN

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## ► Findings and Recommendations from Field Research

Department of Defense military personnel are committed on a large scale to support the nation's war on terrorism, specifically the ongoing military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Law enforcement professionals and their families bear a significant burden in meeting these challenges as Reserve and National Guard units are activated and deployed. Law enforcement officers, like other public servants, share this responsibility as citizen soldiers. Rapid deployments of our Armed Forces did not allow many law enforcement agencies the time to develop proactive and sustainable training, employment, operational, and support strategies to maintain the continuing operational tempo. Law enforcement agencies have a responsibility to support these service members and their families for years to come, so it is imperative that they address their veteran officer<sup>1</sup> issues and provide the necessary assistance. The nation's strategy of combating terrorism dictates that military activations of sworn and unsworn law enforcement personnel throughout the United States will continue well beyond 2010, thus it is important that agencies develop or refine their transition strategies and policies in order to optimize their support for veteran officers.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and law enforcement leaders across the country recognize that many issues face combat veterans returning from deployment to either new positions or positions they previously held as federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement officers. In November 2006, the IACP joined with Applied Research Associates, Inc., Klein Associates Division (ARA/KAD) to discuss this evolving issue. Both organizations recognized the valuable skills returning veterans possess and the unique recruiting opportunity for U.S. law enforcement agencies. The group also identified potential critical challenges for the veteran officers such as screening for and treating Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and navigating the transition between the hostile environments of their deployment and the local community environments in which they serve as law enforcement officers.

In late 2007, with funding support and guidance from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), Department of Justice (DOJ), the IACP and ARA/KAD designed a project to study the issues surrounding returning combat veterans who enter or return to law enforcement careers. The focus of this project was to understand the recent experiences of combat veterans as they transitioned into law enforcement careers. This report presents findings that underscore the transition issues faced by veteran officers and agencies as they deploy and return from military service.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "veteran officer" will be used throughout this summary and is defined as sworn police officers, sheriffs deputies, and federal agents who are combat veterans.

## ► Project Design

The Employing Returning Combat Veterans as Law Enforcement Officers project team designed a series of five project activities: three data collection methods and two discussion groups, to capture a maximum amount of information, provide structured analysis of that information, and to develop recommendations and guidance for both law enforcement leaders and veteran officers.

Data collection methods:

1. Focus groups - Four regional focus groups were held in California, North Carolina, Ohio, and Maryland that included veteran officers and IACP staff. The participants examined the influence of deployment and combat on the decision-making processes, including how veteran officers perceive and understand situations, detect danger, respond tactically and strategically, and determine action options. Analysis of the data revealed five overarching themes:

- **Veteran Attributes** – Positive skills veterans bring to law enforcement
- **Transition Issues** – Challenges surrounding the transition from combat to civilian life and law enforcement careers
- **Current Agency Response** – The types of support or “disconnects” personnel received from their agencies upon returning from deployment
- **Resources/Agency Response Suggestions** – Services and resources agencies can provide to returning and newly-hired veterans
- **Training Recommendations** – Suggestions for training to support new recruits and returning officers who have been deployed

2. Interviews - An ARA/KAD researcher with support from a trained law enforcement psychologist conducted one-on-one incident-based interviews with select focus group participants. The interviews expanded on points identified in the focus groups and provided more in-depth examples of transition resources and performance challenges. A significant portion of this report presents data from the individual interviews including quotes from veteran officers that illustrate issues in real-world contexts. This was a conscious decision to make sure that the ‘voices’ of returning veterans are ‘heard’ clearly by the reader, and that these words serve as the ultimate context for all other study efforts and in particular the final recommendations of this study.

3. Surveys - The IACP distributed two surveys, one for law enforcement leaders and one for veteran officers. The purpose of these surveys was to verify the themes identified in the focus groups and interviews across a wider sample. The surveys provided data from a larger, more generalized sample of agency leaders and veteran officers activated or deployed in military service within the last five years. The surveys asked specific questions about military and law enforcement background, changes in behavior and job performance, health issues, and the assistance or treatment received. Leaders provided additional information about agency policies related to returning veterans and the number of veteran officers at their agencies that have deployed to or returned from military service.

## ► Discussion Groups

During the IACP's 2008 Annual Conference in San Diego, a roundtable and panel were held to discuss the transitional issues that veteran officers face. The roundtable, which included law enforcement leaders, veteran officers, project staff, and others, allowed for a candid information exchange among the participants and was useful in examining ideas and real-life experiences. The panel included a representative from the Department of the Army, two police chiefs, a veteran officer, and a psychologist. Topics of particular interest were:

- Policies & Procedures
- Communication
- Skills
- Transition times
- Psychological evaluations and medical screenings

The methodology employed in all the activities elicited comprehensive, thoughtful, and insightful commentary and data on the issues facing combat veterans and their agencies. Although there were general consistencies across all data collection sessions, the diverse opinions and topic focuses led the authors to realize that this topic is not only highly relevant, but also multi-layered and complex. However, some findings were articulated across all research project activities and are listed for emphasis and insight into what key issues are on veteran's minds.

## ► Findings

- **Programs in Place** – Some departments have excellent transition programs in place; others are conflicted on resolving issues
- **Positive Skills** – Veterans believe they bring positive skills to the law enforcement profession such as leadership, physical fitness, and discipline
- **Patriotism** – Veterans are proud to have served their nation and community
- **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
- **Concerns over Confidentiality** – A deep-seated concern over a lack of empathy and stigmatization by departments/agencies
- **Frustrations with Leadership** – Disappointed with chain-of-command for not displaying leadership in creating a well-rounded transition path for veterans
- **Desire for Comprehensive Training** – Want comprehensive and flexible retraining program that exploits their skill sets

## ► Recommendations

The following time-phased recommendations are for your consideration. The timeline can begin upon receipt of this document.

### **Within 30-60 Days:**

- Publicly acknowledge veteran officers for their service on their return to their agency/community
- Create within-agency focus groups to learn more about veteran officers' needs
- Develop communication methods with veteran officers and their families throughout the deployment cycle
- Offer veteran officers a flexible timetable to meet a range of transitional needs
- Create a specialized Field Training Officer (FTO) type program structured to assist veteran officers
- Allow the veteran officer to ride-along or job-shadow with a peer
- Address the confidentiality policies of the services offered and clarify misconceptions
- Update veteran officers on new policies, procedures, laws, and changes in equipment and technology

### **Within 6-9 Months:**

- Establish peer and family support groups
- Incorporate training that addresses equipment differences and the reprogramming of muscle memory
- Develop a comprehensive family care plan checklist
- Structure training for each veteran officer's specific needs
- Review rules of engagement and standard operating procedures
- Establish a comprehensive driver training program
- Develop a comprehensive web-based communications system
- Update returning officers on new policies, procedures, laws, equipment, and technology
- Develop an ethics and language review to ease the transition back to a civilian culture

### **Within 1-2 Years:**

- Develop core training (e.g., firearms, in-service, specialized training)
- Create scenario-based training to identify transitional issues and to practice tactics
- Address the unique training needs of federal agencies
- Develop strategies to employ disabled combat veterans
- Gauge the effectiveness of military and civilian law enforcement partnerships

## ► **Summary – Future/Next Steps**

The information obtained from this research will result in the development of two guidebooks – one for veteran officers and one for law enforcement leaders. The guides will be available in printed or electronic format to all 18,000 federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies in the United States.

The leaders guidebook will also include draft curriculum recommendations to assist agencies in training and/or retraining veteran officers. The curriculum will focus, in part, on exploring PTSD issues, differentiating between hostile war zones and local community environments, and retraining the use-of-force techniques.

Future steps are necessary to follow-up many of the research recommendations presented here. This project presents a first, exploratory look at veteran officer transition issues. Future work will continue to focus on better preparing both law enforcement leaders and their veteran officers as they share responsibilities in fighting wars abroad and crime stateside. The IACP is prepared to meet these challenges in partnership with the Department of Defense (DOD), DOJ, and the private sector to develop meaningful and cost effective follow-up projects.

# INTRODUCTION

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According to 2003 data<sup>2</sup> from the Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) survey compiled by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), 4,100 of the approximately 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States, had officers who were called to active duty in the National Guard or Reserve. Of those 4,100 agencies, an estimated 11,380 full-time sworn law enforcement officers were activated in a 12-month period. About two-thirds of these officers were from local law enforcement agencies. Moreover, 11,380 officers constitute about two percent of the available law enforcement workforce nationwide.

## Challenges of Contemporary Warfare

The battles in Iraq are being fought not in the desert but in the streets of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. Moreover, U.S. military and coalition forces are engaged in both rural and urban conflict in Afghanistan in which our commitment remains open ended. Veterans returning from the Vietnam War could easily distinguish their combat environment—mostly jungle, farm, or open terrain—from their urban or suburban policing environment. In the case of returning combat veterans from Iraq or Afghanistan, their combat environment and their policing environments may appear surprisingly similar. Military operations on urban terrain pose a great challenge as, among other issues, opposition forces blend in with the population making distinctions between friend and foe difficult. This urban-warfare environment is similar to our country's urban policing environments, except that the rules of engagement are different.

Troops must make instantaneous decisions when confronting resistance in the urban combat setting, and it is very possible that such combat experience enhances their decision-making abilities in the domestic policing environment. However, the environments in which service members work are quite different from the environments in which law enforcement officers work. Sustained operations under combat circumstances may cause returning officers to mistakenly blur the lines between military combat situations and civilian crime situations, resulting in inappropriate decisions and actions—particularly in the use of less lethal or lethal force. This similarity may cause an operational or reactive issue that could result in injury or death to an innocent civilian.

## Governing Law

The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA; 43 *U.S.C.* 38) is administered by the U.S. Department of Labor through the Veterans' Employment and Training Service. USERRA covers every person who has served in the military and applies to all employers in the public, private, and federal sector.

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.  
<http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/cocoon/ICPSR/STUDY/04411.xml>. BJS indicates the survey data will be updated in 2009.

USERRA mandates that returning service members are re-employed in the position that they would have attained had they not been absent for military service, with their seniority, status, and pay as well as other rights and benefits determined by their seniority. USERRA also requires that reasonable efforts (such as training or retraining) be made to enable returning service members to refresh or upgrade their skills and help them qualify for re-employment. The law clearly provides for alternative re-employment positions if service members cannot qualify for their previous positions or the positions they would have been promoted to.

USERRA is widely respected and adhered to by federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. And certainly USERRA's call for training and/or retraining resources for returning veterans is an appropriate requirement. The IACP and ARA/KAD are concerned that other training or retraining issues for returning veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan may exist that have yet to be discovered or documented.

# **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ISSUE**

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Veteran officers are not unique to being away from their primary jobs for a year or more; however, many more issues surround their transition into law enforcement careers based on the similarities between military and law enforcement service. The needs veteran officers have upon returning to law enforcement also vary according to personal and family situations as well as the duration and type of deployment. These needs are manifested by returning officers as well as by new recruits. Ensuring a successful transition for veterans to law enforcement careers lies in understanding the specific difficulties they experience and identifying necessary training and support to ameliorate the problems.

Little is known about how exposure to combat influences law enforcement officer performance. The IACP and ARA/KAD believe that some law enforcement agencies are not fully prepared for the screening and retraining of veteran officers and that the unique nature of combat, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, creates a new level of concern as they return from hostile war environments to local communities.

## **Deployment Related Health Concerns**

Some service members return from war with illnesses, wounds or injuries of varying degrees of severity. Because of advances in medical care, more service members than ever are surviving their wounds, but return home with readjustment challenges.

One common illness that follows a traumatic event such as combat is PTSD. The influence of PTSD on returning veterans' civilian lives is well documented. With symptoms such as anxiety attacks, depression, nightmares, aggressive behavior, flashbacks, sensitivity to noises and movement, and a numbing of emotions, PTSD can cause problems for veterans making it difficult to get along with family and friends, function on the job, or transition back to civilian life. If untreated, invisible injuries can lead to an onslaught of problems including domestic violence, alcoholism, and even suicide. Rates of each run high among veterans compared to the civilian population.

In addition to PTSD, several other behavioral issues are common, such as:

- Attendance problems/frequent use of sick leave
- Difficulty passing fitness-for-duty tests
- Inappropriate use of force
- Domestic disturbances/violence

All branches of the U.S. Armed Forces mandate that service members participate in a demobilization and transition process when they are released from active duty. This process includes briefings on service members' rights and benefits as well as a thorough health assessment; however, PTSD symptoms may not develop until 6-12 months after a traumatic event and less than half the service members with current or emerging mental health problems seek treatment beyond these demobilization events. In addition, since veterans in rural areas may live too far from the mental health resources of military installations and Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities, they may simply not seek the treatment they are entitled to.



## **Readjustment Period**

Returning to civilian life involves more than just hanging up the military uniform. The transition process encompasses a number of concerns and continues long after the initial demobilization. The greatest responsibility for continuing the transition process falls upon those with the greatest contact with returning veterans: their families, their employers, and their reserve units. To succeed, each of these support systems must be armed with specific knowledge about the key issues facing returning veterans so they have access to proper resources when issues arise.

Unfortunately, these support systems may not fully recognize and diagnose a problem as it is developing. Families and employers frequently learn of a veteran's difficulties when they reach a crisis stage that requires immediate intervention, placing them in a reactive mode with insufficient resources and information.

## **Determining Fitness for Duty**

Law enforcement agencies in the United States must determine whether returning veterans employed in their departments are fit for duty. However, agencies likely do not know what, if any, problems are associated with shifting their officers from war fighters to peacekeepers. Some agencies employ the use of administrative interviews and psychological evaluations to assess how their veteran officers will perform the essential functions of their position, while other agencies revert to their department medical officer or lack any policy at all. A clear policy and assessment procedure to evaluate employees' mental and physical fitness is needed to ensure public safety and guarantee a stable, reliable, and productive work force.

## **Recruiting Combat Veterans**

With today's law enforcement agencies severely understaffed, many agencies welcome the influx of returning service members interested in law enforcement employment. The prevailing perception is that individuals with military experience make desirable law enforcement employees. Several veterans suggest that some law enforcement agencies may not be recruiting enough veterans for a variety of reasons. Because of insufficient data, this area warrants further study. Veterans have a unique set of skills that appear to make them ideal law enforcement candidates such as the following:

- Physical abilities/conditioning
- Firearms training
- Leadership experience
- Combat experience
- Respect for discipline and authority
- Experience working with/in culturally/ethnically diverse groups

The IACP and ARA/KAD think that these skills likely do lend themselves to law enforcement. However, there is concern that regular law enforcement academy or in-service training curricula do not contain course material specific to the needs of returning combat veterans. For example, current curricula do not address the heightened reactions veteran officers develop in combat to enemy threats and how to temper these reactions to appropriate levels in policing environments. Specialized training and transition assistance that addresses such specific needs are required but have not yet been developed.

# PROJECT OVERVIEW

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The Employing Returning Combat Veterans as Law Enforcement Officers project addressed issues surrounding the return or entry of combat veterans to law enforcement careers. Anecdotal stories and incidents led the IACP to believe that returning veteran officers may face issues or problems that must be addressed to ensure a successful entry or re-entry into policing careers. The IACP determined that insufficient guidelines, programs, and services exist to meet these needs. The goal of this project, therefore, was to determine the most critical needs of veteran officers and provide policy guidance to both veteran officers and to the law enforcement agencies that employ them.

Supported by BJA, IACP collaborated with ARA/KAD, a research organization that specializes in understanding how experts use their knowledge and intuition to make complex, high-stake decisions during critical incidents. Laura Zimmerman, Ph.D., served as the principal researcher on the project. Her background is in experimental psychology with a focus on law enforcement procedures and training.

The aim of the project team was to ensure that returning combat veterans succeed in either new or resumed law enforcement careers by conducting research that expanded the current level of understanding and developing resources to support the findings. The initiative is supported by a national advisory committee of law enforcement, military, psychological, academic, and health experts.

## Field Research

The project team designed a series of five core project activities: three data collection methods and two discussion groups, to capture a maximum amount of data, provide structured analysis of that information, and to develop recommendations and guidance for both law enforcement leaders and veteran officers. When combined, these findings allowed the IACP and ARA/KAD to create a set of recommendations for new policies and programs that support returning veteran officers. Activities included the following:

- Four regional focus groups
- One-on-one incident-based interviews
- Panel presentation and roundtable discussion during IACP's 2008 Annual Conference
- Surveys for leaders and veteran officers

## Future Products

The most important component of this project will be the products that are developed to ensure that both returning combat veterans and law enforcement agencies are prepared for the transition from military duty to local law enforcement. The IACP and ARA/KAD are producing several products that stem from the research findings, which include two guidebooks and a training curriculum outline.

## **Guidebook for Law Enforcement Leaders**

IACP will distribute a guidebook to state and local law enforcement leaders that presents issues relating to the successful transition of returning combat veterans to community-based law enforcement. The guide will address issues such as:

- Recruitment strategies
- Policy and practices
- Assessment of transitional obstacles
- Differentiating between hostile (combat) and community environments
- Provision of essential services
- Training curricula
- Skill assessment protocols

The guide will be disseminated to all 18,000 federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies in the United States, in either printed or electronic formats.

## **Guidebook for Combat Veterans**

IACP will distribute a second guidebook to help returning combat veterans fully understand the opportunities presented by a career in law enforcement, as well as the issues surrounding this choice. The guide will address a variety of issues:

- Military versus law enforcement skill sets
- Types of law enforcement agencies and their differences (size, scope, mission, region)
- Transition planning
- Obstacle identification
- Physical and mental health inventory
- Support services provided by the VA and by local law enforcement

## **Training Curriculum**

IACP will develop suggestions for possible training curricula, with focus on the unique skills and transition issues of returning combat veterans. The curriculum outline will help both hiring agencies and returning veterans to identify, discuss, and overcome any transitional obstacles. The curriculum will focus in part on core issues such as: (1) PTSD; (2) differentiating between hostile war zones and local community environments; and (3) retraining on the use-of-force continuum for local law enforcement versus combat-zone force perspectives. The training curriculum will be an appendix in the law enforcement leaders guidebook.

# PROJECT METHODOLOGY

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This research effort focused on combat veterans who returned to their civilian law enforcement job or those combat veterans who entered law enforcement after they separated from the military. Data was collected using three methods: focus groups, interviews, and surveys. Supporting information was gathered during a roundtable and panel discussion at the 2008 IACP Conference.

## Focus Groups

Four regional focus groups were conducted in California, North Carolina, Ohio, and Maryland. These focus groups were well attended by veteran officers from the hosting agencies and other nearby locations.

The focus group selections were based on a geographical representation and the ability of the selected police and sheriff's departments to host the one-day event. Host department leadership selected individual veteran officers from their agencies with additional veteran officers from nearby departments who also wanted to assist. Officers were selected from several regional departments or agencies in order to gather information from a variety of small to large agencies. Members of the project's advisory board and IACP project staff served as group facilitators. In total, 53 veteran officers participated in these focus groups. All participants were reminded that their names and department affiliations would remain confidential.

## Focus Group Procedures

The focus group agendas generally adhered to the following format:

- Introduction of project staff, project summary, and breakout sessions
- Introduction of participants, who discussed their law enforcement and military backgrounds
- Session 1 – Positive skills veterans bring to law enforcement, transition issues, performance issues, and training challenges
- Session 2 – Current services and resources available to returning veterans, agency treatment of veterans returning to law enforcement, services and resources agencies could provide to assist returning veterans, and training needed to assist their transition to law enforcement
- Session 3 – Examples of veterans who did not make a successful transition into/back into law enforcement, suggestions for future focus groups, project suggestions, and final thoughts

All participants signed informed consent forms and completed a focus group evaluation. A clinical psychologist was present at all focus group sessions. The clinical psychologist provided participants with contact information and instructions to contact him or her if issues arose as a result of the focus group discussions.

## **Individual Interviews**

At the conclusion of the focus groups, ARA/KAD researchers conducted incident-based interviews with select focus group participants. The goal of these interviews was to expand upon points identified in the focus groups and gather examples of transition, resource, and performance challenges.

### **Interview Process**

Ten interviewees participated in interviews at the IACP headquarters in Alexandria, VA on May 7-8, 2008. The two main interview objectives were:

1. Understand the difficulties experienced by combat veterans entering or returning to civilian law enforcement
2. Identify training and support needs that will assist combat veterans in their current positions as law enforcement officers

Each interview lasted from one to two hours. First, interviewees recalled situations in which their combat experience influenced or affected their behavior and/or the quality of their performance as law enforcement officers. Questions also explored the challenging decisions faced during the situation, how their combat experience helped or interfaced with their approach to the situation, and different ways officers without combat experience may have managed the incident (or different ways the interviewee may have managed the situation prior to their deployment).

Second, interviewees provided ideas for training to address veterans' skill development, remediation, and enhancement. They also provided recommendations for veteran support programs that law enforcement agencies or joint law enforcement and military organizations may provide.

## **Surveys**

IACP distributed two surveys using a web-based data collection tool. The findings from the focus groups and interviews provided the content for the survey questions. Five-hundred randomly selected police chiefs received both surveys with instructions to distribute the officer survey to their veteran officers who had returned from military service within the last five years. IACP and ARA/KAD project staff compiled and analyzed the data.

### **Veteran Officer Survey**

The purpose of the veteran officer survey was to capture information about military and law enforcement backgrounds, changes in behavior and job performance, physical and mental health issues, transitional issues, and assistance and treatment received.

## **Leadership Survey**

IACP collected similar information in a survey for law enforcement leaders. The goal of this survey was to understand how leaders and agencies address veteran officers returning to or entering their agencies. Leaders provided demographic information about their veteran officers and agencies, the value of veterans' combat experience to their agencies, changes in the veteran officers' behaviors and job performance, and agency resources, services, and policies for returning veterans.

## **Panel Presentation**

Law enforcement and military leaders discussed their agency programs and policies on employing returning combat veterans during a panel discussion at the IACP's Annual Conference in San Diego in November 2008. The panel included a representative from the Department of the Army, two police chiefs, a veteran officer, and a psychologist. Panel discussions included such topics as transition procedures and policies, mental health issues of combat veterans, and military deployment challenges. Following the presentations, comments and questions from the audience focused on a range of issues confronting returning veterans and those seeking employment for the first time. Seventy-five individuals attended the 90-minute session. The project team incorporated the notes on the discussion, presentations, and questions with the other research findings.

## **Roundtable Discussion**

The IACP's Annual Conference in San Diego hosted an Employing Returning Combat Veterans as Law Enforcement Officers Roundtable in which law enforcement leaders, veteran officers, project staff, and others gathered to discuss reintegration and transition issues affecting combat veterans. The forum allowed for candid information exchange among the participants and was useful in examining ideas and real-life experiences. Twenty-four individuals attended the event. The session opened with a short video and project briefing. Facilitated questions and discussion topics covered issues surrounding transition, performance, accountability, decision-making, and self-discipline. Roundtable discussions also focused on challenges veteran officers face when returning, mental health and physical injuries that affect performance, and behavioral changes attributed to combat experience. IACP recorded and used the topics and related responses for use as data in the project research.

# FINDINGS

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Employing combat veterans as law enforcement officers is a multi-faceted subject and both veteran officers and leaders expressed a range of opinions on the topic. When discussing current agency response for returning veterans, some departments are meeting their veterans' needs head-on, while other departments have not yet addressed veterans' needs. Some law enforcement leaders do not see returning combat veterans as an issue and suggest that there is little need for new policies or programs. Others see the need but are conflicted on how to implement them, with many agencies stating they do not have the resources to accommodate the specific needs of veterans.

Veterans also expressed diverse opinions and concerns as they discussed a range of mental and physical challenges, ranging from none to complete debilitation (e.g., quit force, career-ending disabilities, and suicide). They discussed problems unique to themselves, as well as issues that are indicative of systemic problems within agencies.

## Survey Findings

A total of 340 surveys were received from veteran officers and 112 surveys from law enforcement leaders. The return rate of the law enforcement leaders' survey was 22 percent ( $n=500$ )<sup>3</sup>. The veterans' survey return rate cannot be calculated because it is unknown how many surveys the leaders distributed to the veterans at their agencies. Many of the surveys were incomplete with various questions unanswered, which limited data analysis. However, the results do provide a picture of what veteran officers experience across the country and revealed many of the issues faced by veteran officers and agency leaders. The following data presents a summary of the respondents' answers. Only relevant and informative responses are presented as they relate to each theme, rather than responses to each individual question.

### Veteran Officer Demographics

**Age and Years in Law Enforcement** – The majority of respondents were male, between the ages of 30-39, and had served in civilian law enforcement positions from one to five years. Fifty-three percent ( $n=296$ ) of veteran officers had law enforcement experience prior to military deployment.

Thirty-eight percent of respondents were state troopers or highway patrol officers. The second highest representation, at 22 percent, were patrol officers ( $n=248$ ).

**Military Status and Rank** – The data in Figure 1 indicates that veteran officers achieved a rank that allowed them a level of responsibility and decision making authority often beyond what they would have in their law enforcement positions.

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<sup>3</sup> The number of respondents who answered a respective question is represented by ( $n=$ ) throughout the report.



Additional questions revealed the following:

- Thirty-four percent ( $n=97$ ) were military police, security forces, or Master of Arms
- Respondents reported an average of 13 years of military experience ( $n=278$ ), with a range of 1-33 years
- Fifty-nine percent ( $n=168$ ) are currently serving in either the National Guard or a Reserve component
- Thirty-three percent of respondents ( $n=285$ ) were discharged, while seven percent were retired, leaving sixty percent with a remaining military obligation and subject to further deployments

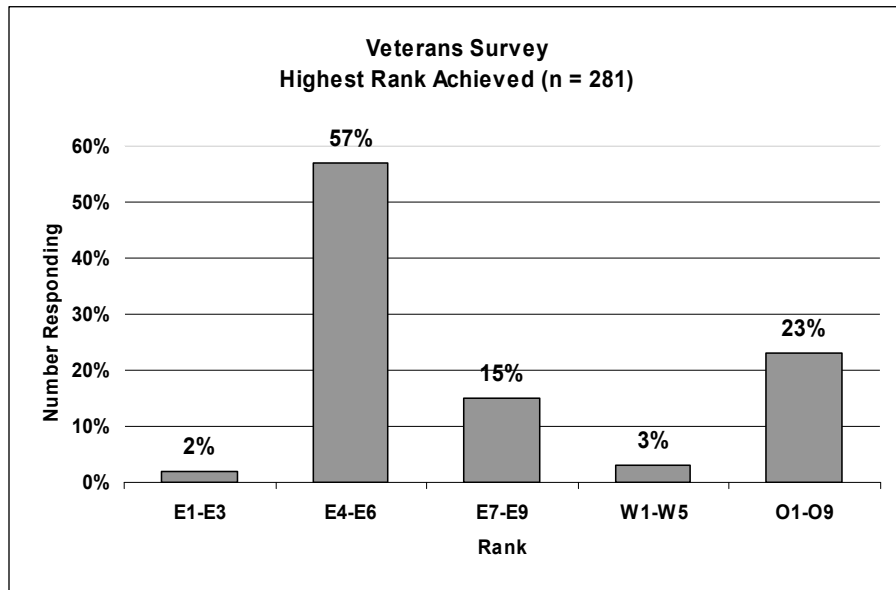


Figure 1 – Veteran Officer Military Ranks

### Agency Demographics

Leaders ( $n=95$ ) reported an average of 342 sworn officers in their agencies (range = 4–4,300). The number of non-sworn staff ranged from 0–1,500 with an average of 114 non-sworn staff.

**Officer Veteran Data** – The majority of responding leaders (86 percent;  $n=66$ ) currently employ veterans who have returned from deployment within the past five years. The average number of veteran officers in a particular agency who departed for or returned from deployment within the last 24 months was three (range = 0-33). Within the past 25-60 months, leaders ( $n=71$ ) reported the average number of officers who deployed or returned from deployment was six (range = 0-91).

Agencies with greater numbers of officers departing for or returning from military duty also reported greater levels of preparedness for dealing with veteran officers' issues. Analysis showed a positive correlation between agency preparedness and the number of

officers who departed for military duty in the last 24 months ( $r=.231$ ,  $p=.049$ )<sup>4</sup> and the last 25-60 months ( $r=.289$ ,  $p=.015$ ) and with those who have returned from military duty in the last 25-60 months ( $r=.325$ ,  $p=.010$ ). No correlation existed between agency preparedness and the number of officers who have returned in the last 24 months ( $r=.181$ ,  $p=.117$ ). This finding indicates that agencies are responding to the needs of their officers returning from deployment. However, it also indicates that agencies with fewer officers serving in the military are less prepared to assist them upon return.

## **Veteran Attributes**

Participants consistently identified the positive skills veteran officers bring to law enforcement. Veteran officers and leaders recognize several areas and skills that have been strengthened by combat experience such as the following:

- Firearms
- Physical conditioning
- Discipline and adherence to policy
- Critical incident response
- Training
- Tactical operations
- Leadership

For many veteran officers, their combat experience allowed them to implement techniques they had only previously practiced in training. This included skills such as operations planning and execution, communications, and hand-to-hand combat. Most important, combat served as a barometer for veteran officers to gauge how they respond in life-threatening, stressful situations. Veteran officers attribute their enhanced ability to react quickly and calmly in threatening situations to the combat situations they faced in theater. They claim to have a higher stress tolerance and are better able to remain calm and focused under stressful conditions. While this response can be simulated in training, it takes actual incidents to determine how quickly and appropriately officers will respond.

Ninety-nine percent ( $n=172$ ) of the veteran officers responded that they noticed improvement in their leadership skills. Difficult assignments, making critical decisions, and a greater sense of military discipline were contributing factors to their improvement.

Agency leaders credit veteran officers' greater confidence, ability to operate in tactical environments, and ability to respond quickly to their experience handling life-threatening situations in combat. Seventy-four percent ( $n=161$ ) saw an improvement in physical conditioning. However, many leaders did not notice an improvement in communication skills, perhaps the result of the lack of need for report writing and substantial verbal interactions with civilians while deployed.

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<sup>4</sup> ( $r=\#$ ) represents a correlation. A positive correlation demonstrates when one variable increases (i.e., number of veteran officers) so does the other variable (i.e., agency preparedness), a negative correlation does not. ( $p=\#$ ) is the significance value. A significance level of  $p<.05$  was used, meaning that any  $p$ -value less than .05 is significant; any value over .05 is not significant.

## Transition Issues

Several challenges exist as veteran officers' transition from combat to law enforcement careers and reintegrate into civilian life including their behavior, transition period, and health.

**Veteran Officer's Perspective on Behavior** – Only 19 percent ( $n=342$ ) of veteran officers responded to questions regarding behavioral changes since returning from combat. Of those who responded, 44 percent ( $n=64$ ) reported changes in driving behavior and 43 percent ( $n=63$ ) reported changes in muscle memory; however, they did report changes in their reaction to sudden noises/movements (75 percent;  $n=65$ ) and changes in mood (72 percent;  $n=65$ ). Veteran officers commented that they are more irritable and easily angered compared to pre-deployment. One respondent stated that “*sudden noises cause an excess awareness and reaction, mood changes due to lack of sleep at night, memories, and no outlet of understanding.*”

**Veteran Officer's Perspective on Transition Period** – When asked how long the transitional period should last between their return from deployment and resuming their full-time law enforcement duties, most veteran officers agreed that *some* transition time is necessary. The majority responded that a transition time of less than six months is appropriate (71 percent;  $n=100$ ). See Figure 2.

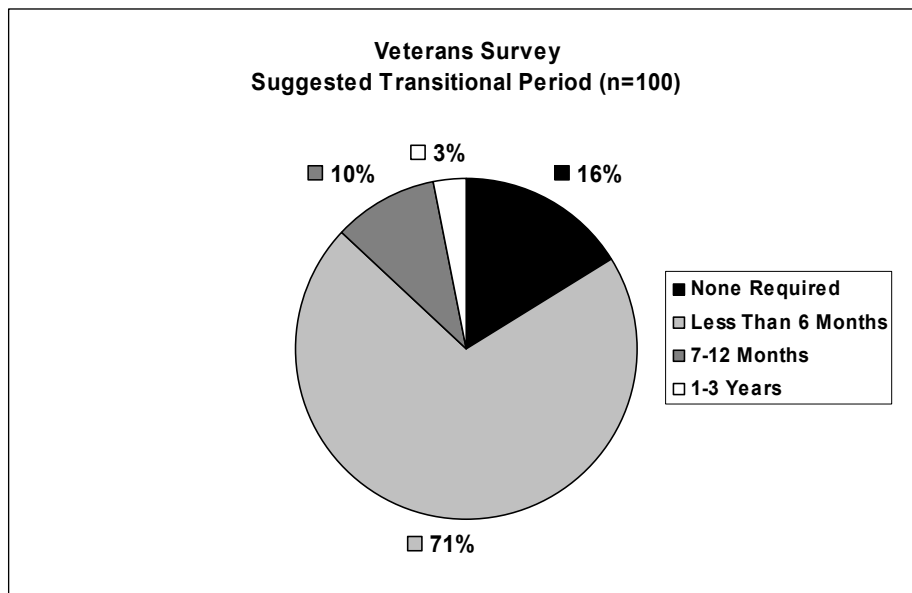


Figure 2 – Transition Periods Suggested by Veteran Officers

Comments made by veteran officers indicate that there needs to be flexibility in the transition time based on the needs of the individual officers. Many respondents indicated that the officers themselves should determine the amount of transition time they need.

*“There really is no magic number – it depends on the veteran, his age, maturity, the degree of close personal combat experienced, his/her family situation. There are a multitude of factors to consider.”*

*“I believe combat veterans can prove to be the police department's best employees. Steady transition is the key. Constant contact with the employee and tailoring the reintegration process to the individuals involved is paramount to guaranteeing success.”*

**Veteran Officers’ Perspective on Health Issues** – Twenty-three percent of veteran officers ( $n=40$ ) reported receiving a physical injury or wound during their deployments. A third ( $n=60$ ) also reported having issues such as hearing loss, back pain or issues, and headaches. Ninety-five percent ( $n=59$ ) stated their physical issues are ongoing.

Twenty-eight percent of veteran officers ( $n=49$ ) reported experiencing mental health symptoms that they associate with combat. Some comments included examples such as exaggerated survival instincts, PTSD, paranoia, and anxiety. As with the physical issues, the majority of officers report their mental health symptoms are ongoing. Half of the officers who reported mental health symptoms also reported physical symptoms.

Notably, nearly all veteran officers (93 percent;  $n=48$ ) who reported experiencing mental health symptoms also reported changes in one or more of the following: driving behavior (46 percent;  $n=48$ ), muscle memory (50 percent;  $n=48$ ), reactions to sudden noises/movements (85 percent;  $n=48$ ), and mood (88 percent;  $n=48$ ). Those who reported physical symptoms without mental health symptoms (14 percent;  $n=10$ ) did not report these behavioral changes.

Veteran officers provided comments about their transition that generally fall on both ends of a spectrum. Some reported that their military service added benefit to their lives and improved their skills, attitudes, and relationships. Others reported the opposite; their lives had worsened, as did their attitudes and relationships.

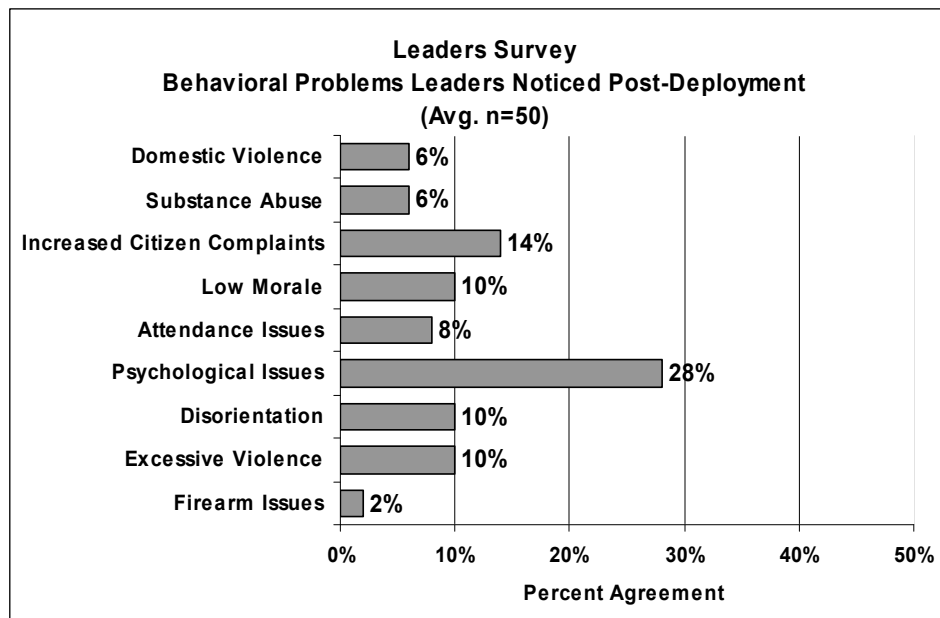
**Leader’s Perspective on Behavior** – Few leaders noticed behavioral changes in their veteran officers who returned from deployment, with the exception of changes related to psychological issues. Twenty-eight percent of leaders noticed some psychological issues post deployment (Figure 3).

Leaders made the following positive comments about the behavioral changes in their veteran officers:

*“I notice that most, if not all, of our returning veterans have a much greater appreciation for (life) by virtue of the fact that they were in life-threatening situations.”*

*“They are able to respond more quickly without detailed explanation to calls.”*

*“The veterans we have employed tend to be more mature and advanced in the areas listed than non-veterans.”*



**Figure 3 – Behavioral Problems Leaders Noticed Post-Deployment**

*“My one returning veteran seemed to be sensitive to or keenly aware of surroundings, especially people.”*

Leaders also shared their observations of some negative behavioral changes in their veteran officers such as:

*“Military duty takes a toll on the individual emotionally and they don't seem to be as stable in their personal life.”*

*“They tend to come back ill-prepared for the civilian world.”*

*“They have exaggerated survival instincts and often suffer from PTSD.”*

*“Less tolerance for officers with less experience or training, especially in critical incidents. Seem to come back with an attitude.”*

*“I have one officer who has had a problem with increased number of civilian complaints.”*

*“I feel that some of the combat veterans exhibit some PTSD problems. Some paranoia to a degree, which I attribute to the heightened alertness and loss of sleep while involved in combat duties.”*

*“Many returning combat veterans have increased the frequency and duration of subsequent deployments, and in some cases have left agency employment so that they can either return to active duty, or accept employment as a Department of Defense contractor.”*

**Leaders’ Perspective on Transition Period** – Most leaders agree that transition time is necessary. Eighty-six percent ( $n= 62$ ) of leaders think the transition period should be less than six months. Interestingly, 20 percent ( $n=45$ ) of leaders without military experience think *no* transition period is necessary, an opinion shared by only three percent ( $n=29$ ) of

the leaders with military experience. Similar to veteran officers, many leaders think that officers should determine their own transition time.

*“It depends on the officer. To some extent, we are relying on the military to return them healthy when released from active duty or to discharge them based on any problems or issues arising while deployed.”*

## **Current Agency Response**

**Leaders’ Perspective** – Leaders conveyed a variety of opinions about psychological testing for their veterans:

- All breaks in service over six months require an evaluation
- Evaluating everyone removes the potential stigma
- Maybe an interview but not a complete psychological evaluation
- The military ought to provide it as a means of assisting veterans who return to the workforce
- Employees need to understand the differences between law enforcement duties and the military
- Testing does not prevent anyone from developing psychological issues after they return to work
- Psychological effects of combat duty have been well-documented
- The negative societal stigma attached to proactive mental health programs does a great disservice to returning combat veterans
- Candid, confidential debriefing with a mental health professional is important
- The military should not release them from active duty if they are not fit to return to work
- Can help to gauge whether and when they should return to active duty as a law enforcement officer
- Can be done at the VA
- Some veterans come back and will not seek help if they need it
- Psychological symptoms are a possibility and could have a detrimental effect on citizen contact
- Case by case depending upon where and how long they served.

**Veteran Officers’ Perspective** – Sixty-eight percent ( $n=103$ ) of veteran officers replied that they would consider using their agency’s Employee Assistance Program or Early Intervention Program (or equivalent); however, many respondents expressed concern about each program’s confidentiality. Some comments included:

*“I have considered attending but I often talk myself out of it because I do not want to be labeled as someone who cannot handle stress.”*

*“A private therapist or the VA would likely be my first choices, followed by our Employee Assistance Program, partly for privacy reasons, partly for the [professional] experience I would expect the VA to possess.”*

*“Real or not, I perceive the possibility that any knowledge of me using these services by co-workers or superiors, would brand me with a stigma I want nothing to do with and possibly call my overall mental state into question.”*

*“Nothing is confidential. I don't trust the upper leadership of this job. It's a bureaucracy, and they have a lot of people investigating us for all kinds of things. I am not going to give them anything they can use [against] me.”*

These types of comments indicate a high mistrust of services designed to assist with transition and adjustment issues. Departments need to address the confidentiality issues of the services they offer and/or clear up misconceptions related to confidentiality.

### **Suggested Agency Improvements**

Many focus group members suggested a need for focus groups within their own agencies so their leaders would understand issues faced by their veterans. Officers were asked if their agencies should create a veteran's ad hoc advisory committee to advise their department chief on veteran's issues. Of the veteran officers who responded ( $n=180$ ), 68 percent stated they think that their agencies should create this type of committee; most stated they would serve on such a committee.

*“The ad hoc committee would be useful in helping identify and work through issues created by military service. It would also work as a way to vet those issues on a case-by-case basis.”*

### **Training Recommendations**

The survey instruments did not include questions that directly addressed training. Survey respondents did not include any training recommendations in their comments pertaining to other question topics.

### **Additional Comments**

The survey also allowed respondents the opportunity to share any additional comments on veteran officers returning to or entering law enforcement. Veteran officers stated the following points.

*“I would like to see input from the female perspective.”*

*“Knowledge on veteran-related issues is a huge asset for a department. Knowing what a department is dealing with will give them the ability to help veterans when it is needed.”*

*“I am happy to see veterans in law enforcement receive attention, as there are a high percentage of veterans in law enforcement. Veterans' issues are unfortunately low on the priorities list in this country despite the challenges asked of them.”*

*“I love being in the military and having the opportunity to serve in a law enforcement agency. This is the best of both worlds and I have never had a regret doing it.”*

### **Survey Summary**

The survey analysis provided a more detailed look at veteran officers and agencies. The following points highlight key data collected from the veteran officers' survey responses:

- Veteran officers desire recognition upon return to their department
- A transition period of up to six months is desirable and should be tailored to the individual officer
- A good proportion of officers maintain their Reserve or National Guard affiliation
- Veteran officers bring transferable skill sets learned in the military to their department
- Reintegration must include specific, tailored training to acclimate veteran officers to civilian policing tasks
- Veteran officers can display a variety of emotional, physical, and behavioral changes upon return which may take weeks or sometimes months to notice the change
- Departments can do more to reach out to veteran officers and their family members as they readjust to life post deployment
- Veteran officers have a perception that assistance programs and personnel will not maintain their confidentiality, leading veteran officers to avoid seeking assistance

The leaders found the following to be true of their veteran officers:

- Improvement was noted in leadership skills after they returned to duty
- Psychological difficulties, such as PTSD, may be attributed to their combat experience
- Attributes such as fitness, discipline, and maturity were valued
- A transition period of less than six months was adequate for some. The greater number of activations, the longer each subsequent transition took.
- Confidential psychological assessment and fitness for duty evaluations for veteran officers should be mandatory

## **Focus Group Findings**

Analysis of the focus group data revealed five overarching themes: veteran attributes, transition issues, agency response, suggested agency improvements, and training recommendations.

### **1. Veteran Attributes**

Focus group participants consistently identified the positive skills veterans bring to law enforcement. Examples include:

- Superior firearms and tactical skills
- More discipline, higher ethical standards, integrity
- Better decision makers and leaders
- Better able to assess situations and react under stress
- More life experience and maturity
- Better at planning and being prepared
- Higher physical fitness level
- Greater willingness to involve themselves in dangerous situations

These findings indicate that veterans return with skills that they believe enhance their performance as law enforcement officers. Their actions in combat environments provide experiences that transfer to domestic policing, particularly their ability to react under stress and make quick, accurate decisions in uncertain and changing situations.



Focus group participants frequently made the distinction between veterans and non-veterans who are law enforcement officers. Their opinion was that officers without military experience were more tentative about reacting in crisis situations and less skilled at employing the tactics and strategies necessary to resolve events.

## **2. Transition Issues**

Many issues surround the transition from combat to civilian life and the return to law enforcement careers. Veterans noted that their perspective on a number of issues has changed based on their military experience:

- Low tolerance for citizens' complaints, which they perceive as minor, relative to their own combat experiences
- Reduced level of empathy for others
- High level of frustration with their families and with civilians
- Impatience with the decision makers and leaders within their agencies
- Indifference to spouses' or family problems
- Feeling that veterans are the only people who understand their issues and experiences, leading to isolation and desire to return to a combat theater
- Only trusting other veterans; an "us versus them" mentality
- Different rules of engagement and standard operating procedures
- The need to adjust driving behavior to domestic streets
- The need to adjust language to civilian environments
- Temporarily feeling stressed and anxious, along with having nightmares
- Perception that the Reserves and National Guard face a different set of issues and have less of a built-in support system compared to active duty veterans

Veterans say the bonds formed within their units are stronger than the bonds they have within their law enforcement agencies. They also think that their families do not understand their experiences or issues.

When veterans return to their jobs, they initially have trouble adjusting their use of force thresholds or adhering to domestic operating procedures. For instance, in military operating environments, troops can physically detain suspicious or non-compliant individuals even when little threat is present. Domestically, officers need a greater threat level to go "hands on." Different objectives dictate how buildings are searched in a combat zone versus domestic environments. The standard operating procedure in a combat zone is to search buildings at a very rapid pace and physically detain anyone encountered. In domestic environments, officers search at a slower pace, with more planning, and must question non-threatening individuals who are not suspects.

For a short time upon return (estimates of two to six months), veterans react, mentally and/or physically, to the environmental indicators of danger they encountered in combat environments. For example, they report some hesitancy when approaching cars during traffic stops, or when dealing with gang members. They avoid driving over potholes or close to roadway debris and they drive out from under bridges at a different place from where they entered.

National Guard and Reservists, along with their families, face issues that differ from active duty members, such as not having a built-in family support system, the initial

expectation that they would not deploy into combat theaters and separation from their units when they return.

Many veteran officers in the focus groups reported having difficulty adjusting from having decision-making authority during deployment to having limited input on decisions back at their agencies.

### **3. Current Agency Response**

Focus group participants discussed the types of responses or policy “disconnects” they encountered at their agencies when they returned from deployments. These include:

- No structure in place for transitioning veterans back into their departments
- Differences in methods of computing pay and benefits while deployed
- No family assistance programs while deployed
- Variation in the transition times agencies allow recruits, from none to 90 days
- Perception that some agencies are disingenuous in their concern for the issues faced by veterans during their transition
- Non-veterans evaluating their return to duty status
- A requirement for mandatory evaluations when not required of others
- Lack of communication between law enforcement agencies and the military
- An unawareness of the resources available to veterans
- A reluctance to hire military personnel who may deploy multiple times
- In some cases, there was minimal assistance or compensation from federal agencies for the sworn federal officers who conduct investigations and are deployed Outside the Continental United States (OCONUS)

Discussions revealed the need to have standardized plans in place prior to veterans’ return from deployment. With a plan in place, veterans will know what to expect from their agencies when they return. They expressed a strong feeling that their agencies do not understand their needs because most of their supervisors are not veterans, or are out of touch with Gulf War-era veterans.

Federal agents shared some unique concerns during the focus groups sessions. They are deployed overseas as federal agents and do not train with the military prior to deployment. Many agents may not have extensive military backgrounds. They work alongside military service members and share similar experiences as the troops; however, they do not receive military benefits or support. Some federal agencies have few transition assistance programs; agents stated that in some cases their agencies failed to acknowledge their service overseas or address any trauma or transitional issues upon return.

### **4. Resources/Agency Response Suggestions**

The focus group participants provided many suggestions for services and resources they would like their agencies to provide to veterans, such as:

- Pre-deployment briefing and/or resource packages that inform veterans and their families about what to expect from the agency throughout the deployment and upon return
- Clear definition of agency benefits, compensation, and paperwork requirements

- Liaison between law enforcement agencies and veteran affairs
- Peer-to-peer support groups
- A single person within the department to handle officers' issues while deployed
- Agency liaison with officers' families while deployed
- Structured transition plan to reintegrate officers back into their agencies
- A departmental representative who has military experience and can provide neutral and confidential guidance to returning veterans
- Continued e-mail or phone contact with officers while they are deployed
- Publicly acknowledging veterans for their service in a way that includes their families
- Reassuring veterans that they can discuss problems and seek help confidentially and without repercussions

Many of the needs expressed by the focus group members involved support for their families. They also requested that their agencies provide peer-to-peer support groups where veterans can meet in supportive and understanding environments. Many expressed frustration at having to figure out complex and confusing paperwork with little or no guidance. They worry that asking for help will hinder or hurt their careers and want reassurance from their agencies that it is permissible and encouraged to seek assistance.

## **5. Training Recommendations**

Focus group participants wanted their agencies to direct them to the most essential policies, procedures, and changes without making them wade through incoherent and irrelevant documents. Participants also wanted to practice transitioning their language from an environment where everyone is the enemy to an environment of community policing.

The discussions indicated that training to reprogram muscle memory is vital. Veteran officers return with training unique to military combat survival, such as where to reach for their weapons and other survival equipment. They need to relearn the automatic reactions that correspond to the equipment and tactics they use in domestic environments. A comprehensive driving training would support the transition from combat zone driving to domestic driving. Focus group participants thought scenario-based training would be useful. They wanted either a FTO or peer assigned to them to evaluate their actions and update them on new tactics and equipment.

## **Individual Interview Findings**

Conducting face-to-face interviews with ten veteran officers allowed the project team time to elicit details about experiences during deployment and within agencies. Interviewees were asked about difficult tasks or duties associated with their transition to law enforcement. They discussed law enforcement skills that were positively or negatively influenced by their combat experience and the unique abilities combat veterans bring to their policing jobs. In addition, they provided details about their transition assistance needs and suggested on going support, policy, and training that agencies could provide.

## **Veteran Attributes**

It is clear, from both the focus groups and interviews, that the qualities veterans bring to agencies are highly valued. Several interviewees also noted a trade-off in value, suggesting that the military also benefits from their skills as law enforcement officers. The focus groups provided a list of veteran attributes and interviewee discussions reflected many of these attributes, such as greater discipline, maturity, and leadership. These skills often support a higher level of performance in tasks that include planning, coordination, and assessment.

Interviewees stated that military service enhances their abilities to more quickly analyze situations, process information, and respond. Deployments made them “*more attuned to people and their behaviors.*” This is one of the qualities that gave veterans more confidence in their technical skills and a greater willingness to involve themselves in dangerous situations.

*“The military prepared me to be very organized, so when I am on a traumatic scene I am very calm about those things. In just a few seconds I figure it out and start to manage the crisis. That is a major advantage of the military. Those that have been in major crises and have survived them handle them better later.”*

While there was consensus among the interviewees that veterans bring an array of skills to the department, it is not the case that veteran officers will always be better, faster, or more conditioned than non-veterans. The ability to manage a specific situation, such as engaging an enemy, is still dependent upon that officer’s range of experience in those types of situations. It is possible that combat experience will produce an officer who is better prepared to manage those incidents than a veteran who did not face combat. Additionally, there are a number of transitional challenges (both technical and personal) that veterans must balance upon returning. These challenges may or may not affect job performance.

## **Transition Issues**

Key to improving department resources for combat veterans is identifying the challenges personnel face when transitioning from military deployment to civilian work. As one interviewee expressed, “*when you get back your senses are more heightened. You need to focus on the fact that you are not in a combat environment and that you are providing a professional service. Heightened senses make sure that the officer goes home at night, but negatively it could cause them to over-react or re-experience something that happened to them [during deployment].*”

The focus groups and interviews revealed a range of transition challenges including:

- Performance impact
- Increased stress and discomfort levels
- Reduced empathy and tolerance for civilians
- Family frustrations
- Challenges with leadership

**Performance Impact** – Interviewees repeatedly stressed the need to re-acclimate to law enforcement work: *“You have to get re-acclimated to the daily rhythm. In the workplace, there are some difficulties in remembering how to do it as a police officer.”* This re-acclimation includes territorial familiarization and relearning how to drive.

*“I had to readjust to geography because they knocked down a lot of houses and changed streets. When I came back it was like the city had totally changed.”*

*“I got lost sometimes because I didn’t know what street I was on. It is kind of an eerie feeling standing there by yourself and not knowing where you are. It was a street that I was familiar with before. After the second deployment, the transition took longer.”*

*“I don’t like driving over potholes because in Iraq they would put explosive devices in potholes and then pour concrete over them. And still, I have problems driving over potholes, and anything in the road that looks like it shouldn’t be there.”*

While the impact of this type of challenge may appear small on the surface, one interviewee relayed the impact of this disorientation.

*“During a foot chase, the suspect hopped over a fence and I pursued him. He ran in one direction and I found myself standing on the street with no idea which way to go. I was totally disoriented. I had worked these streets for years, but it was like I’d never been there before. When you’ve been away for a year you have to become familiar with the streets again. I had to study maps to familiarize myself with the area.”*

One of the greatest performance challenges may be overcoming the mental shift from battlefield to Main Street. The ability to make this shift leads to many of the other transition challenges highlighted during the interviews, such as interfacing with civilians. As shown in the example below, it can also create higher levels of uncertainty about how to manage a situation or a degraded reaction time during events.

*“In [California], a gang city, I responded to gun fire. There was an 11 year-old gunshot victim. I get there, and chaos is breaking out, there is a crowd. They are all asking questions, pushing to get on the scene. And I thought I was back in Iraq, and I thought I was going to lose my control. And there are people surrounding you, and everyone wants something. Started pushing people, and that is when you have to gain your composure, and I was able to stop and say ‘I know why they are like this; it is an 11-year-old.’ In Iraq you would fire a couple shots in the air to push the crowds back. But here [the response] would be to push the yellow tape back and request backup. And in Iraq, I have had people come into your truck and take your food or equipment. And you fire a couple of shots, but here you can’t do that. It is real hard, especially when you have just come back from a tour. It is hard for your mind to transition from a military to a law mode... I did not act on my impulse like it was Iraq, I actually physically stepped back to my patrol car and watched things for awhile and I was able to clear my mind. It wasn’t that I didn’t know where I was, it was more I felt overwhelmed by all the screaming. I was more nervous because of having to deal with crowds in Iraq.”*

Because operating procedures and rules of engagement are different from combat to law enforcement, many interviewees discussed the challenges of shifting back to law enforcement procedures.

*“In SWAT, no one can get shot. When we enter a building or room [in the military] we yelled ‘down’ and shot anyone who didn’t, but not in SWAT. You have to make a judgment call. By military standards, I am successful if I take less than 13 percent casualties but in SWAT, you can’t take any casualties.”*

**Increased Stress and Discomfort Levels** – The California example reflects a high level of discomfort with crowds. Several interviewees identified this as a situation that is much more stressful post-deployment.

*“When I’m in a crowd, if people start flanking me I move back and make sure no one can sneak up on me... In a situation like that, there should always be a bumper behind you. Even at small gatherings, even when we have a cookout, I try to stay back. If I go to a bar, I will sit at the end of the bar away from everyone and, if it is packed, then I’m leaving.”*

Other interviewees felt understandably challenged by sights and sounds that were reminiscent of the battlefield. One interviewee recalled that it took weeks to get over taking cover as a conditioned response to hearing alarms sound, and is still startled occasionally at the sound of a siren (over a year after returning). It is important to note that this interviewee also felt that *“these conditioned responses can be a good thing.”* However, there is a need to balance this over-conditioning and determine the appropriate level for civilian policing.

Additional points of discomfort were related to differences in weaponry and other equipment during deployment vs. post-deployment.

*“We are so used to carrying long rifles there, and here it was odd not having one. [I had to] get used to the idea that you only have a sidearm. And wearing your vest on the inside not the outside, there were equipment issues that I had to get used to. Driving a car, learning your geography again you have to relearn everything.”*

**Reduced Empathy and Tolerance for Civilians** – Examples illustrating a reduced level of concern for civilians once returning to policing were prevalent throughout the interviews. This manifested itself in what some interviewees considered *“small problems”* or *“whining”* from the civilians they encounter. Others expressed decreased concern and greater frustration with people who they perceived as unconcerned about the war.

There were several examples of officers having to regain self-control when they found themselves yelling at people or becoming aggressive during their interactions with civilians. Interviewees recognized that they had become accustomed to communicating differently with people while in Iraq or Afghanistan.

*“In Iraq, I had to use hand gestures or demonstrate for people to understand. When I got back here I found myself doing the same thing. I’d point in a direction and tell them to go. When I got back [home], I found myself pointing and telling people where to go and get out and show them. That was an*

*adjustment I had to make. Before, if people were on the corner and I wanted them to move I would have just warned them, not put my hands on them. [When] I realized it was me that was making my job harder and not everyone else I started making adjustments.”*

This communication difference is also reflected in officers’ increased military demeanor upon returning to law enforcement.

*“The hardest thing for me during my transition was control issues... A student told me recently that I was so intimidating...I didn’t see myself as intimidating. I had two complaints lodged on me. Both of them dealt with people perceiving me to be very military in bearing and unbendable on the scene...That is the hardest thing I had to deal with.”*

Decreased concern for civilian well-being is perhaps one thing that impacts an officer’s effectiveness on the job. The role of an officer to protect and serve is not only compromised by this mental shift from protector to a disinterested or unconcerned individual, but the public perception of the officer’s willingness (or lack thereof) to protect can have a severe impact on community relations. Interviewees recognized this indifference, however, in some of the interviews, the posture was *“I know it’s wrong, but I don’t care anymore.”*

*“I have no tolerance for people asking me for directions. Someone stopped me and I said, ‘Why can’t you just leave me alone?’ I had a bad attitude, and I could tell from his face that I made him mad, and rightfully so. I was disrespectful. [I have] this ‘I don’t care’ attitude. I don’t want to waste my time with disabled vehicles because I want to go catch the bad guys. I have less tolerance for the minor things, and they should be just as important. There was an 80-year-old male with a disabled vehicle, and he started changing the tire himself. And I told him not to do that. Normally I would have changed the tire myself, but he kept going, and I walked back to my car.”*

Participants in both the focus groups and interviews noticed an increased suspicion of citizens based on their nationality. Specifically, a few officers expressed a heightened awareness when they see someone of Middle Eastern descent. There is a tendency among some to profile those they come across with an Arabic name. Interestingly, this was expressed solely as an artifact of deployment rather than the veteran officers’ personal perceptions toward people of Middle Eastern descent. This may speak to the need for cultural training not only pre-deployment, but also post-deployment as a way to “deprogram” perceptions and definitions of the adversary.

**Family Frustrations** – Not surprisingly, many veterans have increased frustration or challenges with family. Whether this is the result of feeling stress over reintegrating into the family unit, needing an outlet for releasing frustration, or imposing structure wherever possible, there is a tendency to be more hardened with family. This hardening can begin prior to the return home.

*“Over there dealing with family stuff was frustrating. We were like, ‘We don’t have the time to deal with this stuff.’ Our tolerance for dealing with stuff back at home was lower. The stress and focus was on trying to get back home... Dealing with family problems, when I got home, at first my family really didn’t bother me*

*with stuff; it was more about quality time. My tolerance for noise, I was like, 'I need alone time, leave me be.' ...tolerance is still low for everyday life."*

Perhaps another motivator for this behavior is the need to maintain a leadership position upon returning. For those veterans who rank higher in their military position than their law enforcement position, losing this rank can be difficult to manage. This perceived reduction in rank can lead to increased frustration with their agency leadership.

*"In Iraq, no one ever questioned you; you did things the way you wanted. In law enforcement, you can't do that, you have to remember to take it down."*

*"Overseas you can just make a decision, but here you have to go through all the admin layers before you can make a decision."*

**Challenges with Leadership** – As the example above illustrates, officers stated that they tend to have more decision-making authority while deployed overseas. Upon return, that authority is diminished. Often, veteran officers transition from a command position during deployment to a patrol or a lower command position at their law enforcement agencies. They report the tendency to compare their manager's decision making process or style to their own.

After working within a military environment, which often has a more regimented structure, officers often find it difficult to work under leaders that may not be as decisive, direct, or polished as their military officer [leader].

*"I expect a lot from someone in a leadership position. You expect them to conduct themselves in a certain way and when they don't I get frustrated. Coming out of the [military], I have certain standards on how they should behave. It irritates me more now. I see a lot of things. It seems I pick up on the double standard a lot more now."*

One notable point from the data is that work transitions are potentially more manageable for veteran officers whose roles and tasks in the department are similar to those in the military. For example, tasks related to working intelligence for the law enforcement agency and serving in an Intel Analyst role in the military may be similar enough that the technical re-acclimation process may not be as great as those who serve in divergent roles. This finding indicates a need for flexibility that addresses a range of transitional needs rather than "one size fits all" veteran support.

## **Current Agency Response**

*"The patrol didn't know what to do with me. I sat around for a week, so I had to read a bunch of policies and procedures. It was just very unorthodox. They just threw together some training for me."*

Interviewees had diverse perceptions of how their agencies responded to their deployment. The data indicates that a low level of organized support currently exists among agencies. For most, their agencies lack a structure to transition veterans into the department. This lack of structure also exists in regards to keeping officers up to date on agency affairs while deployed, preparing for reintegration (e.g. not being included in performance review and promotion processes) and supporting them once they returned.



*“Supervisors didn’t always understand. Like when I had to go to the Veteran’s Administration for appointments. They made it hard for me to do things with the military so I could slowly get back to civilian life. And no one wanted to touch me because I was subject to go back to war.”*

There appears to be a general lack of formalized transition programs. Some veteran officers experienced a program that was assembled impromptu, without real thought to their individual needs, while others were surprised to find that their department had no idea that they were even returning to the job from deployment. These varied experiences were attributed to a need for improved communication between military and law enforcement organizations.

### **Resources/Agency Response Suggestions**

Interviewees provided a range of suggestions for improved agency support. These suggestions call for programs that not only support personnel as they transition back into their civilian roles, but also target individual veteran officers’ needs. The greatest need expressed was for an agency representative or sponsor who can support veterans and their families during deployment and post-deployment.

*“When new recruits come into the system, if they are military, everybody should be assigned a sponsor. So, if they get activated their sponsor takes care of things and keeps the person abreast. Because when I was away, I wasn’t told anything. They took my benefits and nobody called or told me anything. They couldn’t call me because all we had was satellite. Sponsors could be a contact for the family. Your wife and kids won’t know who to call otherwise. When you get back, the sponsor sets up training and your dates to go to the range, etc.”*

*“Much of agency support should be logistical. Have a liaison officer, someone to help you handle all those logistical things. A mentor or support officer that will get you back in and get you going. Someone that will help you get re-acclimated.”*

In addition to assigning a sponsor to veterans and their families, interviewees expressed a strong desire to have improved communication between their law enforcement and military organizations.

*“The post-deployment assessments—the department needs to know exactly what happened to that officer while he was deployed. So [the police agency and military] can talk together to let them know that person is coming back, and people can plan. And there should also be some contact with the family, how is he doing, is he closing himself off, is he more aggressive, and those are all things that you need to know. And then you can cater training to possible PTSD or re-adjustment issues. A lot of times, re-adjustment issues are misdiagnosed as PTSD.”*

They also suggested that their agencies set up or facilitate the organization of support groups for the veteran officers returning from military service.

*“I think there should be a support group either within the police department or within the community. People can share their stories, and people can laugh, and laughing is a coping mechanism.”*

Of great importance to the veteran officers was the need to be acknowledged for the work that they, and others, have done overseas. This was a topic of much discussion during the focus group sessions and was reinforced during the interviews.

*“You are back in your job, and there is a level of frustration for not feeling appreciated. You come back and all your work has piled up... We were supposed to receive an award, and we have not received our awards yet. And every time we contact headquarters they say, ‘we are working on it.’ I think we should be paid a lot more appreciation by [our agencies]. I think [there needs to be] a greater appreciation for the fact that you have volunteered and supported the global war on terrorism.”*

*“I was never as proud as the day I walked off the plane and there were a bunch of people waiting. It was really sad to realize that it just didn’t matter [in my agency] sometimes... There was never a welcome home party or any recognition of what we did and the sacrifices that we made. It would be nice to be recognized.”*

## **Training Recommendations**

*“A vet coming back can say, ‘I already know about that, I already have that training, I need this,’ etc. There is a difference between forcing and offering training.”*

Many of the anecdotes presented indicate various training needs, including transitional training for driving skills, operating procedures, new equipment familiarization, along with re-orientation to community relations and communication skills. Interviewees discussed the need for diverse training that addresses different skill sets and skill levels.

*“[Training needs] will depend on the experience the person had when they were deployed. If they had an administrative job, they will come back and only need a refresher.”*

*“I found it interesting that I had to ride along with an FTO (Field Training Officer). I wouldn’t [normally] do that. I outrank FTOs and they only outrank recruits. I think I should have ridden around with a Sergeant. It is kind of humiliating to have to do that.”*

*“[The new recruits] coming in from active duty [notice] there are police officers that don’t shine their boots or iron their uniforms, but they still might be a good cop. In the academy you should prepare them for the let down that not everyone is military and not everyone is like you. Also, I was used to the high speed, and it isn’t like that either. You just have to lower your expectations.”*

Interviewees discussed training to help with the policy and equipment changes that take place while they are deployed.

*“They need to put something in place to start supporting us better. [We need support for] training, rules of engagement, or use of force. Over there, you fire warning shots, here you don’t use that. In our agency, policy changes at least once a week, so you have to keep up on that. [You have to get] re-acclimated with your gear and used to shooting your own weapons, using your handcuffs*

*and the things that you carry on a day-to-day basis. We only get to qualify with our weapons twice a year, so if they deploy for six months and come back and get into a situation where they have to use their weapon there might be a hesitation.”*

The Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department (LASD) has a training program that resonated with many of the focus group and interview participants. The LASD issues a Unit Commander Military Leave Resource Handbook which instructs their leadership on how to support veteran officers. This handbook addresses the obligations of leadership, legal codes, how to avoid scheduling conflicts, and a structured out/in processing checklist for the department and veteran to follow. It also establishes a Military Action Committee which facilitates the transition process and maintains communication with the officer when he or she is deployed.

It would be useful to evaluate the LASD program and consider using it as a model for future training programs. Some veteran officers expressed concern about making programs and training mandatory. They also warn against stigmatizing officers who return from duty by leading people to believe that all veterans are “broken” as one interviewee put it.

*“I hope that we can tell people that these guys are not monsters waiting to blow up. These kids are not broken. In some ways they are better.”*

*“The [program] Los Angeles [conducts] would be powerful. So the vet coming back can say “I already know about that, I already have that training, no I need that, etc.” There is a difference between forcing and offering training. [Veterans] don’t trust anything that is regimented, so we try to make it informal.”*

*“I was so impressed with the Los Angeles program. There are only a few programs in the country. Los Angeles has volumes of officers coming back, so they can’t afford not to deal with that. I liked the fact that they have support and mentoring, a psychologist on staff, and a structured program...[Perhaps] the small departments that can’t afford [a program like Los Angeles] can use the resources of the bigger units.”*

## **Panel Findings**

The following points emerged from the floor discussions as well as interaction with the panel members at the 2008 IACP Annual Conference:

- Veteran officers return to agencies with maturity and experience and these attributes should be utilized
- Continuous communication with family members is critical
- Written departmental policies for the reintegration of veteran officers are essential
- Trust, communication, and teamwork are recognized attributes in the transition process
- Transition time is necessary but the duration should be flexible
- Field training officers assigned to assist with the transition process should have military experience

- Psychological assessments and fitness for duty evaluations are necessary but should not use procedures that will stigmatize the employee
- Law enforcement leadership should establish a peer group that includes all returning veteran officers
- Law enforcement leadership should establish an ad-hoc advisory group so veteran officers can influence departmental policy and procedures
- Law enforcement leaders should continue their promotion policies that affect their veteran officers and include them in the process while deployed
- Disciplinary procedures should not differentiate between veteran officers and other employees
- Medical screening is important for the veteran officer and their family members
- Some sworn officers in the chain of command may not understand the sacrifices veteran officers make while in the voluntary service to their country
- Studies on multiple deployments and their effect on agencies is incomplete but ongoing within the DOD

## Roundtable Findings

Similar to the panel discussions, many common discussion points emerged from the roundtable:

- Veteran officers understand chain of command and bring the ability to “think outside the box” to domestic, tactical, and operational confrontations in stressful environments
- Serving in the armed forces reinforced their sense of discipline which helped keep them alive during their deployment

Roundtable participants advocated for mentoring programs with other veteran officers and military liaison officers to assist with pre-deployment tasks. The participants also made the following points about transition issues:

- Peer groups were important to setting departmental policy
- Veteran officers expressed the need for more time during their pre-deployment stage to take care of personal business and ready their family for separation
- Assigning a military liaison officer who represents a military component to assist with pre-deployment tasks is necessary
- While some veteran officers agreed that they might require approximately 90 days to decompress and transition, most agreed that chiefs should encourage them to take the time they need before they return to work. Other veteran officers returning from multiple deployments may require more time.<sup>5</sup>
- During the transition phase, veteran officers could be placed in less stressful jobs to better acclimate themselves to routine duties
- Families must always be included in pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment plans and planning
- Some federal agencies are challenged by deployments; some assistance (overhaul) in policy, procedures, and caring is essential in some departments.

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<sup>5</sup> Deployment-related health concerns may be exacerbated by multiple deployments but this phenomenon has not been studied sufficiently to draw any conclusions.

- A departmental web site (home page) with information (official and unofficial) would help with communications
- Returning veteran officers with disabilities require physical and mental assistance, some more than others
- Periodic confidential psychological assessments are necessary to monitor any negative effects upon resumption of law enforcement duties, with feedback and training provided to the employee if needed
- Agencies – big and small, municipal or state – handle veteran officers differently. IACP sample policies or roadmaps would be helpful to those organizations lacking written policies.
- Agencies may have written policies in place; however, communications are problematic within the chain-of-command
- Individual financial planning should be part of the transition program

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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Veteran officers and law enforcement leaders, including those in charge of federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies, would benefit from a comprehensive pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment plan that exploit the talents, ambitions, sense of pride, and discipline fostered in veteran officers. The research provided many suggestions for programs, initiatives, and training that would help new recruits and returning officers who have served.

This research study identified several “best practices” and recommendations that can be implemented by agencies to ensure veteran officers have a successful entry or re-entry into policing. Some of these recommendations can be implemented immediately upon receipt of this document and are not resource dependent; others are geared for mid- and long-range development.

## **Immediate (30-60 days)**

- Publicly acknowledge veteran officers for their service on their return to their agency/community
- Create within-agency focus groups to learn more about veteran officers’ needs
- Develop communication methods with veteran officers and their families throughout the deployment cycle
- Offer veteran officers a flexible timetable to meet a range of transitional needs
- Create a specialized FTO-type program structured to assist veteran officers
- Allow the veteran officer to ride-along or job-shadow with a peer
- Address the confidentiality policies of the services offered and clarify misconceptions
- Update veteran officers on new policies, procedures, laws, and changes in equipment and technology

## **Mid-Range (6-9 months)**

- Establish peer and family support groups
- Incorporate training that addresses equipment differences and the reprogramming of muscle memory
- Develop a comprehensive family care plan and checklist
- Structure training for each veteran officer’s specific needs
- Review rules of engagement and standard operating procedures
- Establish a comprehensive driver training program
- Develop a comprehensive web-based communications system
- Update returning officers on new policies, procedures, laws, equipment, and technology
- Develop an ethics and language review to ease the transition back to a civilian culture

## **Long-Range (1-2 years)**

- Develop core training (e.g., firearms, in-service, update specialized training)
- Create scenario-based training to identify transitional issues and to practice tactics
- Address the unique training needs of federal agencies
- Develop strategies to employ disabled combat veterans
- Gauge the effectiveness of military and civilian law enforcement partnerships

From these research activities the IACP will produce two guidebooks, one for veteran officers and one for leaders, which will provide a comprehensive easy-to-read roadmap that will address the issues faced by veterans. We will also develop a curriculum to assist agencies in training and/or retraining veteran officers.

## **FURTHER STUDY**

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Because this was an exploratory study, the next steps should include systematic evaluations of targeted themes in order to validate the current findings. The IACP and ARA/KAD suggest the following:

- Determine best practices among law enforcement agencies for veteran officers' transition from service member to law enforcement officer
- Conduct research on the real or perceived stigmatization of veteran officers' seeking assistance services
- Compare veteran officers to non-veteran officers and identify where each group's skills can benefit one another for the most effective work force
- Examine factors pertinent to returning military police, security force, or Master of Arms personnel who transition to civilian law enforcement

## **Future Initiatives**

There are several potential projects that would allow the IACP to continue to provide and validate support to both veterans and police chiefs and optimize their service to their families, their departments, their communities, and themselves. Such projects could include:

- Examine sworn and unsworn law enforcement positions and identify those that can be filled by veterans who are fitted with prosthetic devices, to provide them the opportunity to fulfill a law enforcement career.
- Conduct empirical evaluation of the Phase I findings
- Implement and oversee a pilot program with a small group of law enforcement agencies that incorporates the recommendations contained within the guidebooks
- Survey DOD military police agencies and compare findings with civilian law enforcement agencies
- Study the effect of multiple deployments on law enforcement agencies
- Develop a web-based multimedia training program for veterans and supervisors
- Develop a guidebook for families of veteran officers
- Partner with DOD or VA and examine alternative careers for disabled veteran officers in the criminal justice field
- Partner with the U.S. Army's Battlemind program to build resilience into law enforcement officers at the pre-deployment stage

The IACP is prepared to address this need for further research and meet the challenges of developing meaningful and cost effective follow-up projects with selected partners.



# APPENDIX A

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## Project Advisory Committee

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