

The Boston Globe

Metro

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The blue line in the shadows



By Kevin Cullen | GLOBE COLUMNIST NOVEMBER 22, 2013



LAURIE SWOPE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE

Boston police Officer Pat Rogers (left) was a decent, down-to-earth Dorchester guy, from a family where the pride in police work ran deep, columnist Kevin Cullen writes.

It says something about our culture that the only reason a lot of people know that Pat Rogers killed himself is because he was on a reality TV show.

Pat Rogers was a good police officer, well-liked and respected. I met him and found him to be a very decent, down-to-earth Dorchester guy, from a family where the pride in police work ran deep.

But like many cops, he faced pressures that can over time fashion a black hole that seems insurmountably deep.

His suicide, just hours before a showing of the season premiere of “Boston’s Finest,” in which he was a featured character, led organizers to cancel the event at the Revere Hotel.

But, in the long run, the best way to honor Pat Rogers’s service and memory is to drag the problem of cop suicide out of the shadows.

For all the dangers police officers face on the street, they face a bigger threat from their own demons.

“We lose about 150 to 160 police officers nationwide each year in the line of duty,” said Sergeant Brian Fleming, who heads the Boston Police Department’s peer support unit. “There are about three times as many suicides.”

When it comes to asking for help, police officers are fighting stigma, an internal culture of self-reliance, and some real practical concerns about what raising their hand will mean for their career.

“The whole persona is, we don’t ask for help. Everybody else comes to us for help. I call it the John Wayne era. We’re breaking through that, slowly but surely,” Fleming said. “But we’re still losing way too many cops.”

The biggest fear many police officers have is that if they admit having serious emotional stress or contemplating suicide, they will have their gun taken away and won’t be able to work. Fleming has an antidote for that: superior officers who get it, and intervention that works.

“There was a cop, sitting in his cellar, all night long. He had an affair, was wracked with guilt. His kids were upstairs and he’s in the cellar, putting the gun to his head, then putting it in his lap. ‘Should I, or shouldn’t I?’ This went on for eight hours before, in a moment of clarity, he calls another cop, and they get him to a hospital. I took the guy’s gun in the ER. He was in the hospital for eight days, he got on some light medication. He was back at work in 10 days. Only three people in the department know who he is. And he’s been great ever since.”

Bob Long, a retired State Police detective who is president of the Boston Police Foundation, which provides funding for things not included in the police budget, said the recently retired police commissioner, Ed Davis, and his command staff backed Fleming’s unit and the progressive approach to addressing the problem.

“When I came to the foundation last year, I made this, suicide prevention and stress reduction training, our number one priority,” Long said. “Brian and his people are working wonders, saving cops, but we’ve got to give them more resources.”

Long said when he was with the State Police, the cause of death for many troopers who killed themselves was listed as “accidental discharge of weapon.”

“They may have thought they were doing the cop and his family a favor,” Long said, “but it only reinforced the stigma, making it less likely that cops were going to come forward and ask for help.”

Long said cops see things that can eat away at them, especially when compounded by domestic troubles and excess alcohol.

“The stress of the job, seeing the seedy side of society, seeing the sexual and physical abuse of women and children, seeing disfigured bodies, it all adds up,” he said.

Brian Fleming was gutted when he heard about Pat Rogers. The next day, he spoke to a bunch of cops. Four of them called him later. They wanted to talk.

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