

IMPROVING WELLBEING THROUGH SOCIAL SUPPORT & BELONGING

A Pilot Program with Deputies and Civilian Staff of Denver Sheriff Department

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The People Lab



HARVARD Kennedy School

To help address the rampant psychological distress in the corrections system workforce, The People Lab partnered with the Denver Sheriff Department (DSD) to launch a program aimed at fostering peer support to improve overall wellbeing.

SITUATION

Nearly 50% of frontline workers across the US experience psychological distress, with corrections system employees reporting the highest rates of burnout and PTSD. These conditions have been linked to a range of negative physical and psychological outcomes such as heart disease and mental health challenges, as well as organizational consequences like high rates of absenteeism and turnover. Considering the outsized impact that correctional officers can have on the experience of the incarcerated population, understanding and improving officer wellbeing is a critical component in broader efforts in public safety.

In 2021, **The People Lab**, in partnership with DSD, designed and tested two approaches to improve wellbeing among deputies and civilian staff: a peer-focused program and an individually-focused program.

SUMMARY



- 1 A peer-focused program designed to foster social connections was shown to increase feelings of being understood as well as improve job happiness and self-efficacy.
- 2 Public agencies struggling with staff burnout could benefit from programs designed to create space for open and honest feedback from employees about their experiences with stressors on the job.
- 3 Investing in the wellbeing of deputies also improved their perceptions of incarcerated individuals under their care, highlighting the potential to mitigate the “us-vs-them” mentality in correctional institutions.

RESEARCH

The People Lab worked with the DSD to randomly assign 1,062 deputies and civilian staff to receive one of two programs:

- **Individually-focused wellness program**, which included eight weekly emails with wellness prompts. Emails invited recipients to use an anonymous, online journaling platform to respond to the prompts sent each week, which focused on wellbeing from an individual perspective (writing down the strategies they could use to take care of themselves and cope with job stress, for example).
- **Peer-focused wellness program**, which included eight weekly emails aimed at strengthening social connectedness and peer support. These emails encouraged employees to share their experiences and advice with each other through an anonymous, confidential online platform. Emails also highlighted noteworthy responses to the previous week's prompt.

INDIVIDUAL PROMPT

A healthy body needs to have the companionship of a healthy mind. Having some time to collect our thoughts or to decompress from a hard day on the job helps us muster the strength of spirit to face our challenges.

This week, we would like you to take some time to write down what was difficult to deal with this week and how you will help yourself decompress.

You can write a note to yourself by clicking here. No one at [org name] will have access to the notes that you write to yourself.

PEER PROMPT

Last week, your colleagues shared a lot of great advice that would help someone who is just starting out, including this: (Shared story). You can access more stories from fellow deputies by clicking here.

As deputies, we work the toughest beat there is. Think about a time when a fellow deputy helped you navigate an emotionally challenging situation at work. How would you offer support to someone in a similar situation?

You can share your advice anonymously with your fellow deputies by **CLICKING HERE.**

To evaluate which program was more effective at improving wellbeing, we administered a survey to all employees before beginning the program, at the end of the weekly prompts, and six months later. The surveys measured different aspects of wellbeing such as job happiness, burnout, self-efficacy, belonging, and feeling understood. Approximately 33% of employees responded to the initial survey, and 23% responded to the final survey.

Results for deputies and civilian employees

We found that employees who received the peer-focused wellness program:

- ✓ **Had significantly increased feelings of self-efficacy**, specifically driven by increases in feeling that they will be able to overcome challenges, relative to those who received the individually-focused program.
- ✓ **Had slightly increased feelings of being understood**; however, there was no difference, on average, in burnout or other measures of wellbeing among employees in each group.

Results for deputies only

We found that deputies who received the peer-focused wellness program:

- ✓ **Had increased feelings of self-efficacy, job happiness, and feeling understood**, compared to deputies who received the individually-focused program.
- ✓ **Were more likely to indicate that they shared values and beliefs with incarcerated individuals under their care** than deputies who received the individually-focused program.

Rates of retention and incident involvement between participants in each group were not significantly different. In other words, the prompts did not affect deputies' likelihood of quitting during this period, nor their likelihood of being involved (either directly or indirectly) in incidents on the job.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Designing and testing strategies for mitigating employee burnout and stress is crucial for ensuring the health and wellbeing of DSD employees. While the peer-focused program did not reduce burnout directly in this study, it did improve deputies' job happiness, self-efficacy, and feelings of being understood.



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About the People Lab

The People Lab aims to transform the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people in government and the communities they serve. We collaborate with governments and other stakeholders to evaluate strategies that can strengthen the public-sector workforce, improve public service delivery, and foster an engaged democracy.



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