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Seminars offered to strengthen police officers' marriages

Program deals with stresses from job

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Sometimes what Detective Mike Smithers sees in his job as a police officer is difficult to talk about, even with his wife.

Smithers admits he doesn't always open up to his wife of nine years, but after a seven-week marriage enrichment course the couple just took, he said the lines of communication are getting much better.

"It opened up a dialogue for us," said Smithers, who credits the class with helping his wife better understand his job and helping him realize he needs to be a bit more open about what he's dealing with.

The Smitherses took the marriage enrichment course as part of a pilot program sponsored by the Louisville Metro Police Department's chaplain that is aimed at combating the high divorce rate among officers. The program finished in December and a new session started last week.

Though exact statistics are not available, divorce rates among police officers are estimated to approach 80 percent, said Ken Pagano, the chaplain organizing the program. The nation's divorce rate for all people who have ever been married has never exceeded 41 percent, according to researchers cited in a 2005 New York Times story.

"It's a difficult world for police officers," said Pagano, who has been a chaplain with the department for two years.

Using a DVD series featuring Dr. Emerson Eggerich, an expert in family and communications, Ken and Evelyn Snider lead discussions in the classes, which are meant to provide building blocks for strong relationships.

The Sniders, who have been married for 47 years, are retired and are members of Southeast Christian Church. Over the years, they have attended and led marriage seminars and retreats in several states. The classes aim to help couples understand each other better so they can have a stronger relationship and better communication, the Sniders said.

These are lessons that are particularly relevant to police officers because of the stresses they encounter on their jobs, which may require odd hours, working holidays and weekends, and encountering life-threatening situations, Evelyn Snider said.

"We desire to shore up their marriage so that when these stressful days, weeks happen they don't take it out on their mates," she said.

Smithers, who has been with the department for 20 years, said he knows he didn't communicate as well in his first marriage, which ended in divorce. And while he and his current wife have a good marriage, he said the seminar was a great opportunity to strengthen it.

"When you come home, you're not a policeman no more and you've got to understand that," Smithers said, adding that home life shouldn't be as regimented and strict as life at work.

The upcoming series of classes will be held at the department's training academy.

There is no limit on the number of participants and the sessions are free to all officers and civilian employees of the department. They are paid for by the Police Foundation, a nonprofit group that supports department programs.

Pagano said he expects the program to continue indefinitely, with sessions held at least twice a year.

Maj. Troy Riggs, the department's chief of staff, said he began thinking about a way to offer support to officers after hearing story after story of marriages in trouble. Riggs said the department wants to encourage officers to strengthen their personal relationships.

But, Riggs said, no one in the administration is monitoring who takes the classes.

"Officers don't want to show a sign of weakness," Riggs said. "So, this is done on their own. We really believe it's good for the work force."

William Walsh, director of the Southern Police Institute, which is based in Louisville, said offering the program is a progressive step by the department because little research has been done on how policing affects marriages. And, Walsh said, few departments do anything to address the issue.

He said the issue has become particularly relevant as many families deal with the pressure of the economy, including rising gas prices and other strains. For officers, the job only adds to those stresses.

"Sometimes you bring that stress to other problems at home and that leads to a divorce," Walsh said.

Sgt. Adam Houghton, who took the pilot session with his wife of 21 years, said the classes are not marriage counseling and don't just apply to those having troubles in a marriage.

He said he and his wife have taken other marriage seminars and thought this would be a great way to rejuvenate their relationship.

Houghton, who was already married when he joined the department 20 years ago, said he never anticipated the kind of strain policing could put on his marriage.

"We came very close to losing it after I'd been around (the department) for five or so years," Houghton said.

He said he's thrilled the department is addressing the pressure police work can put on a marriage -- and vice versa.

"What happens in your home impacts what you do on the street," Houghton said.

As a citizen, he said, "it is better for me if the police officers protecting me have their house in order."

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