

VICARIOUS TRAUMA INFORMED TRAINING

A Law Enforcement Wellness Resource Toolkit — National Native Justice Institute | www.nativejustice.us

■ VICARIOUS TRAUMA IN TRIBAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

Vicarious trauma (VT) — also called secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue — is the cumulative impact of being repeatedly exposed to others' traumatic experiences. Tribal law enforcement officers are among the most at-risk professionals: they regularly encounter violent crime, domestic violence, child abuse, death, substance use crises, and community tragedy. Without awareness, training, and organizational support, vicarious trauma erodes officer wellbeing, judgment, relationships, and effectiveness.

 An estimated 34% of first responders experience clinically significant secondary traumatic stress. Rates are higher among tribal officers due to small community dynamics and shared grief.

 Vicarious trauma is not a sign of weakness — it is a normal human response to chronic exposure to suffering. Untreated, it becomes a serious health and safety risk.

 Officers experiencing vicarious trauma make more errors, have higher use-of-force rates, generate more complaints, and are significantly more likely to resign or retire early.

 Vicarious trauma-informed organizations that invest in officer wellness retain staff longer, perform better, and serve communities more effectively.

■ RECOGNIZING VICARIOUS TRAUMA IN TRIBAL OFFICERS

Cognitive & Emotional Signs

- Intrusive thoughts or images from traumatic calls that appear during off-duty hours.
- Difficulty feeling emotions (numbing) or feeling overwhelmed by them — with no middle ground.
- Cynicism, hopelessness, or a persistent sense that nothing matters or will ever improve.
- Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or completing routine tasks that were previously easy.

Behavioral & Physical Signs

- Increased irritability, short temper, or conflict with family, colleagues, or community members.
- Social withdrawal, isolation, and loss of interest in activities that were previously meaningful.
- Increased use of alcohol, substances, or other numbing behaviors.
- Chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, physical health complaints without clear medical cause.

Organizational Signs of Vicarious Trauma Culture

- High turnover, frequent resignations, or difficulty retaining experienced officers.
- Elevated use-of-force rates, complaints, and disciplinary actions department-wide.
- A culture of silence where officers are expected to “just handle it” without support.

■ VICARIOUS TRAUMA INFORMED STRATEGIES FOR OFFICERS & DEPARTMENTS

- **Name It to Tame It** — Simply labeling your experience as vicarious trauma — rather than weakness or failure — reduces shame and opens the door to recovery.
- **Build in Recovery Rituals** — Deliberate transition routines between work and home (a specific route, music, or physical activity) help the nervous system shift out of threat mode.
- **Maintain Connections Outside the Job** — Relationships with people who are not in law enforcement provide perspective, normalcy, and connection that protect against vicarious trauma.
- **Seek Professional Support Early** — Do not wait for a crisis. Regular check-ins with an EAP counselor or therapist familiar with first responder trauma is a performance tool, not a last resort.
- **Advocate for Peer Support in Your Department** — Trained peer supporters — fellow officers who have received specialized training — are often the most accessible and trusted source of support.
- **Use Supervision as a Support Resource** — Supervisors in vicarious trauma-informed departments check in on officer wellbeing proactively — not just reactively after incidents.

RESOURCES, GRANTS & SUPPORT

Funding, Training, and Support Resources — Tribal Officer Wellness & Vicarious Trauma Programs | www.nativejustice.us

FEDERAL GRANT RESOURCES

Officer Wellness Funding

- **BJA Law Enforcement Mental Health & Wellness Act Grants** – Funds officer mental health, peer support, and wellness programs. bja.ojp.gov
- **COPS Officer Safety & Wellness Programs** – Resources, training, and grants for law enforcement wellness. cops.usdoj.gov/safety-wellness
- **SAMHSA First Responder Behavioral Health** – Resources for first responder mental health including tribal law enforcement. samhsa.gov

Training & Technical Assistance

- **BJA Tribal Justice Programs** – Supports tribal law enforcement capacity including wellness program development. bja.ojp.gov
- **CTAS – Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation** – DOJ tribal funding supporting officer wellness and training programs. justice.gov/tribal
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) First Responder Support** – Resources and training for law enforcement mental health. nami.org

STATE & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **State Homeland Security Grants (SHSGP)** – Tribal law enforcement may be eligible for state-administered FEMA homeland security funding.
- **Tribal Law & Order Act (TLOA) Resources** – Expanded tribal criminal authority and DOJ technical assistance for implementation.
- **Grants.gov Tribal Search Tool** – Search all federal grants available to tribal entities. grants.gov (filter: Tribal Government eligibility)

HELPFUL TIPS FOR TRIBAL PROGRAMS & LEADERS

Adopt an Organizational Vicarious Trauma Policy Formal policy acknowledging vicarious trauma, designating wellness resources, and establishing supervisory check-in expectations signals institutional commitment to officer wellbeing.	Establish a Peer Support Team A trained peer support team — fellow officers who receive specialized training — dramatically increases help-seeking behavior and early intervention.
Integrate Wellness into Shift Briefings Brief, regular wellness check-ins during shift briefings normalize the conversation and reduce stigma around seeking support.	Measure Wellness Program Outcomes Track turnover, sick leave, complaints, and self-reported wellness metrics. Data demonstrates program value and drives resource allocation.

KEY WEBLINKS

National Native Justice Institute	www.nativejustice.us
BJA Officer Wellness Programs	bja.ojp.gov
COPS Safety & Wellness	cops.usdoj.gov/safety-wellness
SAMHSA First Responder Resources	samhsa.gov
NAMI First Responder Support	nami.org
Grants.gov (Tribal Search)	grants.gov

PARTNER WITH NNJI — WE ARE READY TO SUPPORT YOUR COMMUNITY

TAKE ACTION TODAY — Contact NNJI at www.nativejustice.us to schedule training, consultation, or access resources.

Strengthening Tribal Justice — One Community at a Time