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*(Pictured: Steamy sunset over Lake Flower in Saranac Lake 10/27/22)*

# POLICE TRAINING EVALUATION

## CULTURAL COMPETENCY, TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES, AND OFFICER WELLNESS

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## **Introduction**

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd by Officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May of 2020, protests in support of the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement began to spread across the United States. At the heart of this civil rights movement was a call-to-action for increased accountability for police violence committed against Black Americans and to address significant racial disparities in the criminal justice system. In response to these protests, some cities and counties restructured how local budgets and law enforcement were deployed in service of public safety, and more than 30 states and Washington, DC, enacted one or more statewide legislative policing reforms, to ensure greater policy uniformity within each jurisdiction.<sup>1</sup> The state of New York, in particular, passed one of the most aggressive police reform legislative packages that increased accountability for police officers as well as criminalized specific types of controversial restraints. In addition, Governor Andrew Cuomo, signed Executive Order #203: New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative, which states that “urgent and immediate action is needed to eliminate racial inequities in policing, to modify and modernize policing strategies, policies, procedures, and practices, and to develop practices to better address the particular needs of communities of color to promote public safety, improve community engagement, and foster trust.” As part of this Executive Order, Governor Cuomo made subsequent state funding to police contingent on New York agencies to develop a plan “to reinvent and modernize police strategies” by April 1, 2021, in consultation with the community.

## **The Adirondack Diversity Initiative**

The Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI) was founded in 2015 with a mission to make the Adirondacks a welcoming and inclusive place for both residents and visitors while ensuring a vital and sustainable Adirondack Park for future generations. As the only program of its kind in the region, ADI’s program interventions seek to mobilize transformational change in the Adirondack North Country region to ensure all people feel a sense of safety, connection, and belonging whether they live there or are visiting. Through their Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) initiatives, ADI focuses on building culturally conscious communities, businesses, and organizations by expanding cultural and critical consciousness around systemic racism and structural oppression.

ADI works collaboratively with community members, local organizations, and regional stakeholders, to create tools, strategies, and interventions to help reduce the impact of the legacies of systemic racism and structural oppression that continue to plague the nation and the Adirondack Park. As such, ADI believes that communities must play a central role as actors and stakeholders in articulating, facilitating, mobilizing, and executing efforts that advance

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<sup>1</sup> Brennan Center for Justice. (2021). State policing reforms since George Floyd’s murder. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/state-policing-reforms-george-floyds-murder>

transformational justice in the Adirondack Park and surrounding areas. One such strategy is through its Community Wellness Initiative, which seeks to engage individuals and community leaders in identifying systemic issues related to bias, equity and racism in their community, encourage critical thinking on the impact of local policies and programs, and actively engage residents in equity and anti-racism educational opportunities. One core component of program is the Community Policing Initiative (CPI). The CPI is a commitment to work with State and local police agencies in the Adirondack region, to help them fulfill their commitment to equity and inclusion, by building stronger relationships between the agencies and diverse communities they serve. The program specifically promotes Problem Oriented Policing (POP), which reorients policing to focus on underlying problems in communities instead of simply responding to incidents and endorses community policing strategies, so that community partners play an active role in identifying and addressing community problems in partnership with police.

One primary goal of the Community Policing Initiative has been to support police agencies efforts in fulfilling Governor Cuomo's Executive Order #203 and to make the process both affirmative and cooperative. ADI recognized however that rural police agencies, such as those operating in the Adirondack Park, may struggle with how to fulfill this order because of a lack of resources and expertise. Thus, in September 2020, ADI contracted with RENZ Consulting, LLC ([www.renzconsulting.net](http://www.renzconsulting.net)) a firm that specializes in strengthening police-community relations at the state and local level and within urban or rural settings. Shortly afterwards, RENZ consultants conducted a series of listening sessions with community members and law enforcement agencies throughout the Adirondack Park to assess the needs of all stakeholders and to identify specific evidence-based strategies that could help to bridge the gap between police officers and the communities they serve.

Our training is designed on three training pillars - empathy, self-awareness, and introspection. Our intention is both *diagnostic* and *prescriptive* in nature. The diagnostic piece is in recognizing that a problem exists, the prescriptive piece is addressing it by acknowledging the pain and then beginning the process of healing. Our goal is to shape the conversation in such a way that all participants understand that their voices matter and that there are sensible steps that can be taken to build trust between the community and the police. Our training is rooted in the *contact hypothesis* – *the idea that controlled contact between members of two groups can promote tolerance and acceptance and tends to reduce tensions between them.*<sup>2</sup>

Based on the listening sessions conducted, the following objectives were identified to help agencies meet (or exceed) the requirements set forth in NY Executive Order #203:

- Reduce racial inequities in policing;
- Reform and modernize policing strategies, policies, procedures, and practices;

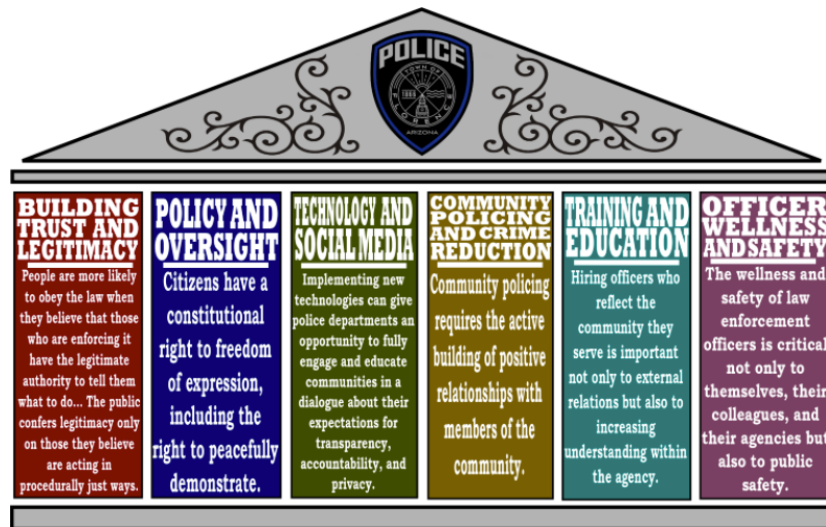
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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.apa.org/monitor/nov01/contact>

- Develop and implement practices to better address the needs of BIPOC communities to promote public safety, improve community engagement, & foster trust;
- Increase the cultural competence of police personnel in Adirondack Park;
- Increase police - community engagement in the Adirondack Park region; and
- Decrease negative relationships between police officers and BIPOC community members within Adirondack Park.

## Curriculum

Drawing from the six pillars of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing and evidence-based research, RENZ Consulting, LLC. created three 8-hour interactive and educational training modules organized around the following topics: a) community engagement and cultural awareness, b) officer engagement and leadership, and c) trauma-informed policing and officer wellness.



The table below provides a summary of the specific principles and topics introduced in each training module.

Community Engagement and Cultural Awareness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-reflection and an introspective look at bias and stereotypes</li> <li>• Broadening the lens of ‘culture’ and ‘diversity’ – learning about the lived-experiences of community members</li> <li>• Exploring the concept of ‘fragile communities’</li> <li>• “It’s not about you” – exploring how citizens attitudes/behaviors towards police might be based on their experiences with police in other communities</li> <li>• Historical reflection of social movements and protests in the United States</li> <li>• Understanding cultural and historical trauma associated with law enforcement</li> <li>• Introduction to procedural and distributive justice</li> </ul>

<b>Officer Engagement and Leadership</b>
• Discussion of cross-cultural communications
• Reimagining police-community relations
• What is police reform?
• Discussion of procedural and distributive justice
• Discussion of a FAIR process
• Discussion of the Restorative Process – building relationships, developing community, repairing harm, and restoring relationships
<b>Trauma-informed Policing and Officer Wellness</b>
• Defining trauma – scope and prevalence
• Discussion of different types of traumas – acute, chronic, complex, community, cultural and historical, vicarious
• Consequences of unaddressed/unacknowledged trauma
• Neurobiology of trauma – acute and chronic symptoms
• Trauma-informed principles and practices
• Impact of secondary stress and vicarious trauma for officers
• Recognizing symptoms of stress
• Wellness strategies to optimize resilience and performance

Two instructors from RENZ Consulting, LLC facilitated each training session. Initially Lorenzo M. Boyd, Ph.D.<sup>3</sup>, founder and president of RENZ Consulting, LLC., and Mike Lawlor, J.D.<sup>4</sup> led the sessions. However, after the second session in year one, it became apparent that some of the officers were dealing with levels of personal or professional trauma. While the facilitators did not (and cannot) diagnose professional levels of police officer trauma, there were clear signs that there may have been some traumatic incidents that some officers were dealing with as evident by some of their actions, behaviors, and opinions. Therefore, Heather L. Pfeifer, Ph.D.,<sup>5</sup> another member of the RENZ Consulting LLC., joined the team to facilitate the third training session on trauma-informed policing and officer wellness. After the first round of

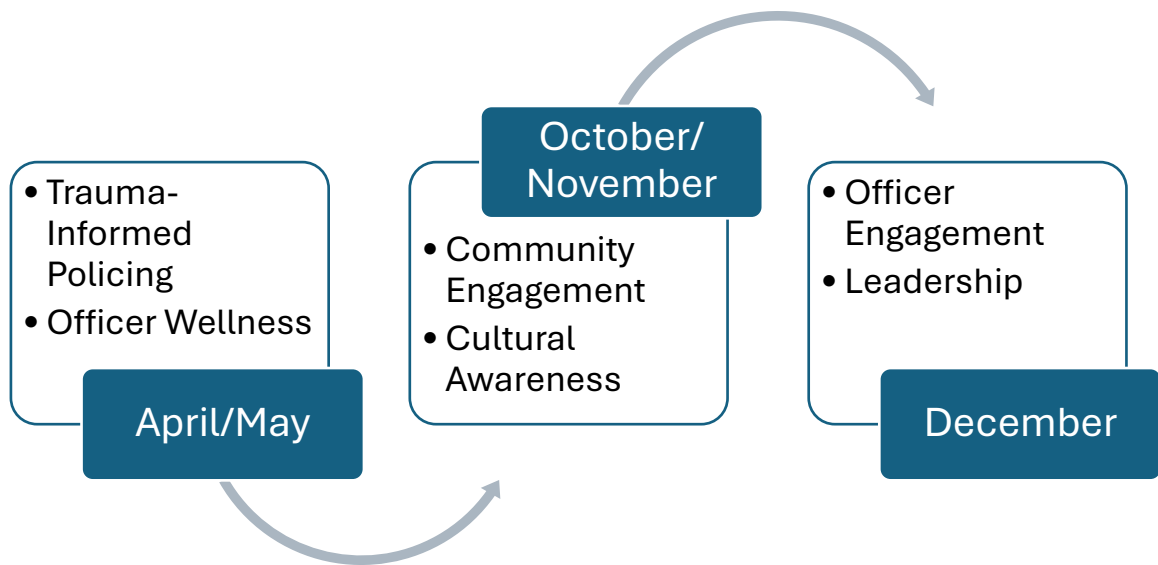
<sup>3</sup> Lorenzo M. Boyd, Ph.D. is a leading authority in policing best-practices, with more than 30 years of combined experience in both law enforcement and higher education. Dr. Boyd's service as a former deputy sheriff in Boston for over 13 years has informed his twenty-year plus career in higher education, where his teaching and research has focused on urban policing and diversity issues in criminal justice.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Lawlor, J.D., a nationally recognized expert on criminal justice reform and a founding board member of the Council of State Governments Justice Center. Mr. Lawlor served in the Connecticut House of Representatives from 1986 to 2011. From 1995-2011, he served as the chair of the House Judiciary Committee. He was subsequently appointed as undersecretary for criminal justice policy and planning in the Office for Policy and Management by former Connecticut Governor Dannel P. Malloy.

<sup>5</sup> Heather L. Pfeifer, Ph.D. is the Executive Director and Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at the University of Baltimore. In 2003, she helped to create the Roper Victim Assistance Academy of Maryland (RVAAM) which has evolved into one of the largest state-based victim assistance academies in the U.S. and had received both state and national awards. For the past fifteen years, Dr. Pfeifer has facilitated trauma-informed trainings with criminal justice professionals and practitioners on how to improve their communication skills to more effectively respond to and assist persons who have experienced trauma, as well as teach strategies on how they can manage their own stress-related responses attributed to vicarious trauma and reduce the risk of burnout.

trainings, facilitators decided to reorder the modules so that all subsequent rounds began with trauma-informed policing and officer wellness. As facilitators, we felt informing officers about recognizing trauma (their own or in the community) would better prepare them to do their jobs with empathy and compassion as well as have the tools to foster resilience to counter the high degree of stress they experience. In addition, to further assist in rapport and relationship building with officers and agencies, RENZ Consulting, LLC., assigned the same two facilitators (Drs. Boyd and Pfeifer) for all subsequent trainings after year one.

*Figure 1: Current Sequence of Training Modules*



The separation between these training dates is important as it allows officers time to process the information from the previous session. However, because facilitators designed the curriculum to be both integrative and holistic, they reintroduce concepts from the previous session(s) at the start of each module before moving into new concepts. This allows officers to reflect on what they have learned as well as to share how they may have used the corresponding knowledge/skills when engaging with the community. Facilitators created each session to be highly interactive and facilitate optimal learning by guiding officers through a combination of self-reflective exercises, small group activities, and large group discussions.

One of the most challenging aspects to these training sessions, however, is creating a learning environment in which the officers feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment or reprisal. Many of the topics introduced are uncomfortable and can (and often do) elicit strong emotions from the officers. To create a safe space to allow for an open dialogue, the facilitators must consistently demonstrate active listening and empathy when officers share their opinions and ask questions. Another challenge is that the facilitators

must be able to present all course material in a neutral and objective manner, but still make it relatable to the officers' experiences. Thus, knowing when to draw on their own professional and personal experiences can help to provide specific examples/scenarios that connect with the different topics and help to further increase the officers' level of awareness, as well as another opportunity for analysis and reflection. Facilitators can manage these challenges by creating familiarity between themselves and the officers. Specifically, by having the same facilitators lead all trainings, RENZ Consulting was able to build the necessary social capital and trust with officers that created an optimal learning environment.

## **Evaluation**

### **Methodology**

#### ***Participants***

Study participants included all command staff and officers attending at least 1 of the 3 training sessions provided by RENZ Consulting, LLC. between July 2021 and October 2024. This included both police officers and command staff from 11 agencies <sup>6</sup> from the Adirondack Park. There was a total of 357 officers trained across the three separate sessions. Due to scheduling/staffing issues, not every officer was able to attend the three-part training sequence. Trainers invited officers to return to complete any session(s) they missed when it worked with their schedule.

#### ***Data Collection & Analysis***

Data collection occurred in two phases. The first phase consisted of training participants completing post-training evaluations that included both likert-scale questions and open-ended questions. At the end of each training, trainers administered an anonymous survey consisting of eight questions; four fixed response questions (agree, disagree, N/A) and four open-ended questions. This report includes quantitative and qualitative feedback from both command staff and officers that completed evaluations directly after completing the training.

Approximately 6 months to 1 year after completing the training, researchers sent emails to command staff and officers introducing the study and providing a link to a survey containing informed consent documents, demographic questions, and requests for further contact information to conduct a follow-up interview. Twenty-one individuals responded to the survey and participated in semi-structured follow-up interviews. Command staff represent 67 percent

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<sup>6</sup> New York State Police, Saranac Lake Police Department, Lake Placid Police Department, Potsdam Police Department, SUNY Potsdam Campus Police, Plattsburgh Police Department, SUNY Plattsburgh Campus Police Department, Essex County Sheriff's Department, Hamilton County Sheriff's Department, Franklin County Sheriff's Department, and NY State Department of Environmental Conservation Police and Forest Rangers



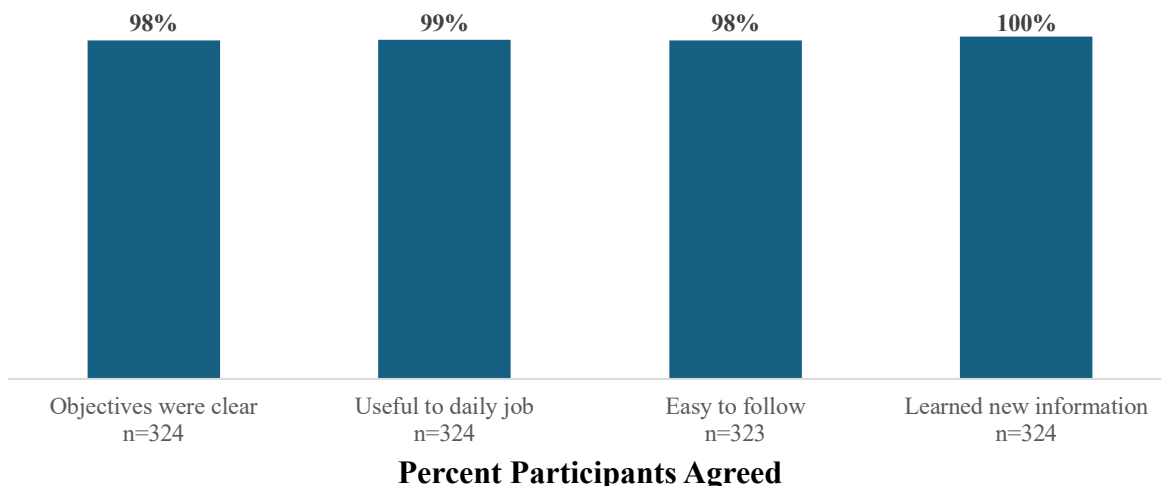
(n=14) of participants and remains the focus for the final section of this report. Questions focused on key takeaway points from three separate trainings: cultural competency, trauma-informed practices; officers' self-care and wellness.

Interviews ranged between 30 minutes and 3 hours and researchers recorded in-person interviews on an iPhone and virtual interviews with zoom. Researchers used Cuckoo (online transcription service) and Zoom's internal software to transcribe interviews. Research assistants listened to interviews and reviewed transcriptions for errors and added identifiers for interviewer and participants to ease later coding efforts. Upon completion, researchers linked all transcriptions to ATLAS.ti, a data management program used for coding and analysis of qualitative data<sup>7</sup>. After linking transcripts, researchers read and coded transcripts line-by-line. Two researchers reviewed and coded each transcript to ensure codes were accurate and complete. Once completed, researchers evaluated codes creating larger categories that eventually merged into themes you see below.

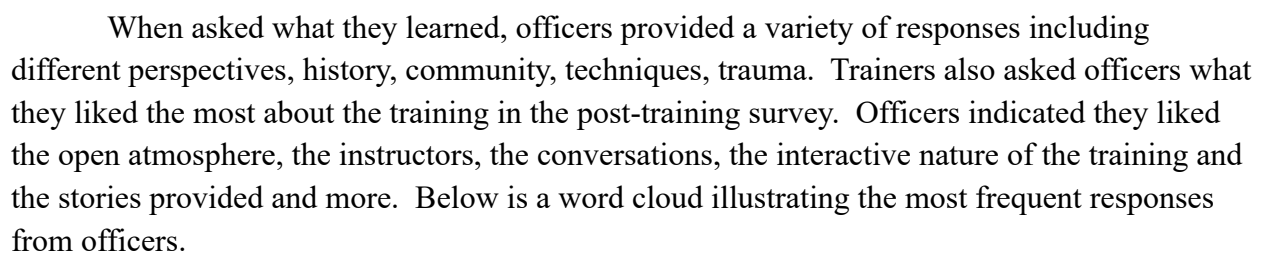
## Results

### *Quantitative Analysis – Training Evaluations*

Aggregated data for all training sessions indicate that instructor objectives were clear; the session was useful for daily employment activities, presentations were easy to follow, and participants learned new information (see Figure below). Although all participants received the survey, some officers did not return a survey and some did not answer all the questions. In addition, trainers provided surveys after each training session so officers could have responded to the three separate times reflecting on each individual training session. In sum, 91% of the officers (n=324) completed the survey.



<sup>7</sup> Muhr, T. (1991). ATLAS.ti—A prototype for the support of text interpretation. *Qualitative sociology*, 14(4), 349-371.



### ***Qualitative Analysis of Feedback - Training Evaluations***

The data from post-training evaluation forms suggest four main areas of growth for the officers that encompassed broadening specific knowledge and skills. These areas include:

- New communication skills
- Empathy
- Trauma Awareness
- Greater self-awareness

**New Communication Skills.** Officers gained new communication skills to help promote trust and legitimacy when interacting with members of the community. As articulated in the first pillar in the Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century policing, “people are more likely to obey the law when they believe that those who are enforcing it have the legitimate authority to tell them what to do .... The public confers legitimacy only on those they believe are acting in procedurally just ways” (p.9). In our discussions with the officers, many expressed that they want better relationships with members of the community, but their traditional training has them operate more from an “enforcement” mindset than a “service” mindset. While a critical step to fostering better police-community engagement is to increase police/citizen interactions in non-enforcement related scenarios, we highlighted the importance that *every* interaction with citizens needs to center on respect, active listening, and transparency. When an individual is provided the space to voice their feelings without reprisal and are instead met with a calm demeanor and empathy, the officer positions him/herself to build trust and facilitate cooperation. In every scenario, officers must not only recognize and manage their own emotions but they must also be able to correctly assess the other person’s emotions/motivations, then adapt their own communication style to moderate the exchange. As one officer noted, *“I learned that there are times when officers have to take a moment to think about how our approach could be perceived by the individual or individuals we are assisting and that we may have to tailor our approach to better serve the public.”*

In this context, we introduced officers to different verbal and non-verbal cues and techniques they could use in the field, such as how to diffuse a situation or how to interview a victim or witness of a crime during the initial report as well as during the investigative stage. Many officers reported greater confidence in their communication strategies that they felt could help them to navigate difficult conversations in the community (e.g., *“I learned different tools to use when talking with community members – allow them to retain their dignity and integrity”*; *“I learned a more articulate way of being able to create a conversation & carry on an educated dialogue with those who oppose the police”*; *“I learned new methods to decrease tensions, fears, etc. most people may have about the police and police culture”*). Others highlighted the trauma-informed techniques they learned and expressed a desire to learn more about these techniques (*“Trauma informed training was very useful. I plan on pursuing further training in this area”*). Ultimately, these sessions provided officers with specific skills and techniques that would

help strengthen their emotional intelligence, a key factor associated with leadership and a path forward for building trust and legitimacy in the communities they serve. As one officer reflected in the evaluation, *“I learned the importance of communication/empathy. The importance of officers as a professional/skilled communicator.”*

**Empathy.** Officers reported greater awareness and understanding of the varied lived experiences people have and how those experiences may frame their perspectives about the police, particularly within BIPOC communities. Initially, many officers believed that the negative interactions between the police and communities of color are issues in “other” jurisdictions and are not prevalent in Adirondack Park. By introducing a broader concept of ‘culture,’ we were able to guide officers in a discussion that explored the diversity within their own community, as well as the varied backgrounds of many of the people who visit the Adirondack Park. We were able to then segue into a discussion of concepts of community trauma (e.g., what is a ‘fragile community’) as well as cultural and historical trauma.<sup>8</sup> These traumas impact not just those who directly lived through the event but also their descendants, often manifesting as mental health issues like depression, anxiety, substance abuse, low self-esteem, identity confusion, and disrupted family dynamics, alongside higher rates of physical health problems and social disparities. Essentially, the ongoing effects of past traumatic experiences passed down through generations within a community, impacting their sense of identity and well-being. Thus, this type of trauma is both cumulative and collective.

In relation to the cultural and historical trauma associated with law enforcement, unfortunately, many of the policies implemented during the first 300+ years of this nation’s history resulted in the over-policing and discriminatory enforcement practices within marginalized communities. For example, many officers were unaware that the origins of modern-day policing in the United States are traced back to the ‘slave patrols’ created in the Carolinas in the early 1700s, which were authorized by local governments to patrol the countryside for runaway slaves and return them to their masters, as well as to help maintain order on plantations and suppress potential slave rebellions. Post-Civil War, southern police departments incorporated these slave patrols to control and deny access to equal rights for freed slaves. Then, during the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras, states, cities, and other localities routinely used law enforcement to enforce segregation and disenfranchisement of African Americans. By spending time discussing these historical roots of policing, officers had the opportunity to reflect on the impact these types of cultural and historical traumas may have on marginalized communities today and may contribute to their general distrust of police and the justice system. As one officer reflected in their evaluation, *“The negative view of police did not come from a single incident. There are*

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<sup>8</sup> Historical trauma refers to multigenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group. It is related to major events that oppressed a particular group of people because of their status as oppressed, such as African Americans who experienced slavery, lynchings, and Jim Crow segregation, Jewish persons and families trying to escape the Holocaust, the forced relocation and assimilation of Indigenous communities, persecution and discrimination against LGBTQ+ persons.

*years of incidents [which was known but not thought about as much as it should have been]” another reflected, “[This training] made me realize this is going to be a long road to build a bridge and heal our relationship.”*

This discussion allowed us to then explore with the officers their perceptions of recent civil protests, particularly those associated with #BlackLivesMatter movement. Once again, to help officers understand the context behind protest movements, we presented them with an overview of some of the major protests that have occurred in our nation’s history - from colonists protesting the English Crown against unfair taxation, to women fighting for their right to vote, to labor unions fighting for workplace protections and fair wages, to African-Americans fighting for equal civil rights, etc. We acknowledged that although the public discourse has often framed the narrative around protests (particularly those that have taken place in recent years) as un-American or un-patriotic, given the extensive history<sup>9</sup> of such movements in our nation, protesting is in fact ‘as American as apple pie,’ and is enshrined in our Constitution. By sharing this history, it helped many officers reframe their perspective towards the #BlackLivesMatter movement by adopting a broader and more objective lens. After the training, one officer reflected *“BLM is not against the police and we need to work together to fix the problems in policing”* and another wrote, *“It was more about bridging the gap between the community and the police rather than taking sides.”*

While these topics were difficult and sometimes produced uncomfortable emotions for the officers, many recognized this is an important and necessary conversation to have to improve police-community relations (*“The underlying issues are beyond the scope of what most people realize in it will take decades to change opinions on policing. Policing is as much a societal issue as it is a reform issue”*; *“Community awareness is crucial for positive change”*). Some officers, however, expressed it is still difficult to not take the anti-police rhetoric personally. After we validated their feelings, we were able to reassure them that we do not intend to make them feel guilty or own another person’s trauma with these discussions. Rather, the goal is to help them acknowledge the trauma that exists in many marginalized communities, and then actively challenge themselves to help to reshape the narrative by engaging with those communities in a trauma-informed manner. This resonated with many of the officers and provided them with a path forward. As one officer reflected in their evaluation, *“The current societal problem is not to be taken personally, just be you and continue to do the right thing.”*

**Trauma Awareness.** Officers reported greater understanding of the impact trauma may have on an individual’s ability and willingness to engage with them, and learned new techniques and strategies on how to engage with individuals in a trauma-informed manner. Because of the very nature of their occupation, officers encounter people in the community who have experienced trauma. Sometimes it is within the context of a crime, other times it is when they respond to a

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<sup>9</sup> For a list of incidents of civil unrest in the United States from 18<sup>th</sup> Century to present day, click [here](#)

critical incident, such as a serious traffic accident. But it can also manifest within ‘ordinary’ calls for service, such as a traffic stop or responding to a disturbance. Unfortunately, officers do not know the specific trauma history of the persons involved. Thus, they may encounter a wide range of emotional and behavioral responses from the individuals they engage with. Yet, agencies expect officers to know how to recognize the multitude of trauma symptoms and then successfully navigate those situations. Unfortunately, neither the traditional police academy or subsequent professional development sessions teach this information nor the skills required to succeed. Thus, we dedicated one of our sessions to teaching officers a foundational overview that included: the nature and scope of trauma, the neurobiology of trauma responses, the impact of trauma on memory and recall, the concept of ‘triggers’, and finally, trauma-informed practices and strategies outlined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

One of the first steps to help officers broaden their understanding of trauma was to get them to realize how prevalent it is in their community, as well as that it is unique to the individual. Through a series of group activities, officers began to see how broad of a concept trauma is and that there is no uniform or ‘accepted’ way for an individual to process and respond to their own experience. Trauma is subjective. As one officer reflected after our discussion, *“everyone has a story,”* and another recognized the importance *“to slow down and recognize trauma.”* We then addressed that one of the keys to successfully engaging with individuals who have experienced trauma is to be able to recognize trauma symptoms. This entails a wide range of physiological changes in a person’s body, but also changes in their psychological, emotional, and cognitive functioning. These symptoms may not only be present for individuals during the immediate aftermath of a critical incident, but when exposed to stimuli that ‘triggers’ a trauma memory. This can include environmental or sensory cues or when asked to recall details of the event(s). Thus, we spent time reviewing different cues they can watch for when engaging with someone who has experienced trauma, and what specific strategies and techniques they can use to avoid re-victimizing (triggering) the individual or help to mitigate those symptoms if, and when, they manifest. This information was extremely helpful to the officers. One officer shared in their evaluation of the session, *“I learned the ability to read body language and decide my next course of action based on my observations.”* Overall, these discussions provided some important context for officers when interacting with people who have experienced trauma. First, it helped them understand that whatever trauma response they might encounter in the field is not a reflection of them as an officer per se (*“The idea of people being “triggered” by traumas that have nothing to do with you as an individual”*); second, triggers are unpredictable (*“different people have different things that trigger their trauma and it’s important to understand them”*); and, third, how officers respond in those situations is critical (*“Identify certain triggers people may have and step back and reassess the situation”*).

By introducing officers to SAMHSA’s six principles of trauma-informed practices, we reinforced the principles of procedural and restorative justice, both of which are critical to

building trust and legitimacy and fostering positive police-community relationships. Integrated into each of SAMHSA's principles is the practice of empathy – the ability to recognize another's feelings and/or perspective without judgment. We reminded officers that the first step to practicing empathy when engaging with others is to listen to understand, not to respond. This requires officers to practice patience, active listening, and display a calm and respectful demeanor throughout the entirety of the interaction so the person feels safe enough to share their story (e.g., procedural justice). Not only does this make it more likely the person will continue to engage with the officer, but it also makes it easier for them to recall information that may be vital to any investigation. While this can help to promote public safety by facilitating successful investigations, we reminded officers that the goal is to build trust and legitimacy, and that is not solely dependent on the outcome of any case. People want to be heard and treated with dignity and respect. That is what truly facilitates healing for individuals who have experienced trauma (e.g., restorative justice). This lesson resonated with the officers in several ways, with one reflecting, *“[I learned] giving people a voice can be more important than the outcome in the criminal justice system”* and another shared, *“I learned how the interview can be destructive to a vulnerable or a hurt victim. This reminded me to take a step back to remember that what may be routine for a police officer is life changing for a victim.”*

**Greater Self-Awareness.** Officers reported greater awareness of the importance of their own wellness and gained new skills on how to manage their own stress responses. One of the issues that became evident after completing the first two training sessions in year one was that some of officers were dealing with levels of personal or professional trauma. While we did not and cannot diagnose the specific levels of trauma these officers experienced, there were signs and indications that some of the traumatic incidents officers were dealing with might have influenced their actions, behavior, or opinions. Therefore, we developed another training module to specifically address the types of personal and professional trauma that officers might experience during their careers, and provide them with specific techniques and resources they can use in the field (as well as in their personal lives) to help manage their own stress responses. The feedback we received from officers for this session was overwhelmingly positive. Many of the officers' expressed appreciation for acknowledging the high-level of stress they deal with on the job and for dismantling the fallacy of the 'teflon cop' who is impervious to the effects of stress (*“People carry different trauma, even cops.” “Everyone talks about PTSD in the military, but no one really speaks about PTSD and STSD with cops”; “Police need workshops to care for one another”*). Importantly, by providing them with the opportunity to have an open dialogue around these issues, we were able to help normalize their experiences and concerns, which in turn helped to counter the feelings of isolation some of the officers shared during these discussions. As one officer shared in the evaluation, *“I finally feel like my issues have been heard and validated.”*

After exploring the different types of stressors associated with the job, and how those can affect their mind, body, and psyche in the short, medium, and long-term, we then introduced officers to

a range of techniques and resources they could incorporate into their daily routines to help manage their stress responses and optimize their performance. Of particular importance, evidence-based research supports each of the strategies/techniques we shared and requires minimal time and effort to implement in the field. The officers genuinely appreciated learning these tips, tricks, and tools and acknowledged how they could use them proactively to help take care of themselves (*“I learned new techniques to help me with stress that your body endures”; “End the day with wind down techniques”; “little changes go a long way”*). As one officer shared why they liked the training, *“Officer wellness portion because I’ve kinda forgotten to take care of self,”*

### ***Qualitative Analysis for Command Staff Follow-Up Interviews***

Six themes emerged across all three training topics after analyzing follow-up interviews with command staff:

- communication,
- cultural/organizational change,
- trauma,
- officer wellness,
- timing of training, and
- type of trainer.

**Communication.** The need for increased and open communication continued to be the most important element discussed by command staff across all three training topics. Command staff emphasized the need for clear communication to bridge differing perspectives in law enforcement and to align perceptions and expectations among staff and supervisors. With one commander providing an example of working with an officer, *“you know, let me actually give them a chance to tell me what's going on because I think as we move from one thing to the next, we just assume something because, well, the last person did this because of this, or the last person said this, or the people are not the same. So taking that pause and listening to them.”*

Many felt it was useful to have individuals of different ranks and experiences in the same training to gain varied perspectives and increase communication between command staff and officers. In addition, officers appreciated the mixture of agencies in the training sessions leading to increase conversations, sharing of experiences and interagency collaboration. Communication is not only important within law enforcement agencies but also between agencies and their community. Some officers highlight the need for outsiders (e.g., community members) to understand law enforcement's inherent distrust and hyper-vigilant mindset due to their experiences.

**Cultural/Organizational Change.** Command staff recognized the need for cultural and/or organizational change after attending the training sessions. This theme was especially prevalent



when discussing training on trauma-informed practices and officer wellness and runs parallel to the need for open communication. Commanders discuss cultural shifts in policing, acknowledging generational differences in handling stress and trauma, emphasizing the need for mental health awareness from the start of an officer's career while also recognizing the responsibility of leading by example.

*"I think it's important if you're sending your officers and you're expecting them to go out in the community and believe and do and change this culture, change mindset, that that starts with you and that also doesn't expire. You don't get to 30 years on the job and say well I've learned it all. You know? I've been there. It changes."*

For communication to improve, cultural and/or organizational shifts must occur. The conversations highlighted the importance of training officers in fairness, respect, and empathy, as opposed to solely relying on policies in law enforcement encounters, a divergence from most existing policies.

**Timing.** Command staff indicated that officers should receive training in each of the topics early in their careers, potentially incorporating training on cultural competency, trauma-informed practices, and officer wellness into the academy. This would provide officers with a foundation of knowledge to build upon during their careers.

While all command staff recognized the need for training early on in officers' careers, many discuss training on these topics as continuous learning opportunities. Command staff felt such training benefits both new recruits and experienced officers, enabling them to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios. One commander stated *"I think right in the Academy and I then think it doesn't really have a time, like it doesn't have an expiration date, you know?"*

Feedback illustrated the significance of interpreting data in context and how individual backgrounds within the community shape perceptions of law enforcement that could solidify knowledge on the topics as well as build off on officers' experiences in the field.

**Trainer.** Officers discussed the advantages and disadvantages of having external vs. internal (to law enforcement) facilitators. Many identified the advantage of having an external facilitator with past law enforcement experience that was able to bridge the perspectives of law enforcement and the public. Many officers highlighted the non-accusatory and collaborative nature of the training, emphasizing the importance of mutual understanding between the public and law enforcement.

*"I like the open conversation. There was never, at any point, did I feel like we couldn't interrupt and actually ask a question. And whether it seemed like sometimes we have a hard time with being inappropriate, not meaning to be, but just genuinely asking a*

*different culture question. I felt very comfortable in there, which to me is, for being in my job, that's really appreciative, to be comfortable to say what I want without it being judged."*

Officers also indicated that training involving sensory experiences and scenarios enhances learning retention for officers and appreciate that from the trainers.

**Trauma.** Specific to training on trauma-informed practices, trauma emerged as its own theme and remained a topic of interest even 6 months to a year following the initial training. Command staff spoke to the broad nature of the topic encompassing officer trauma, victimization, intergenerational trauma, and more. Some command staff mentioned the newness of the topic and stated the training altered their perceptions of the community and their officers. They stated a need for openness and support for the trauma officers experience while on the job as well as in their personal lives and a need for empathy when interacting with community members. One supervisor commented, *"that trauma-informed approach reminds you of the importance of slowing down and making sure you're treating people like individuals. So, I appreciate any kind of training that is like that, that gives you perspective and tips and then shared experience of how impactful. Because we don't typically hear those things."*

Officers underscored the significance of accurate information and the challenges of gathering reliable details from traumatized individuals. The conversations emphasized the importance of understanding auditory exclusion, memory, and trauma in high-stress situations like police incidents and recognizing trauma in day-to-day interactions and its impact on decision-making and responses. Understanding the psychology and trauma management such as delaying interviews after traumatic events leads to clearer memory recall, is crucial for officers.

As with all training topics, officers discussed advantages of having training on trauma conducted by individuals with law enforcement experience and the benefits of ongoing, iterative training on trauma throughout an officer's career. Specific to trauma-informed practices; however, trauma discussions might work better peer-to-peer rather than in a supervisor-subordinate relationship. Providing strategies and tools for wellness, including peer support, enables law enforcement officers to take care of themselves and support their colleagues. One commander summed this theme nicely with the following example:

*"I think it really opened the door for a lot of people to realize that they might have stress responses that they don't even recognize. So, I had an incident a while ago, like when I first kind of started, where a young man who was in my community where I grew up had passed away in a snowmobile accident. And I didn't realize that I had struggled with the situation more than I realized. I think that this topic really opened the communication with me and a fellow deputy about the fact that I did have trauma responses to certain calls after that."*

**Officer Wellness.** Another theme that emerged from a specific training session was officer wellness. In general, discussions with command staff highlighted the importance of addressing officer wellness in law enforcement and the need for training and support from the beginning of an officer's career. More specifically, officers stressed an understanding of the importance of self-care, physical health, and wellness techniques such as breathing exercises as necessary for law enforcement. One supervisor stated *“sometimes people don't even have the capacity to recognize how much weight they're carrying around and what they've been exposed to.”* The conversations also touched on the value of integrating such material early in an officer's career and the challenges of getting officers to take the training seriously especially early on. Interviews underlined the importance of such trainings in helping officers handle stressful situations and better serve their communities; while also discussing the challenges in recognizing stress in others due to personal trauma desensitization.

Command staff also explored their roles in supporting officer wellness and the impact of training on supervisory skills and discuss the need for ongoing support, training, and understanding of officers' unique needs to maintain a healthy and effective police force. One command staff remembered thinking *“Wow, they're trying to teach me ways to better my health, how to cope, things like that. And that's not what I thought the training was all about. At the end of the day, I was like, that was really helpful.”* Ultimately, the effectiveness of the training depends on individual officers' attitudes and receptiveness to new ideas.

### ***Evaluation Summary***

Interviews with command staff highlighted external perspectives, practical tools, and open communication as essential for promoting officer well-being and effective policing practices. They emphasized the significance of understanding trauma, building community relationships, and fostering a supportive workplace culture.

Many discussions focused on the significance of addressing mental health and wellness among law enforcement officers. Officers shared experiences and insights about the importance of managing stress, trauma, and promoting officer wellness through open dialogue, peer support, training, agency-wide buy-in, and leadership involvement. They emphasized the need for ongoing conversations, training programs, early intervention, and resources to support mental health in law enforcement. A key point was normalizing seeking help, understanding psychology and trauma, and providing tools for stress management to improve officer well-being in law enforcement.

The officers stressed the importance of training in trauma-informed practices and emotional intelligence from the beginning of their careers. This training is crucial to address the impact of cumulative trauma on officers and for building trust with the community. Continuous education on trauma throughout an officer's career is essential to effectively address its effects. Additionally, interviews emphasized the practical implementation of strategies for officers to handle trauma in the field, including training on trauma response and de-escalation tactics. Many

staff focused on promoting officer well-being, community relations, and effective policing through trauma-informed practices.

While understanding trauma and the impact on officer wellness is important, training on cultural competency training is vital for law enforcement officers to enhance communication and community relations. Continuous training remains crucial for navigating diverse encounters effectively and promoting understanding and collaboration within law enforcement. Training sessions on cultural diversity provide fresh perspectives, improve interactions with diverse communities, and encourage open dialogue leading to positive changes in law enforcement agencies. Ongoing reinforcement and leadership by example are essential in implementing fair and respectful practices in policing.

Overall, command staff emphasize the significance of diverse perspectives in training, officer wellness, trauma-informed practices, and ongoing support for officers. They stress the need for mental health support, cultural competency training, wellness discussions, and collaboration within departments to enhance officer interactions with the public and promote their own well-being.

### **Recommendations**

Please consider the following recommendations based on the feedback synthesized from post-training surveys and follow-up interviews with command staff.

1. **Early Career Training** - Introduce material on cultural competency, trauma-informed practices, and officer wellness early in officers' career (either during Academy or within first 2 years) providing a solid foundation to build careers, establish routines, attitudes and behaviors as well as apply theoretical information to real world experiences.
2. **Continued Learning** – Ensure continued learning through booster sessions for officers to continue growing and learning from trainers and each other. Booster trainings on each topic every 3 to 5 years reinforces a potentially perishable skill and allows officers to bring experiences into the class room for discussion and build upon them.
3. **Multi-level Participation** – Include command and administration in the same training sessions post-academy. Officers responding to the post-training survey and command staff during follow-up interviews discussed the importance of sharing training space with each other. This intermingled structure allows command staff to hear about officers' experiences in the field and provides guidance from their years of experience. In addition, command staff training with officers, shows buy-in, models the behavior expected of line staff, and reiterates the importance/values the mission of the agency
4. **Inter-Agency Training** – Training sessions that invite participants from multiple agencies (i.e., corrections, police, rangers) provide a diversity of experiences and perspectives. Officers learn about different available resources and recognize

opportunities for potential collaboration. One participant stated *“I think we should have more training with other departments, I thought it was helpful to see other departments perspectives.”*

5. **Community Dialogue** – Hold special listening sessions with both law enforcement and community stakeholders that is facilitated by same trainers to provide both parties the opportunity to share their experiences and have an open dialogue around community-building. Officers acknowledge that distrust on both sides can be deconstructed through authentic and respectful conversations.
6. **Purposeful Selection of Trainers** – It is imperative when selecting trainers to consider professional experience (on-the-job); and credentials. Past participants connected with trainers that had past law enforcement experience allowing for increased rapport building. *“The personal stories shared that tied into the learning. It relates to absolutely every interaction we have, on duty and off.”* Trainers must be objective, open and patient given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed. *“That you make us think, but you don’t judge our opinions or experiences.”* Trainers’ ability to introduce and facilitate difficult topics while modeling emotional intelligence and genuine understanding and empathy is also important. One participant stated that the *“open and SAFE discussions, [and the ability] to question what I was thinking”* was helpful.

## **Conclusion**

Over our numerous visits to the Adirondacks over the past three-and-half years, we have witnessed a notable shift in attitudes and behaviors among the officers. We have seen firsthand many of the officers have increased their level of awareness to the issues faced by community members. This is particularly encouraging because when we started the initial round of trainings, many officers reported feeling beat up by society and not surprisingly, projected a defensive attitude at the idea that they might be part of the problem. By the time we ended our training sessions with them, many officers were willing to admit that they also have a critical role in making relations better with community members. Most importantly, many of the officers ended the session feeling empowered and shared in their evaluations that they felt more prepared to deal with the complexities of policing in the north country. One shared on their evaluation, *“Seriously, thank you for this training. Seriously beneficial and helpful both to expand our understanding and to help define the terms and concepts in order to perpetuate it within the profession and the region!”*.

RENZ Consulting, LLC. recognizes that no single training session, or series of training sessions, can fix 400 years of cultural and historical trauma between law enforcement and BIPOC communities. We do, however, feel that the focused and deliberate approach that we have taken to build rapport with officers during these trainings, as well as how we deliver the information is a great step in the right direction. We recognize that individual and organizational

change is an incremental process. Thus, our goal is to help both parties shift from “none-to-some” and from “some to-more.” This approach helps to reassure officers that it is not their sole responsibility to fix the problems we discussed. But now that they are aware of those problems and why they exist, they *do* have a responsibility to be a part of the solution.

As we enter a new year, we look forward to expanding our engagement with other officers who serve the Adirondack Park and the opportunity to work with other law enforcement agencies across the state of New York.

*I felt the training was great. There was not one part of it that I did not truly enjoy. As I said during the class, seeing more participation would be great as far as getting more people in the seats. The information provided I felt was great for all officers to get and having more participation would benefit the departments and each officer.*