

Improving Well-Being in Retired Law Enforcement Officers

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Abstract

The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF) and Museum in Washington, D.C. has requested assistance developing a program to improve the well-being of retired law enforcement officers. Policing is a dangerous and stressful profession that entails repeated exposure to life-threatening situations. It is linked to high rates of posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, broken relationships, depression, and suicide. Upon retirement, officers often lose the deep sense of identity, belonging, purpose, and meaning that characterizes the profession. This loss, coupled with years of exposure to potentially traumatic events, leaves many retired officers psychologically vulnerable. We propose that the NLEOMF establish a “peer advisory program” in which retired officers receive training in positive psychology principles and are provided toolkits to support fellow retirees. The toolkits draw on evidence-based interventions targeting identity and belonging, purpose and meaning, and resilience, optimism, and posttraumatic growth. Operating under the umbrella of a National Law Enforcement Officers Association, the program would recruit, train, and equip peer advisors, while the NLEOMF would serve as a central repository of best practice and resources. Advisors would then lead fellow retirees through structured exercises during periodic gatherings, with the goal of helping reestablish identity, meaning, purpose, and connection in retirement.

Keywords: retirement, well-being, connection, belonging, identity, resilience, PTSD, posttraumatic growth, optimism, purpose, meaning, depression, suicide, policing, law enforcement.

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Introduction and Background

The National Law Enforcement Museum is located in Washington, D.C., adjacent to the National Law Enforcement Memorial. Both the museum and memorial are operated and funded by the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF), a non-profit whose mission is to “honor the fallen, tell the story of American law enforcement, and make it safer for those who serve” (*National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund*, n.d.-a). The NLEOMF exists to help foster engagement and build trust between the public and the law enforcement community. It also supports and honors those who serve, protect, and sacrifice to keep our society orderly and safe. The NLEOMF has requested assistance applying positive psychology principles to enhance the mental and physical well-being of retired law enforcement officers.

Sector Overview

The U.S. has a complex law enforcement system that includes more than 17,500 agencies spread across federal, state, county, tribal, and city governments (Gardner & Scott, 2022). It is a highly fragmented and localized system, with over forty percent of agencies employing ten or fewer officers (Gardner & Scott, 2022). Each agency has a unique jurisdiction, training program, recruiting pool, and culture. Most law enforcement officers join the profession with the hopes of serving their community in a meaningful and beneficial way. Policing is a dangerous and stressful job in which officers are asked to solve difficult problems involving people who are often at their worst. The job requires strengths of courage, judgment, fairness, and teamwork, among many others. Repeated exposure to life-threatening or stressful situations are linked to posttraumatic stress disorder and high suicide rates. Law enforcement officers are more likely to die of suicide than to be killed in the line of duty (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). Many law enforcement officers report a change in their perception of others during their career, becoming

more distrustful and judgmental of the public they chose to serve (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). This creates a heavy psychological burden around the neck of these police officers. Too often, while in the throes of a fast-paced, high-pressure job, an officer sees only anger or hatred and misses the quieter voices of those who appreciate their service. Our law enforcement officers live with chronic stress from what they have seen and from the danger they may face in their next shift. A sense of duty, calling, and commitment to their fellow officers often gets them through their career. Once retired, however, an officer often has a reduced sense of purpose, community, and identity. As a result, retired officers face higher rates of depression, substance abuse, broken relationships, and suicide than both the general public and officers still on the job (Bowler et al., 2016; Craddock & Telesco, 2022; Violanti, 2026). Our project aims to move retired officers from this pathway of suffering to one of growth, resilience, and flourishing through reconnection with community and a sense of purpose.

Background

The NLEOMF is a nonprofit, non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization established in 1984. The organization has three pillars: a memorial that honors the fallen, a museum that tells the extraordinary stories of American law enforcement, and an officer safety and wellness program. The memorial, opened in 1991, is a living tribute to the more than 24,000 US law enforcement officers who have died in the line of duty (*National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund*, n.d.-b). The Memorial Fund also helps organize the National Police Week observance each May and a Candlelight Vigil each May 13th to honor all fallen officers (*National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund*, n.d.-c). In addition, the Memorial Fund maintains a comprehensive database of line-of-duty officer deaths. This information documents the cause of death and is

used to conduct research into officer fatality trends and to develop programs promoting officer safety and wellness (*National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund*, n.d.-a).

The museum fosters awareness, understanding, and dialogue between the public and the law enforcement community. It does so with exhibits and artifacts that educate the public about the history, evolution, and challenges faced by law enforcement. By highlighting the service and sacrifice of law enforcement, the museum recognizes and honors their work. This, in turn, helps build trust and respect for those who serve and the vital function they perform on behalf of the public (*National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund*, n.d.-d).

The safety and wellness pillar of the organization is aimed at promoting best practices for preventing officer injury and death. Destination Zero is an NLEOMF initiative that collects ideas, innovations, and solutions that law enforcement agency leaders can use to build and improve their own officer safety and wellness programs. Its goal is to reduce line-of-duty law enforcement deaths to zero. Each year, the organization collects nominations for outstanding officer wellness programs. The nominations are reviewed, and the best are selected for recognition in five categories: General Officer Safety, Officer Traffic Safety, Officer Wellness, Comprehensive Wellness, and Comprehensive Safety. Awards in each category are presented during National Police Week at a reception for the winning agencies. These programs are documented and captured in a database that serves as a resource that other law enforcement agencies can leverage for their own safety and well-being programs (*National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund*, n.d.-e).

Key Stakeholders

Law enforcement professionals are the heart and soul of the NLEOMF. This includes fallen officers' families and survivors, active-duty officers, and retired law enforcement officers.

The memorial supports surviving family members by providing a sacred space that honors the fallen and memorializes their sacrifices. Active-duty officers are supported by the NLEOMF's safety and wellness programs, which promote best practices for officer safety in the field and their physical and mental health. The memorial and museum help increase public support for active law enforcement officers through affirming the dignity of their service (*National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund*, n.d.-a). Retired officers are deeply connected to the organization's mission, and this stakeholder cohort is the key demographic for this project.

The general public is also a stakeholder through the NLEOMF's museum and outreach programs. The public benefits from these programs through increased awareness, understanding, and civic dialogue around law enforcement realities and risks. The NLEOMF is predominantly privately funded, relying on individuals, foundations, and corporate partners, with a small portion of funds coming from government grants (*National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund Inc*, 2025). These donors share a commitment to honoring law enforcement service and are additional stakeholders. Lastly, law enforcement agencies, professional associations, and unions are partners who collaborate with the NLEOMF in promoting officer safety and remembrance.

Application of Positive Psychology

Through initial discovery in partnership with Josh Bronson, Director of Education, Programs, & Visitor Experience, we have begun to understand the NLEOMF mission, structure, programs, priorities, challenges, and opportunities. It is evident that the Memorial Fund, through its three core pillars, has established itself as a positive institution that can continue to enhance the well-being of its stakeholders.

Our proposed application of positive psychology specifically focuses on supporting the NLEOMF's goal of enhancing the well-being of retired law enforcement officers. This

population often experiences profound loss of community, identity, and purpose following separation from service, which significantly impacts their physical and mental well-being (Violanti, 2026). Based on initial discovery, the following domains are the focus of our research and proposed positive psychology application:

1. Identity, belonging, and connection
2. Purpose and meaning
3. Resilience, optimism, and posttraumatic growth

In our partnership with the NLEOMF, we aim to provide evidence-based solutions that will help give back to a community that has given so much in service to our way of life. We are confident these positive psychology interventions can be applied to support retired officers' well-being, fostering greater purpose and meaning, social connection, engagement, and mental and emotional health. We are honored to help support a community that has enabled our own well-being by enforcing the law, protecting our families, and preserving our way of life.

Literature Review

Introduction

While active officers benefit from the safety and wellness programs championed by the NLEOMF, more can be done to support officers in retirement. Retirement often brings a profound loss of camaraderie, identity, purpose, and meaning, contributing to elevated risks of depression, substance misuse, relational strain, and suicide (Violanti, 2026). Despite the Memorial Fund's strong commitment to honoring service and fostering public engagement, there remains limited national infrastructure to support retirees in reconstructing these dimensions of well-being after separation. Addressing this gap requires a theoretically grounded understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying retirement adjustment. The following literature

review examines three interrelated domains: identity, belonging, and connection; purpose and meaning; and resilience, optimism, and post-traumatic growth. The review explicates how law enforcement retirement disrupts identity and belonging, undermines purpose and meaning, and increases vulnerability to depression, suicidality, and trauma-related distress. Well-designed, evidence-based interventions can help buffer against these factors by promoting resilience, optimism, and posttraumatic growth pathways. This review informs the development of interventions recommended for implementation by the NLEOMF.

Domain 1: Identity, Belonging, and Connection

Identity

Role identity is the internalized self-definition developed through participation in a socially recognized role (Ebaugh, 1988). A role identity is a set of internalized expectations tied to a social position that becomes integrated into one's self-concept over time (Burke & Stets, 2009). For law enforcement officers (LEOs), retirement may include a profound disruption of identity. *Role exit theory* suggests that when identity is highly fused with a profession, retirement without structured replacement roles predicts lower well-being (Ebaugh, 1988). In high-identity professions, occupational identity often extends beyond the job to moral orientation, belonging, and embodied behavioral patterns. Policing is rarely experienced as merely a job. It is frequently described as a calling organized around protection, order, and service, reinforced by shared culture and group cohesion (Loftus, 2010). *Social identity theory* suggests that belonging to a salient in-group contributes to self-definition and psychological stability (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As a result, the law enforcement role often becomes highly central to identity. When such a role ends, the psychological impact can be substantial.

Role exit theory conceptualizes retirement as a process of disengagement from a central identity. Ebaugh (1988) outlines four stages of role exit: *first doubts* (questioning the role's sustainability), *seeking alternatives* (exploring potential futures), a *turning point* (the decisive moment, transforming doubt into action), and the *creation of a new identity* (becoming an "ex"). For LEOs, the "ex-officer" identity must be negotiated both internally and socially, particularly when public identity markers such as uniform and badge are removed.

Continuity theory further suggests that adjustment is facilitated when individuals maintain *internal continuity* (values and competencies) and *external continuity* (relationships and routines) across transitions (Atchley, 1989). For retired officers, structured mentoring, training roles, or community engagement may preserve valued identity components while reducing stress. Thus, identity outcomes in retirement depend not only on whether the role ends, but on the availability of continuity pathways and processes to reconstruct identity.

Belonging and Social Connection in Police Culture

In addition to identity, LEOs derive a deep sense of *belonging* from their job. The job is often seen as a calling, wherein new academy graduates "become" police officers, joining an elite and exclusive club. The shared stressors of the job further strengthen the in-group bonds. Historically, the culture of law enforcement has been characterized by toughness and stoicism where showing weakness is discouraged and could impede advancement and acceptance (Bullock et al., 2020; Carney et al., 2021). Although this is starting to change, a culture of not asking for help is still pervasive across departments with detrimental effects on officer wellness. This sense of belonging can be healthy and a source of resilience during an officer's time on the force. Upon retirement, however, an officer no longer belongs to the club (Bullock et al., 2020; Carney et al., 2021). Many officers mention a relevance deficit upon retirement, meaning they

feel they are no longer relevant or have an impact or influence on the world (Carney et al., 2021). This separation from their colleagues and loss of identity can negatively impact a retired officer's well-being. In addition, involuntary retirements due to age or budget cuts can lead to feelings of betrayal by the organization (Cameron & Griffiths, 2016). Moving from a career defined by shared risk and camaraderie into civilian life can be disorienting and isolating. Experience in specialty roles such as SWAT, evidence response, or homicide teams, can make transition even more difficult (Curran, 2021). These roles often carry greater exposure to trauma and a stronger sense of identity and belonging. Officers who identify strongly with their role often face greater challenges adjusting to a new career (Hill & Snell, 2018).

The quality and prevalence of social connections strongly influence a retired officer's well-being. The loss of workplace social connections in retirement is a negative stressor, with the formation of social networks outside work as a key mitigating factor (Carney et al., 2021). Additional isolating factors such as divorce or widowhood result in significantly higher suicide rates among retired officers (Violanti, 2026). In-group bonding is often preferred to civilian groups in part due to a perceived lack of understanding among the civilian social groups and partly due to the strong identity and bond among law enforcement (Porter & Lee, 2024). For this reason, a viable intervention is for retired officers to provide social support networks for fellow officers. This has the added benefit of keeping retired officers engaged and contributing to their former coworkers' well-being. Officers who share work-related concerns with friends and family and avoid self-isolation during employment tend to fare much better in retirement (Pole et al., 2006). However, some assignments (undercover or sensitive investigations) discourage officers from sharing work-related stressors with family. In these situations, agency support groups can be formed to enable active and retired officers to discuss what they are going through.

Police culture both helps and hurts the mental wellness of officers. On one hand, a strong sense of belonging to a unique group promotes bonding. On the other, the unique intensity of the profession leads many officers to feel they cannot share work experiences with civilians (including family). This perceived inability to relate to others leads to isolation, particularly in retirement. Policing culture also makes the expression of anything that could be perceived as weakness difficult. Gallows humor is a common and effective coping mechanism, but it can give the impression one should be unaffected by trauma. Officers who are struggling may be seen as unfit for duty or unreliable in a difficult situation. This discourages officers from discussing emotional distress they may be experiencing, leading to further isolation (Porter & Lee, 2024).

Mental health problems often worsen post-retirement. A study of retired police officers in Australia found 81% were clinically depressed, and over half scored at or above a clinically significant risk of suicide (Udovicich & McLaren, 2025). The study also found a moderate association between moral injury, decreased self-compassion, and suicidality (Udovicich & McLaren, 2025). A study of 60 Delhi police officers found retired LEOs had higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than currently serving officers (Pal Singh et al., 2022). Violanti (2026) found posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to be higher in retired officers than in active officers. Mitigating factors include strong peer social networks that can foster a sense of belonging. An Australian study found that trained peers, in this case veteran police officers who had successfully transitioned to civilian life following a career in law enforcement, provided significant support to new retirees. Two factors were central to the success of the program: first, the strong identity associated with policing and the sense of belonging it creates; second, the need for hope and possibility in transitioning from policing to civilian life (Venville et al., 2024). The peer coaching essentially provided a roadmap for a successful transition, and many police

officers preferred to receive support from fellow officers. Reconnection and building mutual trust through peer support networks consisting of others with shared experiences is therapeutic, particularly among a population trained to be suspicious of others. Re-establishing identity and a life outside the force is vitally important. Many police officers are unsure how to transition and how they can put their skills to use. Peer support can provide a roadmap, ideas, and advice on how best to apply policing skills in civilian life (Venville et al., 2024). Lastly, officers suffering from mental illness are more likely to seek help if their organization checks in frequently, leadership concern is deemed genuine, and trust and confidentiality are maintained (Craw, 2022). Research consistently shows across study design, population, and geography the importance of social connection and community to the mental health of retired LEOs.

The most rigorous study around suicide risk is by Violanti (2026), which identified three factors that significantly increase the risk of suicide: widowhood, advanced age, and health problems. All three of these factors compound isolation and decrease community engagement, highlighting the importance of strong social connections in retirement. Pre-retirement solutions include organization-supported retirement planning that includes financial planning and psychological support, and an organizational culture that supports mental health and well-being. Post-retirement solutions include peer support networks, community engagement, and the availability of police centric mental health support services (Violanti, 2026).

Domain 2: Purpose and Meaning

Purpose

Purpose refers to a stable sense of core goals, aims, and direction in life (Martela & Steger, 2016). It is future-oriented and motivational, organizing behavior toward valued ends (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Work often provides purpose through structure and contribution,

and policing intensifies these features. LEOs operate with a vivid mission: protecting others, upholding order, responding to crises, and being needed. Such mission-driven roles provide strong daily reinforcement of purpose. Retirement may disrupt this motivational architecture. The loss of responsibility and structured contribution can diminish direction and perceived usefulness (Wang & Shi, 2014). Officers without clearly defined post-retirement goals may experience restlessness, diminished structure, and reduced engagement. Research suggests that goal disengagement without goal reengagement predicts poorer psychological adjustment in retirement (Barlow et al., 2020).

Purpose decline is not inevitable. When underlying values like service, leadership, and protection are translated into new domains, purpose may be preserved or reconstituted. *Self-determination theory* suggests that purpose is sustained when individuals experience competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Retirement can threaten *competence* (reduced skill use), *relatedness* (loss of camaraderie), and *autonomy* (if retirement is externally imposed). Therefore, roles that restore contribution, preserve connection, and reinforce voluntary engagement may buffer purpose loss.

Meaning

Meaning consists of coherence, significance, and purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016). Sustaining it is key to flourishing in retirement. *Coherence* refers to the sense that one's life is comprehensible; that it makes sense. *Significance* reflects the belief that one's life has inherent value and is worth living, and *purpose* captures directional aims (Martela & Steger, 2016). Retirement from law enforcement may simultaneously challenge all three dimensions. Purpose may decline with mission loss. Coherence may be disrupted as individuals attempt to integrate a

high-intensity occupational identity into a broader life narrative. Significance may diminish when daily cues of authority, contribution, and public recognition are removed.

Narrative identity theory provides a mechanism for meaning reconstruction. Individuals construct internalized life stories that integrate past experiences with present identity and their anticipated future (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Retirement can represent a narrative disruption, ending a central chapter. Successful meaning reconstruction involves integrating the policing chapter into a coherent broader narrative while constructing a valued next chapter. *Redemptive narrative themes* (adversity leading to growth or contribution) are associated with higher well-being (Adler et al., 2016). This narrative process may be particularly important for LEOs with cumulative trauma exposure or moral injury. *Moral injury* involves enduring distress resulting from exposure to events that transgress an individual's core moral framework, often leading to guilt, shame, anger, or loss of trust in oneself or institutions (Litz et al., 2009). Trauma can fragment coherence and challenge significance, while moral injury can disrupt beliefs about one's moral worth (Litz et al., 2009). Among law enforcement populations, moral injury has been associated with psychological distress and suicidality (Papazoglou & Chopko, 2017). Meaning reconstruction may therefore play a protective role by restoring coherence and significance following role exit.

Domain 3: Resilience, Optimism, and Posttraumatic Growth

Resilience

Resilience is defined as an individual's ability to maintain healthy and relatively stable levels of functioning in the aftermath of a significant stressor or potentially traumatic event (Bonanno, 2004). It does not imply the complete absence of mental or physical disturbances, but instead is characterized by the ability to sustain normal functioning in the wake of such events

(Bonanno, 2004, 2005). Research on resilience indicates that it exists on a continuum and is context specific, such that an individual may exhibit resilience differently across various stages or domains of life (Pietrzak & Southwick, 2011; Reivich & Shatté, 2003; Southwick et al., 2014). Contrary to earlier thinking on the subject, recent research shows that resilience is the most common response to potentially traumatic events, while conditions like PTSD are comparatively rare among populations subjected to comparable stressors (Bonanno, 2004, 2005). Importantly, resilience can be taught and measurably improved across all of its component dimensions (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

The subject of resilience is of particular importance to the retired law enforcement community. A career in law enforcement exposes officers to significant stressors and frequent, potentially traumatic events (Violanti et al., 2019). Law enforcement is commonly considered one of the most stressful and dangerous professions (Pole et al., 2006). Programming should examine and incorporate elements that are characteristic of the most resilient retired police officers. Two such variables involve sharing work-related matters with others and refraining from distancing coping strategies (Pole et al., 2006). Interventions should focus on resilience skill development and reconnecting retirees to group belonging, social connection, identity, purpose, and meaning that are too often lost in retirement (Bullock et al., 2020; Carney et al., 2021; Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

Optimism

One of the foundational dimensions of resilience is that of optimism. *Optimism* is defined in two ways. First, *dispositional optimism* is a person's general positive expectations about the future (Carver et al., 2010). More optimistic people believe the future will bring more good things than bad, while more pessimistic people expect that the future will be worse. The second

definition of optimism relates to *explanatory styles*, or how a person explains past events (Peterson et al., 1982). More optimistic people tend to consider negative events to be *temporary* (this will soon pass), *specific* (this will only impact a narrow domain of life), and *external* (I was not solely responsible) (Abramson et al., 1978; Peterson et al., 1982). People with more pessimistic explanatory styles tend to view setbacks as *personal* (I was solely to blame), *permanent* (the problem will last forever), and *pervasive* (this will impact other domains of life), (Abramson et al., 1978; Peterson et al., 1982). Both types of optimistic beliefs can be cultivated, and both are predictive of better coping skills, persistence, and greater resilience in the face of stressors (Scheier & Carver, 2018). Fostering optimism is critical for retired LEOs because such beliefs are linked to greater effort exerted towards goals, better social connections, and improved overall mental and physical health. In contrast, pessimistic beliefs correlate with disengagement from relationships, less goal-related effort, and worse health outcomes (Carver & Scheier, 2014; Kim et al., 2014; Koga et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2019; Sumi, 2006). For the retired law enforcement community, cultivating optimism is particularly relevant given the combination of stressors posed by retirement. Interventions aimed at changing pessimistic beliefs, envisioning a best future self, and promoting optimistic thinking should be particularly beneficial to retired officers (Fosnaugh et al., 2009; Malouff & Schutte, 2017; Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

Posttraumatic Growth

Related to resilience is the phenomenon of *posttraumatic growth* (PTG), defined by positive changes that occur as a result of traumatic events (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). In contrast to resilience, wherein stable functioning is maintained, PTG entails positive changes along any of the following dimensions: improved perception of self and one's capabilities, improved relationships with others, and changes to one's philosophy of life (Bonanno, 2004;

Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). Due to the regular exposure of LEOs to potentially traumatic incidents, PTG is a relevant lens to better understand how and why some officers cope with and even grow through adversity while others languish. Though PTG and PTSD symptoms tend to coexist, factors such as the strength of social relationships, identity, and sense of meaning predict higher PTG (Chopko et al., 2018; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). This understanding can further inform interventions aimed at developing these factors among the broader LEO community (Bowler et al., 2016; Chopko et al., 2015; Craddock & Telesco, 2022)

Conclusion

The research described above provides context and direction for our recommendations to support the NLEOMF's goal of supporting retired officers. Retirement from policing presents many challenges, but we are confident this literature can inform interventions to help support officers in navigating the transition to retirement with greater well-being.

Application Plan

Introduction

Our situation analysis and literature review revealed that law enforcement officers often experience a loss of community, belonging, identity, and purpose upon retirement. These stressors, coupled with years of unprocessed trauma, can result in elevated rates of substance abuse, broken relationships, depression, and suicide (Pole et al., 2006). Our application plan seeks to mitigate these risk factors by designing a peer advisory program housed within a National Law Enforcement Officers Association (NLEOA), supported by the NLEOMF.

Point of View Statement

We are focusing primarily on retired LEOs in our application plan. Specifically, LEOs who retire from small and medium-sized law enforcement agencies, which have fewer resources

to support their retired officers. Our application plan specifically seeks to support officers retired from these small and medium-sized agencies by forming a peer advisor network. The larger vision expressed by the NLEOMF is to create a National Law Enforcement Officers Association to provide a support network for all retired LEOs. We believe the best initial step to pave the way for this larger vision is to establish a peer advisory program as the foundational element of the NLEOA, and to provide support and training for these peer advisors.

We envision retired officers learning about the peer advisor program while visiting the NLEO Museum. There, interested officers can apply to become peer advisors and sign up for a one-day training program to be run by the NLEOMF. Once trained and provided logistical support and materials, these peer advisors will be equipped to offer support for groups of retired LEOs in their local communities. Any former or retired law enforcement officer should be encouraged to enroll in the NLEOA and attend local chapter meetings, with the structure, setting, and size of the groups to be largely at the discretion of the peer advisors. This support network will provide retired officers with a sense of belonging and a peer group in which to share challenges and provide mutual support. This decentralized network will serve as the foundational element aimed at helping mitigate many of the previously discussed risk factors facing retired officers. In addition, the NLEOMF can serve as a repository of best practices for these peer advisors through a common SharePoint site. These best practices can be spotlighted through an annual award given to the most innovative or effective peer advisor program. This award will mobilize the entire LEO community to share best practices and highlight the importance of mental health and wellness among retired LEOs. Peer advisors can also educate mid-career officers on best practices before and during transition to retirement, in addition to the crucial support offered through regular chapter meetings. We envision a future in which retirement from

a law enforcement career is not merely an ending, but rather, offers a new opportunity to continue and even advance the spirit of camaraderie, identity, purpose, and service that characterizes the law enforcement community.

Guardrails

Our application plan is focused on developing the peer advisor training curriculum. This will essentially be a train-the-trainer (TTT) program housed within the NLEOMF. The NLEOMF will provide instructors to train peer advisors using the provided curriculum outlined in Appendix B. Peer advisors will then implement this curriculum with their local retired officers group. We believe that the actual formation of a National Law Enforcement Officers' Association is outside the scope of this engagement; rather, the NLEOMF will be able to leverage the peer advisory program as the cornerstone upon which to pilot and build the NLEOA. Once the association is formed, it will seek members and peer advisors. These peer advisors must be screened and qualified by the NLEOMF and must undergo a one-day training program to educate them on the risk factors faced by retired LEOs, techniques to mitigate those risk factors drawn from positive psychology frameworks, limitations of the program, and instruction on how to facilitate the intervention toolkit with retired officer groups in the advisor's local community.

Intervention Toolkit 1: Identity and Belonging

Upon retirement, officers turn in their badge, their gun, and no longer put on a uniform each morning. With this transition, they are faced with the challenge of finding a new role in society. This can be a difficult transition, generating a profound sense of loss of identity and belonging (Bullock et al., 2020). The retired officers' association is designed as the overarching positive intervention to recreate the sense of belonging officers had during active-duty

employment. Peer advisors will be offered a toolkit of embedded interventions to help retired officers reconnect, find belonging, and establish a new identity.

Intervention #1 – Positive Introductions

A peer advisor needs to establish a culture of shared vulnerability, respect, and trust within their group of retired officers. Starting with positive introductions is an effective way to do this. Highlighting officers' contribution to society and their impact reconnects officers to their work and strengthens the bonds and connections within the group. Officers will be asked to prepare a five to ten-minute story to introduce themselves to the retired officers group. Their story will highlight a particular event during their career in which they operated at their best by exhibiting the characteristics and values they feel exemplify the ideals of being a police officer. This exercise will direct the officer's attention to a particularly meaningful event in their career and will reinforce the reason for becoming an officer in the first place, what it means to serve, and provide a sense of pride in their accomplishments. This intervention has the added benefit of creating significant emotional bonding with the other participants. Group members will be more likely to form a connection through shared experience, which will strengthen the sense of belonging and community amongst the retirees. This will help create a culture of vulnerability, sharing, and belonging within the retired officers' group. Importantly, the sharing should not be limited to just the newest members. New members must also hear from existing members, as a one-way discussion will not foster the same sense of connection. Ideally, several current members will share their story first as an example for new members, which will have the added benefit of creating a safe place for the new members to share.

Interventions #2 and #3 – Shared Meal and Experience

Just the act of sharing a meal will generate many work-related stories. These stories may help foster a sense of belonging and connection through the retelling and reliving of shared experience. Each peer advisor will have to strike a balance between unstructured time together and formalized interventions. When the group is ready for deeper connection and healing, the peer advisor can encourage a retiree (perhaps one per meeting) to share a story of their most challenging event, how it affected them, coping strategies, and how this trauma has changed in retirement. Retelling these stories in a social, supportive context will enable the officers to process and make sense of their experience. Peers will be able to provide a different perspective for the officer, which can lead to healing. Lastly, sharing difficult stories can further solidify the bonds between the officers and recreate the sense of belonging and identity. Peer advisors will be provided guidelines on how best to facilitate group discussions to keep all members engaged and the conversation constructive. Peer advisors will also have a reference list of mental health professionals and additional clinical resources available if an individual requires assistance beyond what the peer advisor is trained to provide.

Intervention Toolkit 2: Purpose and Meaning

Purpose research shows that contributing to others sustains meaning after career transitions (Steger, 2018). In this set of interventions, each officer will create a “Second Mission Plan” by working with their peer advisor and fellow retired officers in a facilitated group setting. Though it is recommended that these interventions be facilitated in the order below, peer advisors are encouraged to use discretion to modify the program to best suit their group.

Intervention #4 – The Legacy Interview

This intervention addresses meaning-making, narrative identity, and generativity (Bullock et al., 2020). Retired officers will participate in a guided “legacy interview” facilitated

by their peer advisor in a small group setting with other retired officers. They will reflect on key moments of their service, responding to the following prompts:

- *When did you feel most proud wearing the badge?*
- *When did you know your work mattered to someone?*
- *What lessons would you pass to the next generation of officers?*

Stories are recorded as short oral histories. Selected stories could become part of a digital archive or listening station in the NLEO Museum. This exercise reinforces life meaning through storytelling and helps officers see their career as part of a coherent life narrative.

Intervention #5 – Service Beyond the Badge

This intervention addresses purpose in life, prosocial behavior, and self-transcendent goals. It is intended to help officers design a post-retirement service mission. Peer advisors will lead officers through the following prompts:

- *What skills did policing give me?*
- *Who might benefit from these skills now?*
- *What community need speaks to me today, and how might I apply my skills to serve that community?*

Officers will reflect on the prompts and write down their answers. The peer advisor will facilitate a discussion afterwards to help explore the themes that emerge. Examples of service might include mentoring, teaching, or coaching youth, volunteering with search and rescue, supporting disaster response, and neighborhood mediation. Officers will be given a follow-up assignment to write their Second Mission Plan, to be discussed in subsequent meetings.

Intervention #6 – Meaning in the Line of Duty Reflection

This intervention helps retired officers reconstruct meaning from their service and find wisdom in it. Peer advisors will lead retired officers in a group storytelling session in which each officer will respond to the following question: *“Can you tell me about a call or situation that was especially difficult for you during your career?”* After each story, the peer advisor will lead the officer through the following prompts:

- *What did this experience teach you about courage, justice, service, or another value you prize?*
- *How did this moment shape who you became?*
- *What value did you protect?*

The exercise is intended to transform difficult memories into sources of wisdom rather than rumination.

Intervention #7 – Badge to Legacy Reflection Exercise

In policing, the badge symbolizes identity, duty, and belonging. When officers retire, the loss is not just occupational; it is symbolic and existential. This intervention is a transition ritual that helps transform that loss into continuity and legacy, which is strongly linked to purpose and meaning in positive psychology. In other words, the badge is not something you lose; it is something you pass forward as part of your legacy. The peer advisor will lead a small group of retired officers through the following steps:

Step 1 – Reflection: “What Did the Badge Mean?” Participants write or discuss these prompts:

- *When you first pinned on the badge, what did it represent to you?*
- *What values did you try to carry while wearing it?*
- *When did you feel most proud to represent your department?*

Step 2 – Values Translation: Participants identify the core values that defined their service, such as courage, justice, loyalty, compassion, duty, and protection of the vulnerable.

Then they are guided through this prompt:

- *How will these values guide the next chapter of my life?*

Step 3 – The Legacy Statement: Participants write a short reflection, such as: “The badge taught me that protecting others requires courage and compassion. In the next chapter of my life, I will carry those values forward by...” This statement becomes a legacy document.

Step 4 – Symbolic Transition Ritual: The officer places their badge (or a symbolic representation of it) into a legacy display, archive, or artifact case. Possible formats include a digital legacy archive, a museum artifact collection, an engraved badge wall, a legacy booklet, or a recorded video reflection. The message becomes: “The badge is no longer only mine. It is part of the long and storied history of policing.”

Intervention #8 – Meaning through the Humanities

Art can help us find solace in suffering, meaning in difficult experiences, joy in everyday life, or hope when we feel helpless. In this intervention, retired officers will be asked to engage with art or writing to find meaning from their career and in their retirement. They will be asked to conduct one or more of the following:

- Create a piece of visual art related to policing or retirement. AI assistance is allowed.
- Find a piece of visual art that resonates and spend time viewing and contemplating it every day for a week.
- Draft a short story or poem related to policing, your career, or retirement.

Officers will then be asked to discuss and share their art or literary work with the group and interpret the meaning and experience behind the work.

Intervention #9 – Beyond the Badge AI Reflection

Retirement from policing often disrupts identity and can activate maladaptive thinking patterns such as identity foreclosure (“I only matter as an officer”) or helplessness (“There is no meaningful role left for me”) (Ebaugh, 1988). Emerging evidence suggests AI-guided conversations can effectively support cognitive reframing and belief updating in real time, offering a scalable and accessible tool for psychological support (Costello et al., 2024). In this brief, structured exercise, participants will use an AI chatbot to: (a) describe a triggering moment of perceived loss of purpose; (b) articulate the belief they are holding; and (c) identify associated thinking traps. The AI chatbot then guides the officer through a stepwise reframing process, challenging cognitive distortions. The exercise concludes by identifying a small, strengths-based action that expresses continued service in a new context. The prompt template is below:

“I am a retired law enforcement officer and recently experienced a moment where I felt a loss of purpose: [Insert Event]. I am feeling [Insert Emotion] and telling myself [Insert Belief]. Help me identify whether I am falling into a thinking trap (such as identity loss, all-or-nothing thinking, mental filtering, or helplessness). Then, act as a coach, and guide me through reframing this belief by helping me recognize how my values and skills still matter. Ask me one reflective question at a time to help me reconnect to purpose and contribution. Finally, help me identify one small, meaningful action I can take using my strengths to serve others in this next chapter of my life.”

Intervention Toolkit 3: Resilience, Optimism, and Posttraumatic Growth

Many retired LEOs carry into retirement years of accumulated stress and trauma from their careers that can cause long-term psychological impact if not adequately processed. Research indicates that individuals can transform this adversity into sources of resilience,

optimism, wisdom, and strength (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The following interventions are aimed at helping retired law enforcement officers strengthen these psychological capacities.

Intervention #10 – Resilience through Strengths

This intervention is aimed at increasing retired LEOs' psychological resilience and capacity to cope with challenges. The intervention targets the physiological and stress response system activated by adversity, leverages interpersonal connections among retirees, and seeks to strengthen coping skills by reinforcing personal character strengths developed during a policing career (Pole et al., 2006). The activity for this intervention entails the peer advisors facilitating a discussion about the psychological demands of policing, common challenges, and stress responses experienced in retirement. The session may open with the peer advisor introducing physiological resilience techniques such as mindfulness meditation and controlled breathing techniques (De Hoog et al., 2023; Hoeve et al., 2021; Moreno et al., 2024). Participants then take the VIA Character Strengths assessment and reflect with the group on their use of strengths through their policing careers, such as bravery, leadership, teamwork, judgment, etc. (Niemic, 2018). Other group members offer reinforcement with examples of where they observe strengths in others' stories. Peer advisors can prompt participants with questions such as: *“How can the strengths that helped you succeed as an officer help you thrive in the next chapter of life?”*

Intervention #11 – Learned Optimism and Cognitive Reframing

This intervention is aimed at helping retired LEOs improve optimism, avoid thinking traps, and increase psychological flexibility (Reivich & Shatté, 2003). The target system for this intervention is the participants' explanatory style and automatic thought patterns related to adversity. The intervention seeks to help retired LEOs shift from a pessimistic explanatory style to more balanced interpretations of challenges. The active ingredients are cognitive reframing,

awareness of explanatory styles, and shifting of perspective through group practice. In this intervention, peer advisors introduce the ABC framework from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and the common thinking traps that lead to rigid and unhelpful thought patterns (Beck, 1979; Reivich & Shatté, 2003). Participants practice defining the specific *Adversity*, identifying their underlying *Beliefs* or story of how they interpret the event, and the *Consequences*, or their emotional and behavioral responses that follow from that belief. Participants then practice separating facts from beliefs and generating alternative interpretations that are less permanent, pervasive, and personalized (Abramson et al., 1978; Peterson et al., 1982). This exercise helps equip retired LEOs with tools to cultivate optimism and challenge unhelpful thought patterns.

Intervention #12 – Adversity into Growth Reflection

This intervention aims to enable posttraumatic growth pathways among retired LEOs by targeting narrative identity and interpretation of traumatic experiences. It aims to shift narratives from damage-focused interpretations towards growth-oriented interpretations. In this exercise, peer advisors facilitate a structured reflection in which retired LEOs revisit challenging experiences and identify ways those experiences shaped their character and perspective.

Participants respond to prompts such as:

- *What difficult experiences during your career changed you the most?*
- *What personal strengths helped you get through those situations?*
- *What did those experiences teach you about courage, justice, service, or compassion?*

Participants then complete the prompt: “Because of what I experienced in my policing career, I now understand that...” and share their reflections with the group. Hearing similar experiences from peers can help normalize trauma and highlight the growth that can emerge from adversity,

allowing retired officers to integrate difficult experiences into a coherent narrative and highlight the strengths and wisdom developed through their service.

Limitations

These proposed interventions are research-based and shown to be effective at achieving the desired results. However, several limitations exist. The proposed peer advisor program is dependent on each advisor's skill level. Some advisors will be more effective leaders or be able to connect more naturally with peers than others. Having a standard train-the-trainer program housed within the NLEOMF will mitigate knowledge gaps and set a consistent quality standard for each advisor. However, variation in natural ability will persist. Another limitation is the continuous entrance of new retirees. It would be more convenient and natural for an advisor to run a cohort of new retirees through a set program and then add them to the existing retiree community. However, we anticipate new retirees will be added to the existing retirement cadre unpredictably. This will make interventions such as the positive introduction or shared traumatic experience more difficult to employ. A skilled advisor should be able to navigate this uncertainty and understand when the group could benefit from a particular intervention. In addition, the effectiveness of the peer advisor network is dependent upon ongoing support from the NLEOMF and the retired officers association. To the extent an association is not formed, or the NLEOMF does not provide consistent support, the peer advisor network will flounder. Therefore, it is important that key leadership within the NLEOMF buys into the concept, and ongoing funding is obtained. Finally, it is important to view this initiative as a living, evolving program, with the current structure merely serving as an initial pilot. The program implementation, ongoing support, and curriculum of positive interventions should continue to be developed, measured, and improved over time for maximum positive impact.

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Appendix A:

Measurement Plan

Long-term success of this initiative will be measured by reduced rates of substance abuse, depression, divorce, and suicide amongst retired law enforcement officers. These metrics, however, are likely to take years to show up in national statistics; consequently, it is important to identify more concrete short-term measures. First, the number of peer advisors trained and reporting active involvement in their community will demonstrate buy-in and successful rollout of the program. Peer advisors will complete a post-training survey to determine the effectiveness of the initial train-the-trainer instructional session at conveying the concepts and to determine whether they experience an improvement in well-being simply by taking on the leadership role. In addition to tracking the number of peer advisors in the program, the number of participating officers within each localized group will provide a good measure of buy-in from the target community. Lastly, annual surveys can be collected that measure changes in self-reported officer subjective well-being (SWB) (Diener et al., 1999). Collectively, these four measures will provide:

- 1) The number of peer advisors trained and their well-being improvements
- 2) The number of active retiree chapters
- 3) The number of officers participating in the program
- 4) Effectiveness of the program through improvement in self-reported levels of SWB

These metrics will provide a good understanding of the potential success of the program. Within several years, we anticipate that this program will result in a statistical decline in the rates of depression, substance abuse, divorce, and suicide among retired officers and an increase in measures of retired officer well-being.

Appendix B:

Peer Advisory Program Train-the-Trainer Slide Deck

The enclosed Train-the-Trainer (TTT) Slide Deck is designed to help the NLEOMF train and equip new peer advisors to lead retired law enforcement officer peer groups in their local communities.

For additional speaker notes and instructions to accompany the Appendix slides, or for questions pertaining to this material, please contact any of the following:

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2026 Team Indigo:
National Law Enforcement Officers
Memorial Fund (NLEOMF)
& Museum

Appendix B

The Second Mission

Fostering Well-Being for Retired Law Enforcement

National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial
Fund (NLEOMF) & Museum

Team Indigo: Ben Binger, Scott Barentsen, & Evan Milnor

April 25, 2026

Our Service Learning Partner: **National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF)** **& Museum**



Josh Bronson

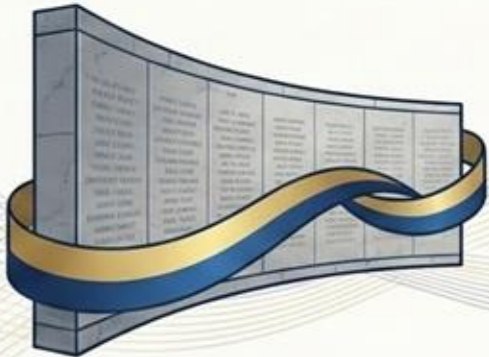
*Director of Education, Programs,
and Visitor Experience*

“The Mission of the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund is to honor the fallen, tell the story of American law enforcement and make it safer for those who serve.”

(National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, n.d., About)

The Three Pillars of the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF)

The Memorial



Honoring every U.S. law enforcement officer who has died in the line of duty. More than 24,000 names on that wall.

The Museum



Tells the story of American law enforcement and builds public understanding.

Officer Safety & Wellness



Programs aimed at reducing line-of-duty deaths. Destination Zero: reducing line-of-duty deaths to the only acceptable number: zero.



The Peer Advisor Program Toolkit: A Holistic Approach to Post-Service Well-Being

Toolkit 1: Identity & Belonging



The Positive Introduction

The Shared Meal

The Shared Experience

Toolkit 2: Purpose & Meaning



The Legacy Interview Service Beyond the Badge

Meaning in the Line of Duty Reflection

Badge to Legacy Reflection Exercise

Beyond the Badge AI Reflection

Meaning through the Humanities

Toolkit 3: Resilience, Optimism & Posttraumatic Growth



Resilience through Strengths (Values in Action)

Mindfulness & Breathing Techniques

Learned Optimism & Cognitive Reframing

Adversity into Growth Reflection



Artifact for Service Learning Partner (NLEOMF):

A comprehensive, evidence-based resource for training and empowering Peer Advisors to support retired officers

The Second Mission

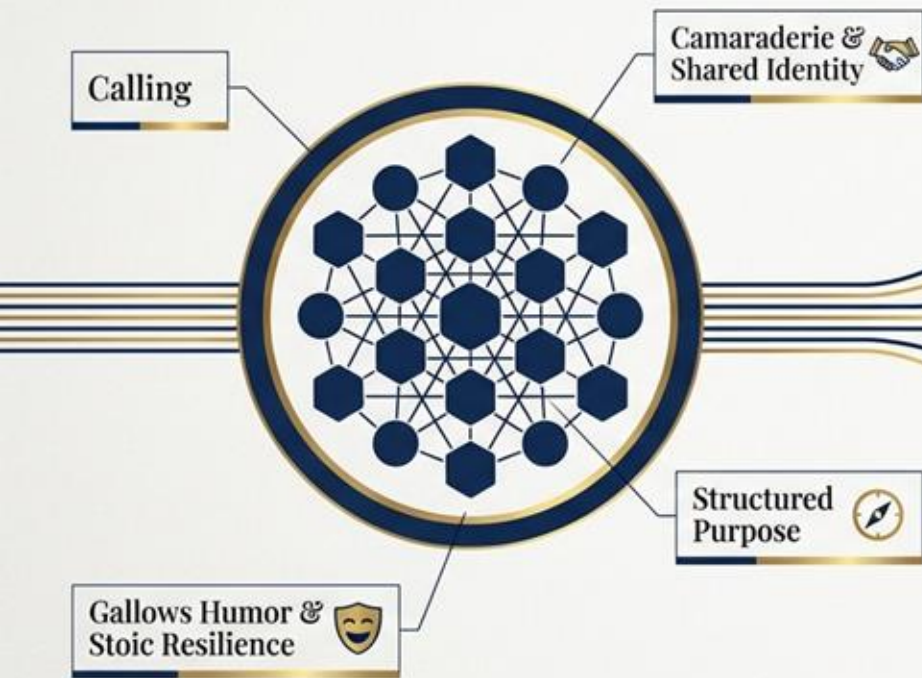
Fostering Well-Being, Purpose, and Connection for Retired Law Enforcement

An Evidence-Based Application Plan for the NLEOMF
Ben Binger, Scott Barentsen, and Evan Milnor

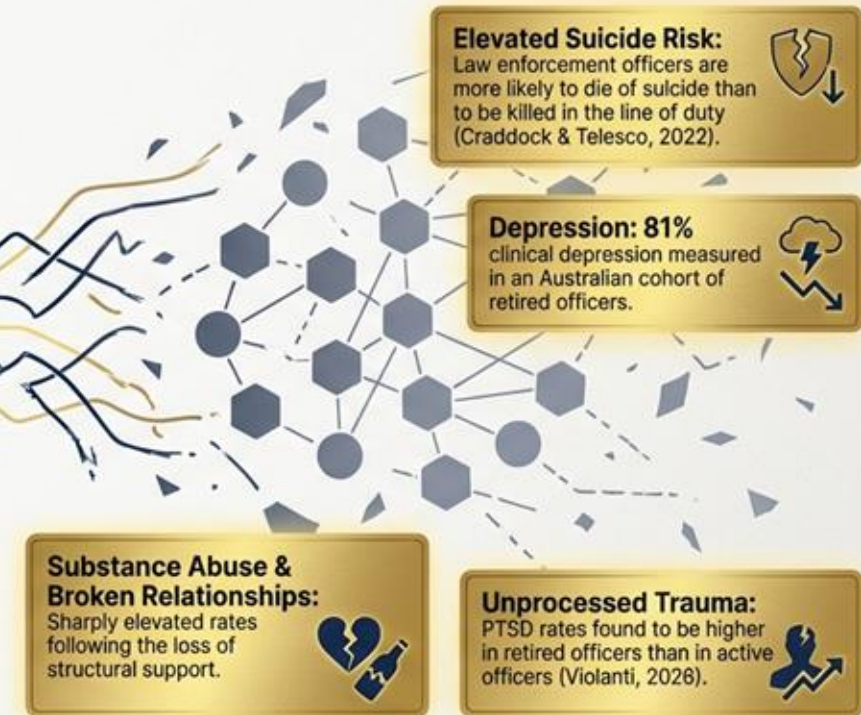


The sudden loss of the active-duty ecosystem triggers a silent psychological crisis in retirement

The Active Armor



The Retirement Void



Diagnosing the psychological transition deficit between active duty and civilian life

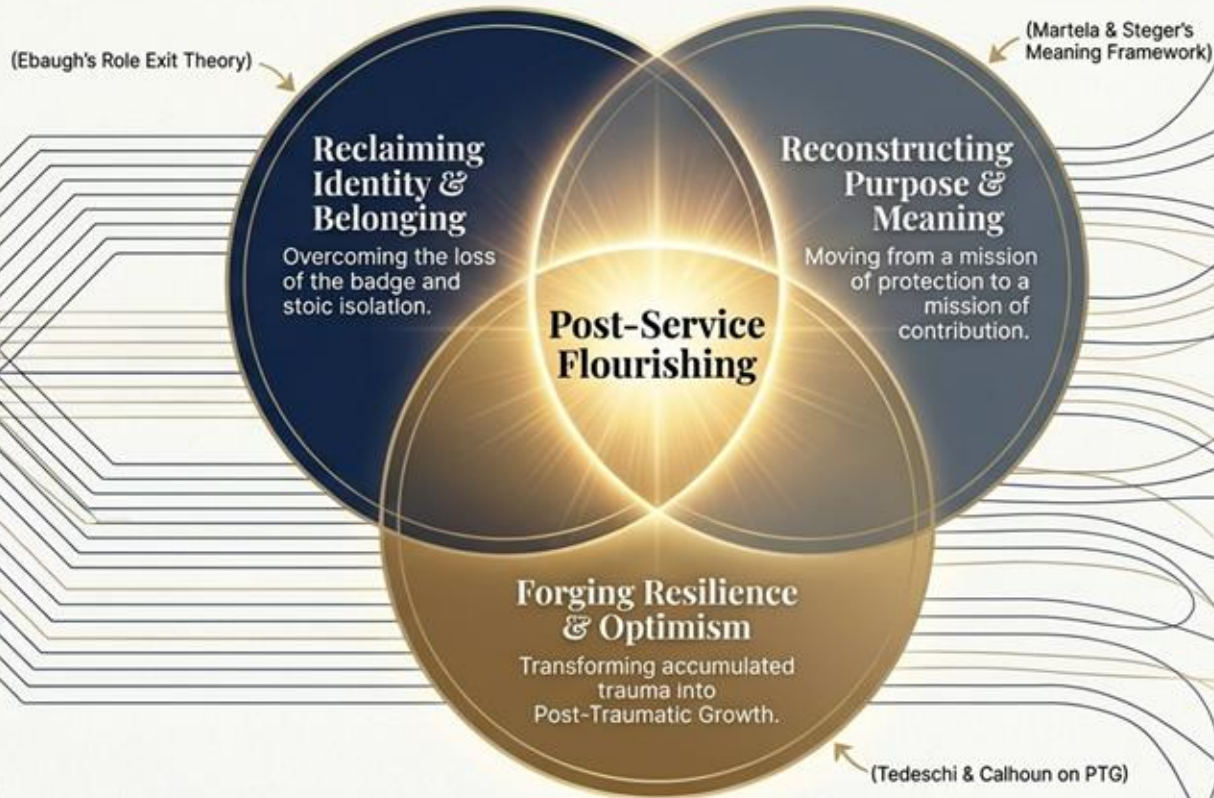
The Transition Deficit

Active Duty 		Retirement 
Highly regimented, crisis-driven, clear mission.	Daily Structure	Loss of structure, loss of routine, restless void.
Deep in-group bonding, high trust, sense of belonging.	Social Ecosystem	Isolation, perceived inability to relate to civilians.
Gallows humor, stoicism, show no signs of weakness.	Cultural Norms	Self-reliance and stoicism becomes an isolating barrier to seeking help.
Vital protector, central authority, daily reinforcement.	Perceived Relevance	Relevance deficit, feeling discarded or without impact (Carney et al., 2021).

Supporting retirees is the critical missing link in the national continuum of care

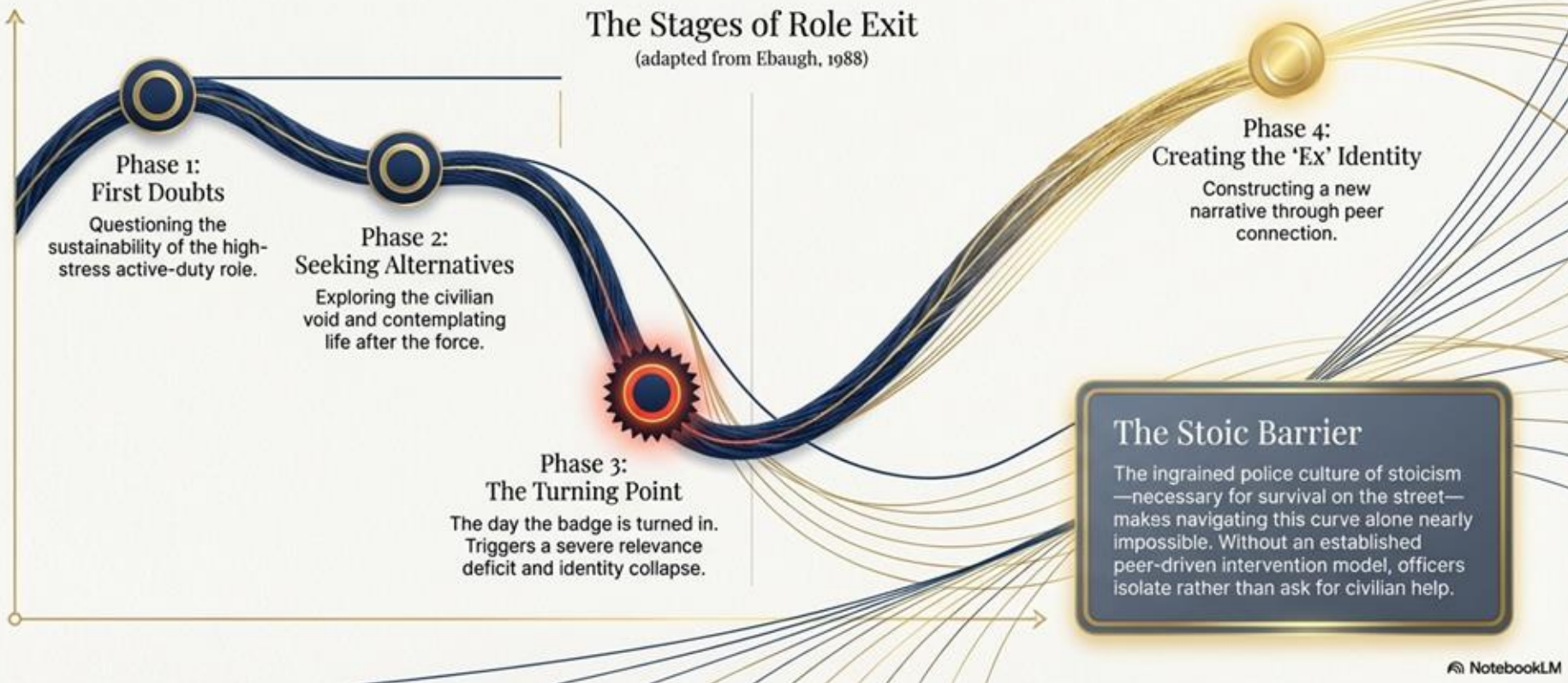


The architectural blueprint for post-service flourishing relies on three interconnected pillars



Reclaiming Identity & Belonging requires navigating the total disruption of role exit

The Stages of Role Exit (adapted from Ebaugh, 1988)

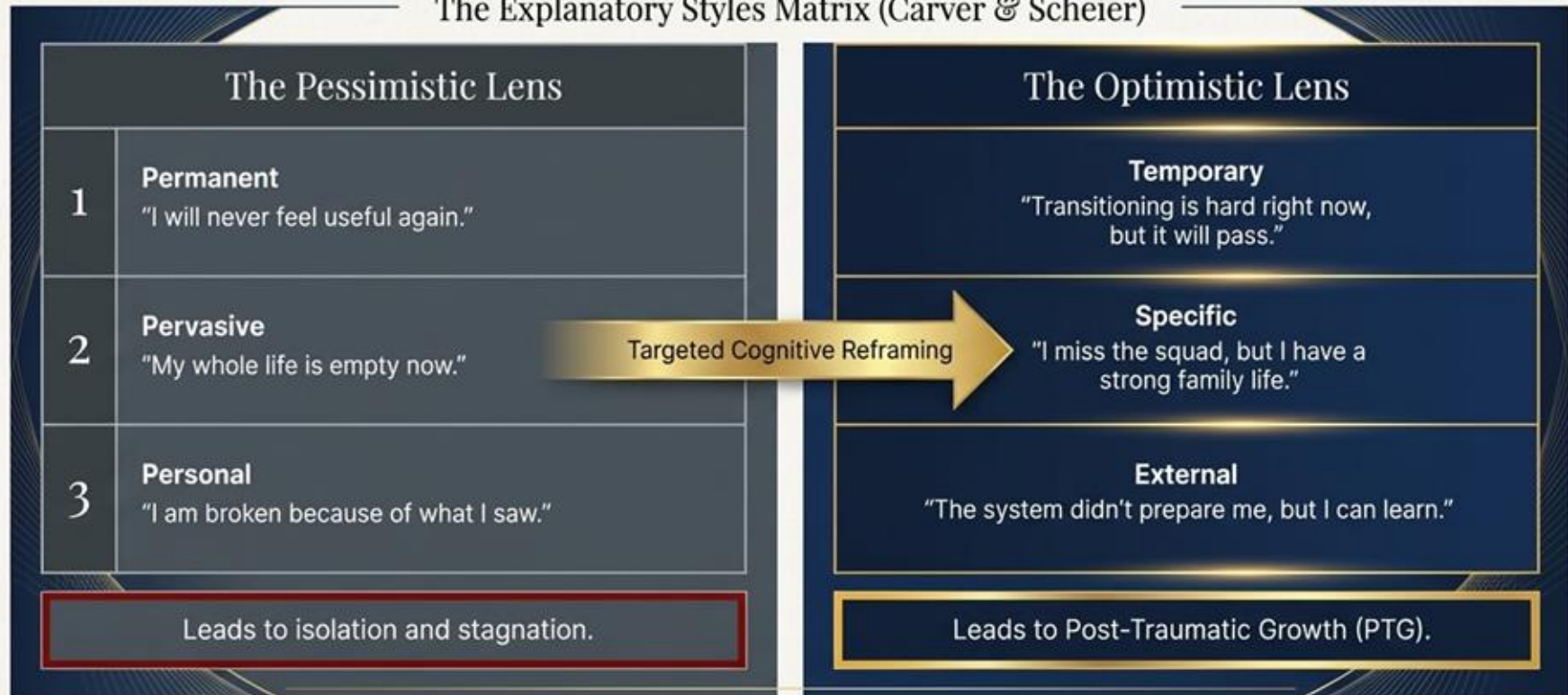


Reconstructing meaning requires translating physical protection into civic contribution



Resilience and Post-Traumatic Growth are learned skills forged through cognitive reframing

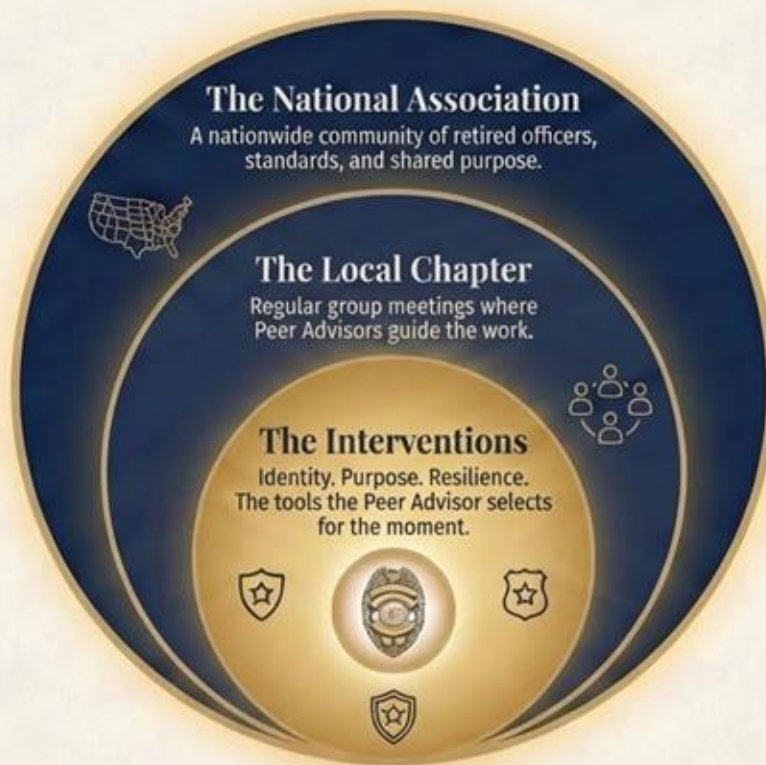
The Explanatory Styles Matrix (Carver & Scheier)



The solution is a national Peer Advisor Network bridging the NLEOMF and local retiree chapters



A Toolkit Within a Larger Mission



No single tool does the work alone. Put together, they build a second mission.

Setting Up Your Chapter Meetings

A Peer Advisor's starting guide. Before you run any intervention, set the room right.



Gather the Group

- ★ Start with 6 to 10 retired officers.
- ★ Keep it consistent. Same faces, same time, same rhythm.
- ★ Trust builds through repetition.



Pick the Right Room

- ★ Choose a comfortable, private, neutral space.
- ★ A VFW hall, a back room at a diner, a chapter office, or a member's home all work well. Skip the fluorescent lights and keep badges off the door.



Set the Ground Rules

- ★ Confidentiality stays in the room
- ★ No interrupting or one-upping
- ★ Phones down during the session
- ★ A seasoned member shares first, never the new guy alone



Keep Resources at Hand

- ★ Always have a printed list of mental health resources ready before each meeting. Include the **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** along with local first-responder, clinician, and chaplain contacts. If a session gets too heavy, walk the officer to that help personally.

You are a bridge, not a clinician. Your job is to hold the space and know when to hand it off.

When Things Get Hard in the Room

Six situations to expect, and how to respond



Someone Monopolizes

They likely need to be heard. Find a natural pause and say, "Thank you for sharing. I want to make sure we hear from others before we wrap."

Turn to the next person. Be respectful.



Someone Judges Another

Shut it down immediately.
"Hold on. We listen, we don't rank.
Every person's experience is their own."

Protect the room's contract; the group is watching.



Someone Mentions Suicide

Take every mention seriously, even as a joke. Stay steady. After the meeting, sit with them and ask directly: "Are you thinking about hurting yourself?" Asking doesn't put the idea there. If needed, call 988 together. Stay with them until they are safe.



Someone Shuts Down

The exercise likely hit home. Don't chase them. Let them be quiet, then check in after the meeting: "That seemed to land hard, you okay?" Don't take it personally; you provided an off-ramp.



Someone Starts Crying

Let them cry. Don't rush to fill the silence. Let it sit, then quietly say: "Take your time." Your job is to hold the space, not make it stop.



You Feel In Over Your Head

This happens to all Peer Advisors. Wrap on time, get resources into their hands, and call another Advisor or your NLEOMF contact that day. The network exists for support. Use it.

Handle these moments with care, and you are doing the job right.



Toolkit 1: Identity and Belonging



Toolkit 1: Identity and Belonging

Interventions to forge emotional bonding and a culture of vulnerability

Escalation of Psychological Safety & Cultural Vulnerability

Step 1: The Positive Introduction

Members deliver a 5-10 minute story highlighting a career event where they exemplified their core values.

Active Ingredient:
Fosters pride and immediate shared-experience bonding.

Step 2: The Shared Meal

Unstructured, informal time centered around breaking bread together.

Active Ingredient:
Natural storytelling and rebuilding the "squad" camaraderie.

Step 3: The Shared Experience

When ready, members share a deeply challenging event and how it altered them.

Active Ingredient:
Normalizes trauma, breaks the stoic barrier, and utilizes peer perspective for healing.

The Positive Introduction: Instructions & Guidelines

Toolkit 1, Step 1: Fostering pride and immediate shared-experience bonding.

Participant Instructions

- 🛡️ Prepare a 5-10 minute story highlighting a specific career event.
- 🛡️ Focus on a moment where you exemplified your core values.
- 🛡️ Share the challenges faced, actions taken, and the positive outcome or lesson learned.
- 🛡️ Be authentic and vulnerable in your storytelling.

Facilitator Notes & Best Practices

- Set a tone of psychological safety and non-judgment.
- Encourage active listening and respectful attention.
- Keep track of time to ensure everyone has an opportunity to share.
- Briefly debrief after all introductions to acknowledge common themes and shared experiences.



Active Ingredient: Fosters pride and immediate shared-experience bonding.

The Shared Meal: Instructions & Guidelines

Toolkit 1, Step 2: Natural storytelling and rebuilding the "squad" camaraderie.

Participant Instructions

-  Commit to the full duration of the meal and stay present.
-  Keep conversation informal, focusing on personal life, hobbies, and non-work topics.
-  Actively listen and show genuine interest in colleagues' stories.
-  Be open to sharing lighthearted, personal anecdotes to build rapport.
-  Avoid discussing current cases, work stressors, or professional disagreements.

Facilitator Notes & Best Practices

- Choose a comfortable, neutral location that encourages relaxation.
- Ensure the meal is completely unstructured with no formal agenda.
- Model openness by sharing a personal, non-work related story first.
- Gently redirect conversations back to personal topics if work is mentioned.
- Observe participation levels and encourage quieter members to join in without pressure.



Active Ingredient: Natural storytelling and rebuilding the "squad" camaraderie.

The Shared Experience: Instructions & Guidelines

Toolkit 1, Step 3: Normalizing trauma and utilizing peer perspective for healing.



Participant Instructions

- Choose a deeply challenging career event to share.
- Focus on the personal impact and how the event altered you.
- Share the emotional weight, not just the tactical facts.
- Be honest about struggles and show vulnerability.
- Aim for a 5-10 minute story.



Facilitator Notes & Best Practices

- Ensure a high level of psychological safety is established first.
- Emphasize strict confidentiality and a non-judgmental space.
- Validate the sharer's courage and vulnerability.
- Manage time (e.g., 5-10 mins) but remain flexible for emotional needs.
- Facilitate a brief, supportive debrief after each share (not a critique).



Active Ingredient: Normalizes trauma, breaks the stoic barrier, and utilizes peer perspective for healing.



Toolkit 2: Purpose and Meaning



Toolkit 2: Purpose & Meaning

The Badge to Legacy Funnel transforms past authority into enduring wisdom

The Physical Badge

Reflection on what the badge meant when first pinned on (Identity, Duty).

Values Extraction

Distilling the physical object into core values (Courage, Justice, Protection).

The Legacy Statement

Completing the prompt: "In the next chapter of my life, I will carry those values by..."

Second Mission Plan

A tangible action plan (e.g., mentoring youth, disaster response).

A symbolic transition ritual leaving a recorded "Legacy Interview" oral history at the NLEOMF museum.

Toolkit 2: Intervention #1 – The Legacy Interview

This intervention addresses meaning-making, narrative identity, and generativity (McAdams, 2011).

The Process

- Retired officers participate in a guided “legacy interview” facilitated by their peer advisor.
- Setting is flexible: small group with other retired officers OR 1-on-1 based on comfort level.
- Stories are recorded as short oral histories.

Reflection Prompts

-  When did you feel most proud wearing the badge?
-  When did you know your work mattered to someone?
-  What lessons would you pass to the next generation of officers?

Outcomes & Archiving

- Reinforces life meaning through storytelling.
- Helps officers see their career as part of a coherent life narrative.
- Selected stories could become part of a digital archive or listening station in the NLEO Museum.

Goal: To transform past experiences into enduring wisdom and a meaningful legacy.

Toolkit 2: Intervention #2 – Service Beyond the Badge

This intervention addresses purpose in life, prosocial behavior, and self-transcendent goals.

The Process

- Officers create a "Second Mission Plan" in facilitated group settings with peer advisors and fellow retired officers.
- Participants reflect on provided prompts and write down their answers.
- Peer advisors facilitate a discussion to explore emerging themes and ideas.
- Officers receive a follow-up assignment to write their full Second Mission Plan for future meetings.

Reflection Prompts

-  What skills did policing give me?
-  Who might benefit from those skills now?
-  What community need speaks to me today, and how might I apply my skills to serve that community?

Outcomes & Examples

- Purpose research shows contributing to others sustains meaning post-career.
- Defines a concrete post-retirement service mission.
- Examples of service: mentoring, teaching, coaching youth, search and rescue, disaster response, neighborhood mediation.

Goal: To help officers design a post-retirement service mission and sustain meaning.

Toolkit 2: Intervention #3 – Meaning in the Line of Duty Reflection

This intervention helps retired officers reconstruct meaning from their service and find wisdom in it.

The Process

- Peer advisors lead retired officers in a group storytelling session.
- Each officer responds to the question: "Can you tell me about a call or situation that was especially difficult for you during your career?"
- Peer advisor leads the officer through reflection prompts after each story.

Reflection Prompts

-  What did this experience teach you about courage, justice, service, or another value you prize?
-  How did this moment shape who you became?
-  What value did you protect?

Outcomes & Examples

- Transforms difficult memories into sources of wisdom.
- Prevents rumination on past challenges.
- Helps reconstruct meaning from service experiences.
- Finds enduring value in difficult career moments.

Goal: To transform difficult memories into sources of wisdom rather than rumination.

Toolkit 2: Intervention #4 – Badge to Legacy Reflection Exercise

This intervention is a transition ritual that helps transform the symbolic loss of the badge into continuity and legacy.

Step 1 – Reflection: “What Did the Badge Mean?”

- Participants write or discuss prompts:



When you first pinned on the badge, what did it represent to you?



What values did you try to carry while wearing it?



When did you feel most proud to represent your department?

Step 2 – Values Translation

- Participants identify core values (e.g., courage, justice, loyalty, compassion).
- Guided prompt: How will these values guide the next chapter of my life?

Step 3 – The Legacy Statement

- Participants write a short reflection.
- Example format: “The badge taught me [values]... In the next chapter, I will carry them by...”
- This becomes a legacy document.

Step 4 – Symbolic Transition Ritual

- Officer places badge (or representation) into legacy display.
- Possible formats: Digital archive, museum collection, engraved wall, booklet, video reflection.
- Message: “The badge is no longer only mine. It is part of the long and storied history of policing.”

Goal: To transform the symbolic loss of the badge into a continuity of legacy and purpose.

Toolkit 2: Optional Intervention – Beyond the Badge AI Reflection

A structured, AI-guided exercise for cognitive reframing and belief updating to find purpose after retirement.

Step 1: Identify Trigger & Belief

- Describe a moment of loss of purpose [Event].
- Articulate the associated Feeling and Belief.
- Example: "I only matter as an officer."

Step 2: Detect Thinking Traps

- AI helps identify cognitive distortions.
- Examples: Identity foreclosure, helplessness, all-or-nothing thinking.

Step 3: Guided Reframing

- AI acts as a coach.
- Asks reflective questions one by one to reconnect values and skills.

Step 4: Actionable Step

- Identify a small, strengths-based action.
- Express continued service in a new context.

The AI Prompt

"I am a retired law enforcement officer and recently experienced a moment where I felt a loss of purpose: [Insert Event]. I am feeling [Insert Emotion] and telling myself [Insert Belief]. Help me identify whether I am falling into a thinking trap (such as identity loss, all-or-nothing thinking, mental filtering, or helplessness). Then, act as a coach and guide me through reframing this belief by helping me recognize how my values and skills still matter. Ask me one reflective question at a time to help me reconnect to purpose and contribution. Finally, help me identify one small, meaningful action I can take using my strengths to serve others in this next chapter of my life."

Goal: To provide scalable, real-time psychological support for cognitive reframing and finding meaningful roles post-service.

Toolkit 2: Optional Intervention – Meaning through the Humanities

Art helps us find solace in suffering, meaning in difficult experiences, and hope when we feel helpless. Engage with creative expression to interpret the narrative of your career.

1. Visual Creation



Create a piece of visual art related to policing or retirement. AI assistance is welcomed to help translate your vision into form.

2. Art Contemplation



Find an existing piece of art that resonates with you. Spend time viewing and contemplating its details every day for one week.

3. Literary Draft



Draft a short story or poem related to your career or retirement. Use words to capture the emotions that images cannot.

Goal: Discuss and share your work with the group to interpret the collective meaning and experience behind each creation.



Toolkit 3: Resilience, Optimism, and Posttraumatic Growth



Toolkit 3: Resilience, Optimism, and Posttraumatic Growth

Cultivating psychological strength and finding new meaning after adversity.

1. Resilience



The ability to bounce back from setbacks, adapt to change, and keep going in the face of adversity. Building mental fortitude through healthy coping mechanisms and social support. (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

2. Optimism



Maintaining a hopeful outlook and focusing on positive possibilities. Reframing challenges as temporary and solvable, rather than permanent personal failures. (Carver & Scheier, 2014; Peterson et al., 1982).

3. Posttraumatic Growth

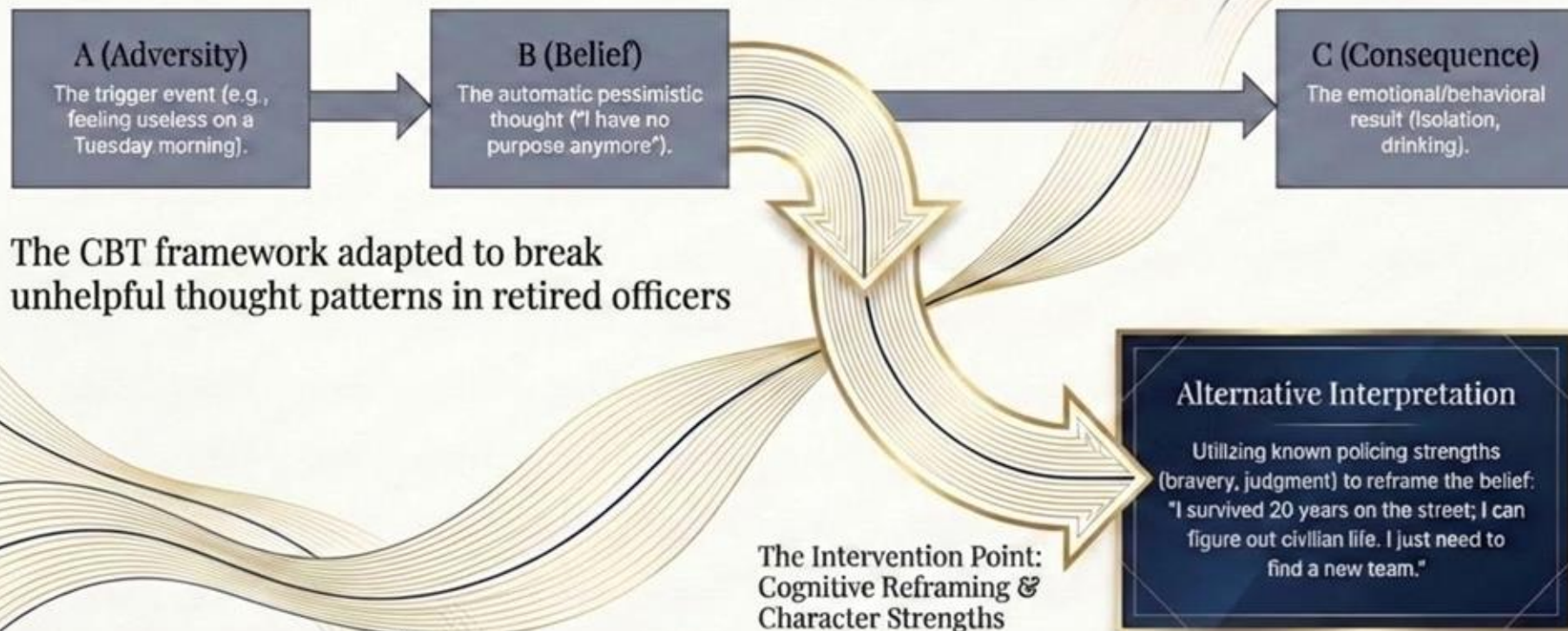


Experiencing positive psychological change as a result of struggling with highly challenging life crises. Finding a greater appreciation for life, deeper relationships, and a renewed sense of personal strength. (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Goal: Apply these concepts to foster a mindset of growth and well-being throughout your post-service life.

Toolkit 3: Resilience, Optimism, and Posttraumatic Growth

ABC Framework (Reivich & Shatté, 2003)



Toolkit 3: Intervention #1 – Resilience through Strengths

This intervention transforms accumulated stress into resilience by targeting physiological responses, leveraging peer connections, and reinforcing character strengths developed during a policing career.

Step 1: Discussion & Physiological Resilience

-  Facilitated discussion on policing demands and retirement stress responses.
-  Introduction to physiological techniques: mindfulness meditation and controlled breathing.

Step 2: Character Strengths Assessment

-  Participants take the VIA Character Strengths assessment.
-  Reflect on strengths used in career (e.g., bravery, leadership, teamwork, judgment).

Step 3: Group Reflection & Reinforcement

-  Share stories of strengths in action during career.
-  Peers offer reinforcement, observing strengths in others' narratives.

Step 4: The Pivot Prompt

-  Peer Advisor asks: "How can the strengths that helped you succeed as an officer help you thrive in the next chapter of life?"

Toolkit 3: Intervention #2 – Learned Optimism and Cognitive Reframing

This intervention aims to improve optimism, avoid thinking traps, and increase psychological flexibility by targeting explanatory styles and automatic thought patterns related to adversity (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

Step 1: Introduce the ABC Framework & Thinking Traps

- Peer Advisors introduce the ABC framework from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) (Beck, 1979; Reivich & Shatté, 2003).
- Explain common thinking traps that lead to rigid and unhelpful thought patterns.
- Goal: Shift from pessimistic to balanced interpretations.

Step 2: Practice Defining Adversity, Beliefs, & Consequences

- Participants practice defining specific Adversity (the trigger event).
- Identify underlying Beliefs or story of interpretation.
- Recognize Consequences: emotional and behavioral responses.

Step 3: Separating Facts from Beliefs

- Guided exercise to distinguish objective facts of the situation from subjective beliefs.
- Challenge the automatic pessimistic thought patterns.
- Awareness of explanatory styles.

Step 4: Generating Alternative Interpretations

- Practice generating alternative interpretations.
- Focus on explanations that are less permanent, pervasive, and personalized (Abramson et al., 1978; Peterson et al., 1982).
- Equip with tools to cultivate optimism.

Toolkit 3: Intervention #3 – Adversity into Growth Reflection

This intervention aims to enable posttraumatic growth pathways among retired LEOs by targeting narrative identity and interpretation of traumatic experiences. It aims to shift narratives from damage-focused interpretations towards growth-oriented interpretations.

Step 1: Structured Reflection & Narrative Shift

- Peer advisors facilitate a structured reflection.
- Retired LEOs revisit challenging experiences.
- Aim to shift narratives from damage-focused to growth-oriented interpretations.

Step 2: Identifying Growth through Adversity

- Participants respond to prompts about difficult experiences.
- Identify personal strengths used during those situations.
- Reflect on lessons learned about courage, justice, service, or compassion.

Step 3: The “Because of...” Prompt

- Participants complete the prompt: "Because of what I experienced in my policing career, I now understand that..."
- Facilitates integration of difficult experiences into a coherent narrative.
- Highlights the strengths and wisdom developed through service.

Step 4: Group Sharing & Normalization

- Participants share their reflections with the group.
- Hearing peers' experiences helps normalize trauma.
- Highlights the growth that can emerge from adversity.

The Architecture of a Successful Transition: Reclaiming the narrative

The Journey to Post-Traumatic Growth

Identity
(Positive Intros)

Purpose
(Badge to Legacy)

Resilience
(ABC Reframing)

Flourishing

Emerges exhibiting Post-Traumatic Growth—actively engaged in a “Second Mission” protecting the next generation.

The Engine: Officer enters the local chapter and engages in the 3-Pillar interventions.

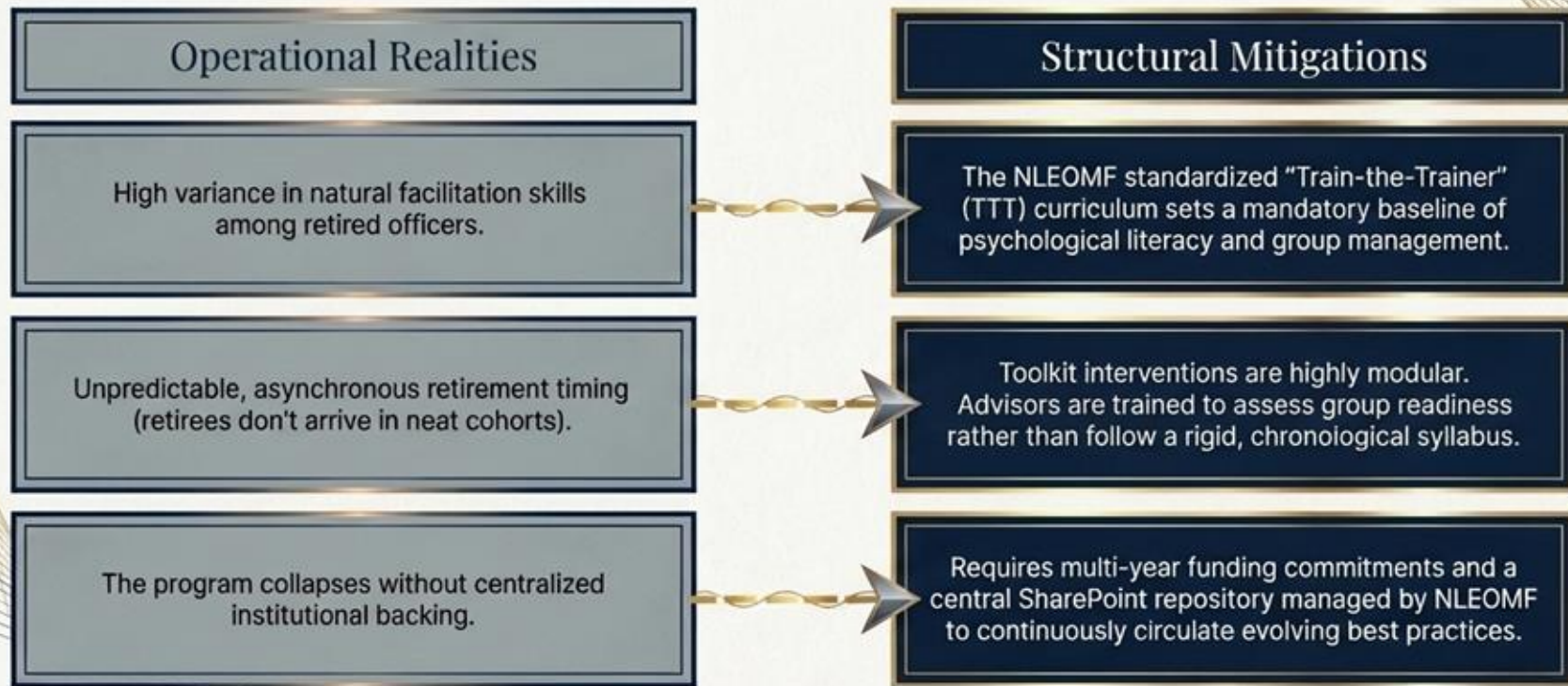
The Spark

Encounters legacy exhibits, connects with a trained Peer Advisor.

Isolated Retiree

Visits the NLEOMF Museum.

Operational guardrails: Mitigating the variables of peer-led implementation



Measuring the mission: Tracking the shift from process execution to generational wellness

Tier 1: Leading Process Metrics (0-12 Months)

1. Number of Peer Advisors trained through the TTT program.
2. Number of active local retiree chapters established.
3. Active participation and engagement rates.

Tier 2: Lagging Outcome Metrics (1-3 Years)

Annual psychometric survey results measuring self-reported retired officer well-being, sense of meaning, and quality of social connections upon retirement, after 6 months, and annually thereafter.

Tier 3: The Ultimate Goal (5+ Years)

A measurable, statistical decline in the national rates of depression, substance abuse, divorce, and suicide among retired law enforcement officers.

Reducing the invisible casualties to the only acceptable number: Zero.

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for Retired Law Enforcement

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