

# Quick reference guide:

## Entry points for addressing trauma in police reform programmes

### Introduction

Trauma and adversity are nuanced and multi-layered areas and there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Any efforts to address specific aspects of trauma must be carefully adapted to the specific context and culture of the organization(s) addressed by security sector reform. However, this quick reference guide offers a summary of questions SSR practitioners should consider when designing and implementing police reform programmes in any context.

The guide is intended as a complement to a separate DCAF study on trauma-informed approaches to police reform (“Addressing Trauma as a Missing Element in Security Sector Governance and Reform: Perspectives on Trauma-Informed Policing”). The study analysed three elements of trauma in policing (individual,

organizational and collective), highlighting the importance of understanding where possible responses are available to mitigate these elements, both from within the organization and externally.

Internally, for example, the organization has a responsibility to care for its employees, which requires knowledgeable leaders, well developed policies, and practical resources. Externally, communication and joint understanding with communities can lead to greater stability for the organization and its employees. Considering and addressing external factors including political pressure or instability can also help to mitigate risks of organizational trauma and its impacts on organizational decision-making and effectiveness.

## Internal:

- ✓ Is there acknowledgment and awareness of:
  - The widespread prevalence and occurrence of trauma, stress, pressure, and adversity for the individual police officer (which may include work-related as well as personal trauma)?
  - Aspects such as secondary or vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, moral injury, and burnout?
  - The ways in which workplace culture and narratives can influence how people feel about their emotional wellbeing?
- ✓ Are staff encouraged to talk about their range of experiences and seek help when needed?
- ✓ Are there training, resources, and thinking spaces which educate and increase awareness around the signs of trauma and its impact on both professional and personal experiences in areas as varied as the use of force, perception of risk, decision-making, impulse control, memory recall, family relationships, and life styles (e.g. alcohol use)?
- ✓ Is there a menu of support options, and are they widely disseminated and discussed at all levels of the organization?
- ✓ Do employees have access to mental health/ emotional wellbeing practitioners who are skilled in addressing all forms of trauma, not just those diagnosed with PTSD?
- ✓ Have guidelines been developed (with the support of mental health practitioners where needed) to manage:
  - How decisions are made regarding the type of support an individual requires, and when they may need to be taken off duty, and how this potentially difficult situation is addressed and discussed with the individual and their colleagues?
  - Which measures are taken to support those returning to work after an incident?
  - How lessons learned are captured and integrated in daily practice, whether from specific incidents or the resignation of police officers?
- ✓ Do leaders receive:
  - Tailored training and support to help them recognize and respond to trauma/ emotional distress in their organization and, where needed, play an active role in de-stigmatizing help seeking?
  - Specific training on ways to have trauma-informed conversations and to discuss potentially uncomfortable topics related to emotional wellbeing?
  - Training on how to create a sense of belonging for all members of the organization so police feel connected and supported within their work community?
- ✓ Do leaders have regular and varied ways of monitoring and reviewing staff wellbeing? Examples may include surveys, anonymous questionnaires, focus groups, one-on-one conversations, external thinking spaces (such as with a qualified clinician, coach or mentor), and using standardised measures to monitor levels of secondary and vicarious trauma and staff wellbeing.
- ✓ Are there policies and resources in place to support leadership in ensuring debriefs, post-incident reviews, and disciplinary processes are trauma-informed? (Video and written examples can play an important role in helping leaders put theory into practice).
- ✓ Does organizational training go beyond individual experiences to acknowledge:
  - Where the organization itself may have experienced trauma (through the loss of officers, continued political pressure or public criticism, or other factors)?
  - How trauma may have affected organizational policies, culture, and decision making?
  - How intergenerational, cultural, and other forms of trauma affect policing?

## External:

- ✓ Are there training, resources, and open conversations which acknowledge the impact of collective and community trauma on police relations with the public? This might include historical and intergenerational trauma as well as more recent sources of trauma such as high levels of violence and conflict.
- ✓ Have traumatic experiences of the police and community been named and acknowledged? Where appropriate, has this included acceptance of responsibility, meaningful apologies, and development of a shared commitment to address factors which led to these experiences?
- ✓ Do police as well as the government ministries/agencies which supervise and oversee them have:
  - An intentional commitment to examining the biases and inequalities which affect different communities, and can impact social cohesion?
  - An awareness of how certain behaviours, words, equipment, uniforms, or actions might affect community members and shape their responses to the police?
  - Effective approaches for listening to and learning from communities and their needs, fears, hopes, and ideas related to security and police-community relations?
  - Community projects or other means of developing a more positive police presence and “humanising” police within their communities?
  - A commitment to ensuring the police are representative of the communities they serve?
- ✓ Are police values clearly communicated to the community and consistently modelled through actions taken by the police?
- ✓ Are there mechanisms in place for the police, community organizations and other government agencies to work together to:
  - Identify and address community needs?
  - Support and contribute to public campaigns related to mental health, domestic violence, drug and alcohol use, and other societal challenges which may both stem from and contribute to collective trauma?
- ✓ Are police public relations offices, as well as local media and civil society organizations, sensitized to the importance of reporting on positive developments (e.g. progress in crime reduction or police-community cooperation) as well as problems?
- ✓ Do political and police leaders understand the potential impacts of political transitions or other major events on the organization? Are they prepared to engage in constructive dialogue with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to address these impacts, and to ensure continuity in the organization where needed?
- ✓ Are parliamentary oversight committees, ombuds institutions and other oversight actors aware of the presence and effects of trauma in the police? Do they have a way of holding the police accountable for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of their personnel?
- ✓ Do national labour laws/regulations demonstrate an awareness of the impact of trauma and stress on the workforce?

# DCAF

Geneva Centre  
for Security Sector  
Governance

**Maison de la Paix**

Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E  
CH-1202 Geneva, Switzerland

 +41 (0) 22 730 94 00

 [info@dcaf.ch](mailto:info@dcaf.ch)

 [www.dcaf.ch](http://www.dcaf.ch)

