Chapter 8
911:
Stabilization Approaches Used by Police Social Workers

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ABSTRACT

Police social workers are crucial components of police departments when individuals or communities experience crises. They perform essential tasks, including well-being checks, crisis intervention, de-escalation, mediation, safety planning, referrals to community services, and other preventative measures to stabilize clients in crisis. The chapter will define police social work and give the reader insight into the stabilization approaches used by police social workers to prepare clients for their next level of care. The chapter begins with a brief history of the evolution of police social workers within the context of public policy and their most recent call to action to address mental health crises. The authors utilize a multi-tier approach to highlight stabilization approaches used by police social workers with a focus on empowering individuals, families, and communities to collaborate on solutions. The chapter uses case scenarios drawn from the experiences of police social workers and interns to demonstrate stabilization approaches. A racial equity, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed lens informs the approach to stabilizing client systems in law enforcement settings.

POLICE SOCIAL WORK AND THE HISTORICAL TIES TO SOCIAL WORK, LAW, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Police social workers "…refers to a professional social worker, typically holding a graduate social work degree in social work, employed in law enforcement agencies" (Patterson, 2022, pg.52). Patterson (2022) asserts the title police social worker is comparable to that of a school social worker who is hired by a school system to work directly in a school. Therefore, unless a social worker is an employee of the police department, the term "police social worker" should not be used. In this chapter, the authors add to Patterson's definition the important point that police social workers are hired by law enforcement agencies under the direction of the Chief of Police. Police social workers are integrated fully into the fiscal, cultural, and overall DNA structure of a police department. More specifically, a police social worker does not have arresting powers and is not a police officer with a background in social work. Thus, police social workers cannot have a dual role as a police officer and a social worker simultaneously; it creates a conflict of interest and risks significant role strains. A dual professional focus may further perpetuate myths, stereotypes, and mistrust of police social workers. It would create situations where the public would have no way of knowing whether the person was acting as a social worker with confidentiality rules or a law enforcement officer with arrest powers.

A police social worker is embedded into a police department to serve as an essential bridge between the police and the community, building community trust and wellness through advancing human rights and social, and economic justice. As part of the interdisciplinary team, police social workers help strengthen communities by addressing disparities, reducing entry and recidivism rates in criminal and juvenile justice settings, and improving police/community relationships as well as bringing together community resources.

Police social work is an area of social work practice that combines the profession of social work and law enforcement. As such, it needs to be considered under the umbrella of forensic social work. Barker (2003) defines forensic social work as a specialized social work field involving the law, legal issues, and all types of litigation. Traditionally the core issues include child welfare, divorce and custody of children, juvenile delinquency, human rights, mandated treatment, and legal competency (p. 166). Police social workers necessarily work within legal contexts. Their work often includes navigating criminal legal issues as well as legal rights and the challenges of client safety and self-determination. The macro policies are also a focus for police social workers as they advocate for changes to social, economic, political, and racial conditions.

Since its earliest inception, the social work profession has focused both on meeting basic needs and addressing social injustices. One of the primary developmental

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