Suicide epidemic hits corrections officers
6:28 PM, Oct 30, 2012

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USA TODAY

National law enforcement and health officials will meet later this year near Boston to review a recent rash of suicides involving prison and jail guards.

Concerns are mounting that the guards are struggling with a range of health-related troubles ranging from severe depression to post-traumatic stress disorder.

The National Sheriff’s Association said the meeting, organized by Massachusetts Sheriff Peter Koutoujian of Middlesex County, represents the first time national authorities will assemble to deal with increasing concerns for officer health and the long-term effects of entire careers spent in daily interaction with dangerous offenders.

“Prisoners come and go from our jails, but many of our full-time corrections people spend their whole lives behind the walls at great personal cost,” says Fred Wilson, national operations director for the sheriff’s association. “The problems manifest themselves in high divorce rates, addiction and suicide.”

Little national research exists that tracks problems involving corrections officers, but a series of high-profile incidents in the past three years is prompting an attempt at intervention.

Among them:
• In Massachusetts, Koutoujian’s Middlesex County Sheriff’s Office has been rocked by three sudden officer deaths in the past 15 months, including two suicides. The third fatality was related to a cardiac condition.

• In June, a Rikers Island, N.Y., guard fatally wounded another police officer before turning the gun on himself in the midst of a domestic disturbance in which the guard also wounded a former girlfriend.
• In less than a month in 2009, two New Jersey corrections officers killed themselves in separate incidents.

According to a study published in the Archives of Suicide Research, the risk of suicide among corrections officers is 39 percent higher than the rest of the working population. That study was published in 1997. But authorities said there is evidence that the mental and physical health risks to the officers remains severe.

In a 2011 survey of 3,599 corrections officers, researchers found that 44 percent experienced some form of post-traumatic stress disorder, while 27 percent “met the criteria for full PTSD.”

“These are the forgotten people of the criminal justice system,” said Caterina Spinaris, a Colorado-based psychologist who conducted the 2011 survey and who founded Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, which provides counseling assistance to corrections staffers and their families. “We talk a lot about the warriors returning from combat overseas, but these are warriors behind the walls. There are way too many casualties.”

Spinaris is part of the national panel that will assemble in Lowell, Mass., which will also include representatives from Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, the University of Massachusetts Medical School, the City of New York Department of Corrections and the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department.

Koutoujian, whose department manages 1,500 county jail inmates, said officers face constant stress, both from protecting inmates from each other and guarding themselves against inmate attacks.

“It takes its toll over the years,” the sheriff said, adding that he hoped new attention to the officers’ plight would prompt additional research and call attention to “critical” officer wellness needs.

In the string of recent officer deaths, James Callahan’s suicide struck the Massachusetts department particularly hard last June, the sheriff said.

Callahan’s father, also a Middlesex corrections officer, died of a heart attack after an altercation with an inmate in 1973.
Before his death, Cheryl Callahan said her husband spoke of increasing anxiety about a job that was becoming more difficult with an influx of mentally-ill inmates into a system already containing "hardened criminals."

“He talked about not knowing what to expect when he went in to work,” Callahan said. “That’s really asking a lot of someone.”

Still, she said, her husband remained “deeply committed to the job.”

“He didn’t recognize that there were people out there who could provide the help he needed,” she said.