

What Is Safer Together?



VALOR Voices Podcast Transcript

Speaker 1: You are listening to VALOR Voices, a production of the VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Program. The VALOR Program is funded through grants from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, BJA, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The points of view and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the podcast authors and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. Here's your host.

David P.: Hello, I'm David Perry. Greetings to you all, and thank you for joining us for this VALOR Voices podcast entitled, "What Is Safer Together?" The Safer Together campaign emphasizes and strengthens the link between officer safety, wellness, community trust, and respect. We also feel it reinvigorates law enforcement at a time when a boost is really needed most.

Today, we're talking about the new national strategy for all law enforcement, Safer Together. I know many in attendance are very aware of the resources, training, and technical assistance offered through the VALOR Program. I'm joined today for this very important discussion by Associate Deputy Director Vince Davenport with the Bureau of Justice Assistance. Vince, welcome to the program, and let me first start off by saying you have walked a mile in the shoes of the men and women listening to this program so you, too, have felt the pain and discomfort of the past few years. Please talk about your career in law enforcement and your work now with the Bureau of Justice Assistance.

Vince D.: Thank you, Chief. It's nice to join you here today, and I'm very excited to talk about Safer Together. It's such an important new program here at the Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance. And as you said, it was developed in response to the events that we've all endured over the last few years, and law enforcement has been at the forefront of some really traumatic and important national discussions about policing—what it should look like, who do we want out here doing this important work, and how do we support the officers that are keeping us safe every day in these difficult times? And as you mentioned, I appreciate the plug for a little street cred with the officers that are listening to this podcast. I did spend 25 years on the job in Kansas City, Kansas, and it was tough over the course of my career there. But nothing came close, in my professional career, to what I've seen these last few years that our officers are dealing with. And for the past seven years, I've actually had the privilege of working here at the Department of Justice and bringing my experience in law enforcement here to help develop programs and strategies to mitigate the impact of stress on law enforcement officers, to help prevent officer suicides, promote roadway safety, and everything that you can think of that supports safety and wellness, and Safer Together is the newest piece of our portfolio, and it's a really exciting program that we think has the potential to

help agencies and communities find a constructive path forward to shared public safety.

David P.: Okay, Vince, you've said the term maybe two or three times you—you've almost given us an appetizer. Please tell the listeners, what is VALOR Safer Together?

Vince D.: So, Safer Together—it's a strategy. First and foremost, it's a broad strategy that includes an eight-hour training course for law enforcement officers, primarily frontline law enforcement officers. That's really who it was designed for, but it also includes a messaging piece, a social media campaign, that allows communities and other stakeholders to join in and to support officers who are really doing the right things to kind of move our nation forward.

David P.: Vince, why is Safer Together different from other similar sounding programs of the past?

Vince D.: First off, there have been a lot of programs that we've all seen around the country—a lot of the programs do address safety and wellness, and a lot of the programs do address promoting mutual trust between law enforcement and the community. But Safer Together is really special. It is. It's very different in primarily because it operationalizes some core principles, and it provides individual officers at that line level with some very specific strategies and skills that they can employ in almost every interaction that they find themselves in to enhance their own safety and wellness and, as a side benefit, to help enhance confidence in law enforcement, not just in that individual officer, but in the agency and in the institution of law enforcement.

David P.: You hit on a key point: improving confidence, instilling just more of what's needed at this very moment. But we are not just talking about something that has not been tested. You have been a part of the very first pilot in Washington, DC, and I know you have several memories and thoughts, and then there was a second pilot conducted in Gonzales, Louisiana. What are your thoughts about those first two pilot classes?

Vince D.: So, it was extraordinary. We discovered some key things about the training that we didn't wholly understand when we designed the course and when we launched it. So, one of the first things that we understood within the first two hours of the training course is that it's really special. It's different, and it impacts officers in ways that I don't think any of us were fully prepared to understand. We saw within the first two hours of the training course that officers were sitting up straight, they were beginning to experience what kind of came to be a rejuvenation, and they started to become reenergized. And we helped them to understand why it is that they got into this profession, why it's so important, and not only important in the work that they do, but why their safety and wellness is so inextricably linked to public safety and to crime reduction and to promoting community trust. All of these really important concepts all started to become seamlessly and effortlessly woven together in those first two hours.

David P.: And so, I think it's important for our listeners to know that every attendee was voluntold to attend, and we had a mixture of agencies from state police to municipal to college and university, even some federal employees were in the room. And so, let's go back to some of those faces and that body posture when we initiated this training, Vince.

Vince D.: There are actually several things that we all witnessed that day that were really extraordinary and were really exciting. But my favorite anecdote is a 16-year sergeant from Baltimore PD. He came in, and again, I'm pretty sure he was voluntold to be there. He sat there, his arms were crossed, and he offered a comment early on in the first maybe 30 minutes that really was just not helpful, and it was kind of jaded and cynical. But by the end of that afternoon, that same sergeant came up to us and said, "Hey, I want to be part of this rollout nationally. This is exactly what our officers need. They need to be part of one of these Safer Together trainings so they too can be reminded about the nature of importance of their work, so they too can experience kind of the rejuvenating effect that the training had on them, and so that they can receive these skills and strategies to employ every day to keep themselves well; safe; and, at the same time, promote that vital mutual trust between them and the community that they serve."

David P.: You're right. You're right. We probably could hold the listeners' attention for another hour about the stories, but I do remember one attendee who said they were really on the cusp of leaving the profession altogether. They had become so frustrated and just didn't feel the appreciation and love that they felt they had received in the past. So, you're right. There are so many positives from not only that session, but the second as well.

And, you're quoted, Vince, you're quoted as saying, "Among all safety and wellness factors, a healthy and positive climate vis-a-vis police-community relations may be one of the most important and universal safeguards against the harmful stress and physical dangers that officers face." Tell me about that statement, and then open up the door for the discussion on community climate and how that connects.

Vince D.: So, there are a lot of things that officers traditionally have been trained on to help them to be safe. We've got contact, cover, you've gotta make sure that you eat a healthy diet, you've gotta get a good night's sleep. All of these things that are kind of the traditional way that we think about safety and wellness. But if you think about the big picture, if you think about—over your wellness and safety over the course of a career, what probably has the biggest impact on an officer's well-being, both physical, mental, professional, is really the community climate. In other words, how does it feel between the community and law enforcement? Is it collegial? Is it toxic? Is it strained? Because in a lot of communities, it is strained. And in some communities, especially in communities of color, there are some deep-rooted reasons why the relationships are very, very strained, and that's just unhealthy.

When you work in a climate like that, and you might be able to do it for a few days or a week or a month without having any lasting impacts on your physical wellness,

your mental wellness, your professional well-being, but if you do that over and over for months and months, year-after-year, that will take a toll on those officers. Those officers will be at much higher risk of coronary disease, of diabetes, all different types of anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders. So, there are so many ways that this job can wear on an officer if the environment is toxic or unhealthy. But in a healthy environment where it is not, as I just described, where it's more healthy, it's more cooperative. Those officers, they're just not exposed to that constant sense of dread and that unhealthy energy that does and will have an impact on their health and wellness.

David P.: And we define community climate as the overall relationship between police and the communities they serve. And as you just said, Vince, positive community climate is one that engenders mutual trust, respect, and collaboration in support of crime reduction and other shared public safety objectives. And so, you know, stress is a major, major factor in this profession, and there are studies that show in our profession, we lose 22 years of our life expectancy because of that extra stress that's not being handled appropriately, but then, all those other factors that you so eloquently articulated.

Vince D.: If you believe that a healthy community climate is important to your health and your wellness and your safety, you're less likely to become involved in situations that tend to escalate, that can lead to injury or worse. Then you also should be willing to invest, individually, in promoting a positive healthy community climate.

And one of the key tenets of Safer Together is that individual officers have a unique ability with every interaction to improve the community climate where they work and where they oftentimes live. So, it's in the officer's best interest to take actions and conduct themselves in a way that contributes to a healthy and positive community climate. And that's really what the Safer Together training is about. It provides them with those strategies and skills so that every time it's possible they can make a deposit into this repository of goodwill, so to speak, that helps to enhance community climate, which in turn, helps to keep them safe long-term.

David P.: So, the number 249 million is a good number to use to transition us into those are the 249 million documented 9-1-1 calls per year. And you just used a phrase, "individual actions," and we know from that training that was a major component to show the men and women who were in the room that they have control and that those individual actions by law enforcement officers matter. How would you categorize the importance of those individual interactions officially, Vince, and then those unofficial contacts when we're walking into an establishment every day?

Vince D.: Yeah. So, if you think about it this way, if you think about over the course of an officer's career, let's just say it's a 25- or 30-year career, how many interactions does an officer have? Whatever that number is—it is finite, okay? It's finite, and Safer Together stresses the fact that every single interaction matters and that the officer cannot afford to waste the interaction as an opportunity to contribute to a positive and healthy community climate that will benefit them for the rest of their

career. And so, if you think about these last few years and the national discourse over police reform and everything that's flowed from the demands for changes in policing, there's a lot of rhetoric in Washington. There's rhetoric at the state level, there's rhetoric at the city level. There's elected officials—there's others who have something to say. But the ultimate element that will determine the state of community-police relations, that community climate, that's determined by individual interactions that officers have with people every day.

So, an officer that goes on duty this evening—for example, an officer that goes on duty, over the course of that eight-hour, ten-hour shift, whatever it is, it doesn't matter what others say. The only thing that really matters more than anything else are each one of those interactions that officer will have during the course of their shift and how they handle those situations, and Safer Together provides very specific strategies and skills that will bring added value in almost every situation that they have. And then we want those skills to become ingrained as habits, and once they become ingrained as habits, that's really where the magic happens over the course of a career—if an officer can develop strong habits to make the most of every situation that's gonna benefit them, their family, their colleagues, and their community for years and years to come.

David P.: You mentioned strategies and skills—and you've already jumped ahead to what we know is module four of the training—but we provide the men and women who attend this important course, those skills in tangible ways that, where they can see them, and we call them buckets. We put those strategies and skills into buckets to help them visualize, recall, and also make notes on how they can improve within those very important buckets. So, for our listeners, can you list those four buckets and maybe briefly mention components of each of those?

Vince D.: So, during the course of the training day, we spend much of the afternoon talking about four key areas that we call buckets. As you mentioned, officers have an opportunity to influence these interactions in a healthy and positive way.

The buckets are first impressions, humanizing one's self, empathy, and competency. And we have exercises that the officers engage in where they help amongst themselves, kind of develop what goes into each bucket. And so, for example, first impressions. How does an officer make a positive first impression? Well, there's a lot of things that they could do. It's the look that you have on your face. Is it a smile? Is it a scowl? How sharp do you look? What's the initial approach to look like? What are the first words that are spoken? That's important.

Humanizing oneself—it's important that the people that we interact with see us as more than just a thing in a uniform with a badge or a gun, however it is that they think about law enforcement. What we want them to see is we want them to see us as a person who has the same concerns for our family, the same concern for public safety, but we're humans too, in addition to being law enforcement officers.

Empathy is a really important bucket. This is where we teach officers to find ways to weave in into the interaction expressions of empathy for whatever it is that

somebody may be going through, and it could be very simple. These skills and tactics and strategies, these require oftentimes just a few seconds, just a few extra words that you speak during an encounter.

And obviously competency—we want officers to demonstrate their competence by being effective and helping to resolve whatever the issue is that they're facing.

David P.: And knowing their job. Vince, in addition to the four buckets and the wealth of information that the students help generate to fill out their ideas and thoughts for each of those, there's another concept we introduced to the officers attending this training called plus one. Can you talk about plus one and maybe give one or two examples?

Vince D.: Yeah. Plus one—it's just a great strategy that really allows the officers to kind of tie everything together and to leave the people that they're dealing with thinking about the officer and the agency in a light that's most favorable for whatever the circumstances were. And so, plus one is basically one minute, one additional minute. When everything is said and done, the call is resolved, the report has been written, whatever this situation is, we encourage officers to just kind of pause and take one extra minute to end on a high note, on a positive note, add something extra to the conversation that is not necessarily related to the call but really is something that's personal. And just really, again, emphasizes the officer's humanness and allows the officer to leave the person with the most positive impression possible.

So, an example might be the officer's there to take a report, and the report's done, and the officer's ready to leave. The officer might just wanna pause for a second and just to say, "Okay, this is done. Whatever it is we were doing, that's done. Here's a copy of your report. Now, how's everything else in the neighborhood? Everything else going, okay? Any other concerns around here that you want me to know about?" And that takes less than a minute just to say those words. Engage in a conversation, do something, say something that's just nice, easy, and again, tends to cast the officer and the agency in a positive way.

David P.: I appreciate that, and those examples are very helpful. Can you talk about, how will agencies benefit from this training? There are agencies that will benefit, and then there are communities that will benefit. But first, talk about—how will an agency benefit from this?

Vince D.: So, Safer Together is designed not only to benefit the officers as we've described, but it is about the agency, and it's even bigger than that. It's really about the entire community. But an agency that works together to promote safety and wellness of its officers is vital. That's critical for an agency to be successful because if officers are not well, they don't feel safe, they're not gonna be at their best. And that's definitely gonna have an impact not only on the day-to-day running of the business, so to speak, and their ability to handle the calls that come in, but it is also going to impact the relationship that community climate that we talked about and how the community views the agency.

- David P.: And you led into the community benefit, but we know communities have experienced generational stories about their interactions with law enforcement and all those stories aren't good. So, talk about maybe some of the benefits communities can maybe expect from this type of training being exposed to their law enforcement agency.
- Vince D.: That's a really important topic, and it's a really sensitive topic. There are a lot of raw and kind of visceral emotional reactions that people have had over the last few years to different events. But as I mentioned earlier, this kind of tension that ebbs and flows sometimes, and sometimes it reaches kind of a critical peak—it's been around for a long time. And I think that communities that have been impacted either been marginalized or been impacted by perceived bias and actual bias in the past, that I think they feel better when they know that their officers understand that there are deep roots to some of the problems that we're trying to work through together as a police agency, as individual officers, as community members. And I think just an acknowledgement and an understanding that we're all on the same page and understanding the history that has contributed, in many cases, in a very harsh and negative way in some communities is important for people to know that there is that awareness there.
- David P.: The course is powerful, as we've discussed, but there are many layers and different segments to what's available. So, can you talk about the courses, talk about our intended audience, maybe the format, and then how do agencies literally request this training and assistance?
- Vince D.: So, Safer Together is the most recent, it's the newest edition, I should say, to our VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness portfolio here at the Bureau of Justice Assistance. And we are really coming to appreciate that this represents kind of the foundation. This is a foundational training course that every officer in the country needs to have, and it's as simple as asking. We offer this training, not only Safer Together training, but a host of other training courses related to safety and wellness, mitigating the impact of stress, awareness and prevention of suicide among officers, roadway safety, and pretty much every area of this profession where there is risk that can be mitigated. This is what we offer in our training portfolio. All the training is offered for free, and so you just need to contact us, let us know, and we'll figure out a way to bring it to you.
- David P.: Right. And so, we have the executive level training class, and that's targeting senior level leaders, chiefs, directors, sheriffs, or their number two, three in command staff. And then we go right to the supervisory/officer level.
- Vince D.: Well, I'm glad that you mentioned that. Certainly, all of the Safer Together principals apply to everybody in the organization from the most junior officer to the chiefs or sheriff, whatever it is, but there are some additional considerations when you're in a leadership role. And so, some training that we have for leaders, for example, especially executives, really is not only what are the core concepts, but how do you implement this? How do you bring this to an agency? How do you

support it within the agency? And so, we try to tailor all of the trainings so that it is commensurate with and that it corresponds to the rank and the responsibility within the organization.

David P.: I appreciate that, Vince. And as we draw to a close, this wonderful informational session about Safer Together, you've talked about your training goals for agencies related to the VALOR suite of training courses. What is the vision for the Bureau of Justice Assistance for this training considering the term "critical mass" for law enforcement agencies?

Vince D.: So, historically, I think with a lot of training programs, there's kind of this predictable model that exists where training comes into an organization, whether it's at an agency—maybe it's regional training, and you might have a handful of officers from one agency that will attend the training, or there might be some training that is agency specific. Maybe you bring in 20 or 30 officers at a time, and that's great. That's all positive. All training is good, but ultimately, our vision, if you will, is to develop training delivery modules in a way that helps to reach a critical mass of officers within an agency. So, for example, if you take an agency that has 300 sworn personnel, we don't want to just train 30 officers. We want to train a critical mass of those 300, and so we want to train 200—ideally all 300. So, we're developing different delivery methods and strategies that will help us to do that that include classroom training, that include live online training, along with self-paced modules, and combinations of those as well.

David P.: And so, I'm not gonna let you off the hook yet. Critical mass is important because if you overlay that against a community, what's the potential impact of a community of five million people?

Vince D.: You know, as we think about all the potential for Safer Together, we know that if we can bring this training and really our other training that also emphasizes a lot of the important strategies and skills that we talked about today to a critical mass of officers within an agency, we know that that can influence culture. And if you can influence the agency's culture, that agency's culture, by extension, has the potential to influence the community as a whole. So, it's all linked together, and that's why it's so important to get it right. We know that this path forward has a lot of potential to improve the officer, improve the agency, and improve the entire community.

David P.: Thank you, Vince, for that. Our last question for our listeners is a straightforward one to you, Vince. It's a magic wand question, and I've done my research. I know you're right-handed. I know you used to throw a mean fastball. So, in your right hand is a magic wand. And if you could wave that magic wand today to improve or change a component related to this Safer Together initiative, what would your magic wand wish be?

Vince D.: That's a good question. I think it's my wish, would be that—first off, that everybody across the country, communities large and small, fully appreciated how difficult this job is in law enforcement, and how nearly every officer that I've ever

met in my life has done what they could to be their best and to help people along the way. I just want people to know the commitment and the level of dedication that I've seen in my lifetime and that I know is out here today. And I also would want officers to take advantage of Safer Together and internalize and accept the skills and strategies that this program offers and make those skills and strategies part of everyday habit. Because if they do, we believe they will have a better career. They will to the extent that they can mitigate their risk for developing serious health diseases or mental health issues. We know that this is the right approach for the right time as we sit here as a nation today.

David P.: Vince, thank you for your time. I want our listeners just to maybe consider these last four takeaways, and one is Safer Together can be implemented instantly. There's no hardware to install. There are no extra screws or any other bolts. This can be implemented once the officer leaves the training. Two, the training is about safety and wellness for officers as well as the community. Three, VALOR can provide training resources and technical assistance to law enforcement agencies for this training and more. And the last one, stress is a part of the job and reconnecting with each officer's why can help them reduce stress, frustration, and the tensions for all officers in this honorable profession. For our listeners, please visit the VALOR website for outstanding resources and information on upcoming training events. I encourage each of you to reach out to us if you have questions by visiting www.valorforblue.org. Thank you for joining us today.

Speaker 2: The VALOR Program is dedicated to delivering training, developing resources, and conducting research to improve the safety and wellness of law enforcement professionals across the country. For additional information regarding the VALOR Program, please visit valorforblue.org, download the app on the Apple or Google Play Store, or follow us on Facebook and Twitter. The Bureau of Justice Assistance, BJA, in the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, is committed to making our nation's community safer through resources, developing programs, and providing grant funding opportunities to support state, local, and tribal criminal justice efforts. All are available at no cost. Please visit www.bja.gov to learn more.

Speaker 6: This project was supported by grant number 2019-VIBX-K001, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the National Institute of Justice; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; the Office for Victims of Crime; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking, or SMART. Points of view or opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.