

THE “HERO SYNDROME”

Sergeant Ben D. Cross

Arkansas State Police

School of Law Enforcement Supervision

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INTRODUCTION

Hero, a word we all associate with accolades of praise upon an individual who has done a selfless or exemplary act. A word defined by dictionary standards as: A person noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose, especially one who has risked or sacrificed his or her life. (The American Heritage College Dictionary, Third Edition)

Syndrome, a word we usually associate with a negative connotation, almost as if it were a contagious disease. A word defined by dictionary standards as: A group of symptoms that collectively indicate or characterize a disease or another abnormal condition. A complex of symptoms indicating the existence of an undesirable condition or quality. A distinctive or characteristic pattern of behavior. (The American Heritage College Dictionary, Third Edition)

The pairing of these two words to describe a condition known in the main stream media as “The Hero Syndrome” brings rise to a variety of pre-conceived notions as to the origins, facts, myths, and ultimately, the reality of what this disorder encompasses. This paper will delve into the history, current trends, investigative practices, (or lack thereof), and the detriment to the law enforcement profession when occurrences of this nature come to light. I hope to also bring stark awareness to law enforcement managers who “look the other way” and do not readily and aggressively deal with this problem head on.

BACKGROUND

The so called Hero Syndrome is not actually a syndrome at all. Having not been duly recognized by the American Academy of Psychiatry as a true mental disorder with definitive research studies to back up the title of “syndrome,” then we are left with identifying this disorder at its’ face value. Carl Gustav Jung, noted Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, found that the phenomenon of fragmented identity can result in what he referred to as “complexes.” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014) There are various categories of complexes, with each being rooted in a particular archetype or more easily understood, a pattern.

Since we've now established the Hero Syndrome is actually the Hero Complex, one must know the meaning in psychological terms of what exactly constitutes a "complex." A psychological complex, as the name suggests, is a distorted thought and sensory pattern that has been deeply ingrained into a person's psyche. It decides a vast chunk of that person's perception and decision making in terms of how they relate to others, their emotional experiences and a sense of self. (Psychological List Dose, 2013) A complex can affect someone for many reasons. Some people have a basic inclination towards developing certain complexes by their very disposition. For example, someone with narcissistic tendencies has a greater chance of having a superiority complex. Either way, a complex is a blind spot in one's thinking and how they rationalize their actions. For purposes of identification, the following represent the ten accepted psychological complexes as identified by the American Academy of Psychiatry:

- 1) Hero Complex
- 2) Guilt Complex
- 3) Dependency Complex
- 4) God Complex
- 5) Don Juan Complex
- 6) Parental Complex
- 7) Martyr Complex
- 8) Superiority Complex
- 9) Inferiority Complex
- 10) Persecution Complex

While many attributes from these complexes cross one another in their description, the Hero Complex and its' affliction to the law enforcement profession is usually rooted in what manifests itself as inherently deviant and outright unlawful activities. For the purposes of attaining knowledge, we should now have a grasp on what the scientific community recognizes as the Hero Complex; for the purpose of writing and general awareness by the not so scientific, we'll just keep referring to it as the "Hero Syndrome."

Noted author Laura Berman Fortgang, described the Hero Syndrome as a phenomenon affecting people who seek heroism or recognition, usually by creating a desperate situation which they can resolve and subsequently receive the accolades from. This can include unlawful acts, such as arson and attempted murder. The phenomenon has been noted to affect civil servants, such as firefighters, nurses, police officers, and security guards. (Winston J. Brill and Associates, 2006) Ms. Fortgang went on to research this phenomenon in both positive and negative roles, developing a 15 question self analysis to be utilized individually to identify characteristics inherent to the Hero Syndrome. She focused primarily on the positive side of the Hero Syndrome and those individuals who will drop everything to help someone else, those

individuals with an unconscious need to be needed, appreciated, or valued. Ms. Fortgang tried to identify those positively influenced individuals who get overstressed and their lives are led by exhaustion and being over extended. The research by Ms. Fortgang is valuable if you're a psychiatrist trying to be a "life coach" to your patient, but for those civil servants living out a more deviant side of the Hero Syndrome, it's often too little, too late, because the acts are only discovered after the fact, after an actual crime has been perpetrated. If those positively affected traits of the Hero Syndrome were all that had to be recognized and dealt with, then this paper would hold little value, but since there's a negative to every positive, let's look at the "evil that men do."

BIRTH OF THE TERM

The term "Hero Syndrome" began receiving notoriety in the early 1980's when Los Angeles police officer Jimmy Wade Pearson planted a fake bomb on the Turkish Olympic team's bus near the Los Angeles airport, during the summer Olympics. Pearson then "miraculously" was the officer who not only located the explosive device, but ripped the wires from it and ran with the device across the airport tarmac and deposited it in a safe location. As Officer Pearson's story began to unravel, he was subsequently arrested and charged with multiple felonies after confessing to creating the entire event as a hoax to become the "hero." At Pearson's sentencing in July 1985, eleven months after the event, Pearson's motive was announced; he wanted a transfer. Pearson stated he wanted transferred out of the metro division and knew it would not happen unless he was a "hero" officer and the department recognized his "value." (L.A. Times, 7/16/85) In all actuality though, the "Hero Syndrome" goes back as far as human record. For as long as mankind has stood up armies and clashed upon battlefields, so have there been instances where individuals have created false realities to further their personal "hero" status.

Another well documented, **albeit wrong**, case of the Hero Syndrome, came to the forefront during the Centennial Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta, Georgia, on July 26, 1996. Off duty police officer Richard Jewell was providing security at the event site when he located a bomb and began dispersing the crowd and evacuating patrons. The bomb detonated, killing one woman and injuring 111. The FBI began questioning Jewell's legitimacy and went so far as to name him a suspect, stating publicly, "If Jewell did plant the bomb, the case would fit a well established hero syndrome profile." (Associated Press, 7/31/96) The only problem, Jewell in

fact was a true hero, and though the FBI's profile of the hero syndrome may have exhibited similar characteristics to Jewell's actions, the investigative side of the FBI failed to thoroughly examine all facets of the event before rushing to judgment. By allowing this investigation to be played out in the nation's media, Richard Jewell was a condemned man from the start. Jewell would subsequently be totally exonerated when it was learned that bomber Eric Robert Rudolph had in fact carried out the Olympic bombing. Richard Jewell would go on to receive sizable civil monetary judgments from multiple media outlets, as well as, from the federal government for their reckless defamation of his character.

The two cases characterized above show the gross disparity of investigative processes in handling a so called "Hero Syndrome" case. The Los Angeles Police Department carried out a thorough and efficient investigation, resulting in a felony conviction and decertification of police officer. The FBI and its' sensationalized handling of the Richard Jewell investigation resulted in the gross defamation of a "true" hero and overshadowed the lack of good police work. As a footnote to a true hero, Georgia Governor Sonny Purdue publicly recognized and honored Jewell at the state capitol on August 1, 2006, ten years after the Centennial Park bombing.

THE RESEARCH

The research into the coined phrase "The Hero Syndrome" is where law enforcement comes up lacking. While the FBI has established so called "profiles" for the hero syndrome, the analytical psychological community and law enforcement have never teamed up to complete a comprehensive law enforcement specific study, whereby established indicators could be identified for eliminating these types of individuals from the prospective applicant pools.

Former FBI profiler Jim Wright spent 30 years studying events involving law enforcement instances of the hero syndrome and now works for the entity, Threat Assessment Group; a company involved in preventing workplace violence. Wright, and renowned forensic psychiatrist Dr. Park Dietz, have collaborated and are active in studying the events that have taken place, but there are no apparent frontrunners in studying how to eliminate these individuals **before** they enter a first responder profession. Dietz and Wright have coined the term "vanity crimes" to describe those in public service professions who commit "acts of heroism" in response to self created problems. Dietz stated, "In a given year, we see 10 security guard cases; 3 law enforcement cases; 3 firefighter cases; and 4 hospital cases." (New York Times, 2004)

I would also submit, the numbers cited by Dr. Dietz are grossly underestimated and here's why. Dietz and Wright are studying "post" events and relying on those events that have been reported, and more importantly, prosecuted. My hypothesis is that many so called "hero syndrome" events are swept under the rug by management, specifically law enforcement management, for the following reasons: (1) A police officer entangled in a hero syndrome event brings negative press to an agency. (2) It brings into question the supervisory skills of the law enforcement manager. (3) It raises credibility issues of a given agency's training capabilities. In Arkansas specifically, where Sheriffs face re-election every two years and most police chiefs work for a mayoral form of government, where they are an "at will" employee, you can easily surmise it would be far easier for such a problem employee to just "go away," than for the law enforcement agency to be scrutinized in the public media for their shortcomings.

So, who is doing something about "The Hero Syndrome"? The fire service, that's who. In January 2003, the U.S. Fire Administration completed a 45 page report titled: *Special Report: Firefighter Arson (USFA-TR-141 1/03)*. The U.S. Fire Administration recognized an extremely dangerous and ongoing problem, firefighters setting fires. The Fire Administration empanelled some fifteen members from the federal, state, and local arenas encompassing the fire service, law enforcement, and academia, to study and properly define the problem. Furthermore, the group was to develop motives, establish indicator profiles, provide an impact statement, and establish prevention techniques; all in an effort to combat a readily acknowledged problem. The groups' mission statement was clear and concise, "Everyone in the fire service must be, and should be, prepared to admit that there is a firefighter arson problem and that precise, firm methods are needed to combat this situation. To ignore the problem or suggest that it does not exist will only increase the damage caused by the arson firefighters involved, as well as, destroy the morale of the other firefighters in their departments. We must talk to our members about firefighter arson. We must investigate, charge, and convict those that are committing this crime."

The fire service recognized over a decade ago, they had a problem. Fire service managers acknowledged it, confronted it, and tasked themselves with not only researching the issue, but offering coordinated solutions. The following table represents just one aspect derived from the overall study, but shows the broadness of the research involved.

Table 1. Firefighter Arsonist Profile Comparison

South Carolina Forestry Commission	FBI's Behavior Analysis Unit
White male, age 17-26 Product of disruptive, harsh, or unstable rearing environment	White male, age 17-25 One or both parents missing from home during childhood. If from an intact home, the emotional atmosphere was mixed and unstable.
Poor relationship with father, overprotective mother	Dysfunctional. One of their parents left the home before the child reached age 17. Cold, distant, hostile or aggressive relationship with natural father.
If married, poor marital adjustment	Poor marital adjustment. If not married, still living at home with parents.
Lacking in social and interpersonal skills Poor occupational adjustment, employed in low-paying jobs	Lack of stable interpersonal relationships Poor occupational adjustment. Menial laborer, skilled laborer, clerical jobs
Fascinated with the fire service and its trappings	Interested in fire service in the context that it provides an arena for excitement, not for the sake of public service.
May be facing unusual stress (family, financial, or legal problems)	Alcoholism, childhood hyperactivity, homosexuality, depression, borderline personality disorder, and suicidal tendencies
Average to above-average intelligence but poor to fair academic performance in school	Mixed findings on intelligence, but most arsonists have been found to have average to higher intelligence. Poor academic performance.

The overall result of this comprehensive study was the implementation of new hiring practices, the passage of legislation to strengthen prosecution of offenders, and the enhanced investigative techniques employed on suspected firefighter arsons. More importantly, the panel agreed to continue the research and continually update the data to see if there are any marked changes in firefighter behavior, since initial data collection.

Until the law enforcement profession tackles this issue head on and breaks the perpetual cycle of “passing the buck” to some other unsuspecting law enforcement agency, we as a profession will only be reactive instead of proactive. The following case studies, specific to Arkansas, highlight the issue at hand and bring a sobering reminder that you don’t have to be a member of a 1000 man department to encounter this issue. In fact, my research has led me to believe the events of “The Hero Syndrome” are actually more prevalent in small, rural law enforcement settings, where officers are working alone, and back up officers are geographically hindered in providing a quick response.

CASE STUDY #1

On January 16, 2004, a Perry County Deputy Sheriff radioed in to his dispatch center he would be out with a white male, wearing a green army jacket, on a secluded U.S. Forest Service road. A short time later, the deputy advised by radio, he was in foot pursuit. Shortly thereafter, the deputy radioed he had been shot by the unknown assailant and the assailant had ran off into the woods. Responding back up officers found the deputy and determined he had sustained a gunshot wound to the lower right abdomen, however his ballistic protective vest absorbed the round and left the deputy with very little injury. The deputy was very coherent and provided responding officers with an elaborate suspect description and direction of travel, stating he had returned fire on the suspect. A very intensive manhunt ensued, incorporating federal, state, and local law enforcement, tracking dogs, helicopters, and mounted horse patrols.

Arkansas State Police Criminal Investigators responded and initiated the investigation of the event. Investigators began obtaining evidence; including the officer's duty weapon, ballistic vest, uniform shirt, and spent shell casings. The following day, some 50 officers participated in a ground search with tracking dogs and located a .25 caliber handgun believed to have been used in the shooting. After conducting numerous mirandized interviews with the deputy, investigators seized on a number of inconsistencies in the deputy's recounting of the event, and after three separate interviews, the deputy confessed to having created the entire event as a hoax. The deputy admitted to shooting himself on purpose with the small caliber handgun, disposing of the weapon in the woods, then fabricating the entire unknown assailant story. (CID-E-01565-04)

The deputy was subsequently fired by the Sheriff, arrested and charged with Filing a False Police Report, 5-54-122 and Communicating a False Alarm, 5-71-210. The deputy was decertified as a police officer and later plead to the charges. Mark one up for the good guys and recognize how a thorough investigation weeded out a bad cop. Significant to this incident however, is the dangers posed to the dozens of law enforcement first responders who were put in jeopardy responding to this "hero event" and the countless man hours spent searching for a "bad guy" that did not exist. To put a dollar amount to the resources expended in this event would easily exceed six digits in taxpayer monies, all for nothing.

CASE STUDY #2

On March 18, 2007, a Clinton Police Officer radioed his dispatch to report he had been patrolling a remote stretch of county road, when an unknown assailant fired shots at him and sped away. The officer very calmly radioed in the event. Responding back up officers from multiple jurisdictions never met a suspect vehicle and were unable to locate anyone in the vicinity of the incident. Residents in the immediate area were later interviewed and reported nothing of hearing gunshots or anything out of the ordinary. Upon arrival of back up officers to the crime scene, two bullet holes were observed in the driver's side rear door of the involved patrol vehicle.

Arkansas State Police Criminal Investigators responded to the scene and began conducting interviews of the involved officer and gathered evidence from the crime scene. Two critical pieces of evidence recovered were the bullets embedded in the police officer's patrol vehicle, items that would later be critical in breaking apart the Clinton Officer's story. The Arkansas State Crime Lab was able to determine the bullets recovered from the officers' patrol car originated from a .380 caliber handgun. Interviews with known associates of the involved officer enabled investigators to learn the officer carried a .380 caliber semi-automatic handgun as a back-up weapon. A warrant was obtained for the officer's weapon, but a leak within the Clinton Police Department gave the involved officer time to alter his weapon. Investigation would determine the officer actually ran a drill bit down the barrel of his weapon to destroy the lands and grooves, making a ballistic comparison unattainable. However, the act of evidence tampering provided investigators with the "smoking gun" so to speak, to further tear apart the officer's story and credibility. While the involved officer would never admit to creating the "hero event" as a hoax, the prosecutor believed the circumstantial case against the officer for Communicating a False Alarm and Filing a False Police Report were enough to sustain a conviction and proceeded with a criminal prosecution. (CID-E-03017-07)

A precursor to this event also aided in questioning the credibility of the involved officer. This same officer, in the months leading up to this event, had called in a vehicle pursuit late at night in a remote area, not suspecting anyone else was around. To the officer's surprise, and ultimately his demise, a state trooper assigned to Van Buren County was on the road in question, ahead of the location the officer was providing via radio. The trooper observed neither a suspect vehicle, nor a pursuing police unit. The trooper, aware of "stories" about this officer and his reputation for making things up, relayed what he had observed to the officer's chain of command. Instead of capitalizing on the event as an opportunity to investigate and

potentially eliminate a “bad apple” from the profession, upper management within the police department chose to handle the matter “in house” with no definitive outcome.

The involved officer, now facing criminal prosecution for his latest antics, made a deal with the prosecutor. The officer would resign and join the United States Marine Corp in exchange for dropping the criminal charges. The prosecutor agreed and the suspect officer did in fact resign and join the Marines, one problem though; he only lasted two weeks and was discharged as unable to complete entry training. This officer would return to Arkansas to not only reenter law enforcement, but continue to commit fraudulent acts for which he was ultimately fired from the Quitman Police Department, only to be hired by the Meniffee Police Department, and then move on to other agencies from there. The end result: he’s still presently a police officer in Arkansas! The bad guys won this round, due to ineffective police management, even after a thorough criminal investigation.

CASE STUDY #3

On July 8, 2014, a rural Arkansas Deputy Sheriff (active case still pending)(CID-E-01887-14), reported he had been assaulted in the driveway of his home by a white male assailant. The deputy stated he had a violent struggle with the suspect and the suspect had attempted to “slit his throat.” The deputy lives in a remote, rural setting and stated he went out about 10:00 P.M. to ensure his patrol car was locked and his weapons were secure, before going to bed. The deputy reported as he was bent over in his patrol car retrieving his handgun, which was in an off duty holster, an unknown assailant approached from behind and began to choke him and slash at him with an edged weapon. The deputy stated the struggle continued until he was able to break free by beating the suspect in the head with his holstered weapon. The officer stated the suspect then fled on foot into the woods.

As one might imagine, when the local dispatch center received this information and summoned all area law enforcement to respond, the response was enormous, including myself, and officers under my command. Again, one can perceive the inherent dangers created and generated by a call such as this; fast driving, adrenaline pumping, critical decision making, all combined to create what law enforcement calls, a “soup sandwich.” In other words, too many variables lead to mistakes, which lead to line of duty deaths.

As a first responder to this event, I was actually one of the first officers to arrive on scene and begin the information gathering process. It took me approximately five minutes upon arrival to begin seeing through the officer’s story and recognize that all was not as it had been

reported. The officer showed me the location of the “violent struggle” and I immediately noted a number of visual cues. The alleged struggle location was between the officer’s patrol car and his personal pickup, a space separated by approximately three feet. Both vehicles were very dirty, with a film of dust over both vehicles and windows. Neither vehicle showed evidence of even the slightest disturbance of dirt or dust. One would assume, in a confined space between two vehicles during a violent encounter between grown men, at some point in the encounter, one or the other of the two involved would have come into contact with at least one of the vehicles. The officer showed me where the alleged assailant had attempted to “slit his throat” and I immediately recognized the abrasions on his face and neck area as being rough “scratches,” not consistent with an edged weapon. The officer showed me the path where the assailant had fled into the woods. I did not observe any disturbed brush or ground clutter indicating where someone would have ran through in a “fight or flight” mode. I then asked the most obvious of questions, “How many rounds did you fire at the suspect?” The officer replied, “none.”

I was obviously perplexed that an armed police officer, outside his own home with family inside, who had just been in a life or death struggle with an assailant attempting to “slit his throat,” could let the suspect just run off into the woods without the added incentive of lead hollowpoints following him. As even the non law enforcement community could ascertain, I was ready to send up the proverbial “bullshit flag.” But wait, there’s more. The investigation would reveal, the deputy had not called 911 to report this incident, he had not even done what I would consider the most tactical of options; get on his police radio in the patrol car right in front of him and call for help. No, he instead went back into his house and relayed his “harrowing event” to his young girlfriend and then called a fellow deputy, who in turn, called 911. If there’s a pattern emerging here, you’re right; impress the girlfriend. The Sheriff has subsequently terminated the officer, but has not submitted to have the officer decertified, and as a result, criminal prosecution appears unlikely. The end result, we still have a certified Arkansas police officer who can gain employment elsewhere... and probably will.

SUMMARY

The case studies above are only a fraction of the “hero syndrome” cases occurring across Arkansas. A simple internet search will produce case after case where police officers are creating hoaxes to be the hero who saves the day or the victim in need of our recognition. The Mayflower, Arkansas Police Officer who took off his own ballistic vest, placed it on the ground and shot it, then put it back on and called in the “assault.” The Kensett, Arkansas Police Officer,

who called in a structure fire, only to have been found to be the arsonist who set the fire. The Stamps, Arkansas Police Officer, who called in that he had been shot at twice, resulting in an extensive manhunt and investigation, only to be found out a fraud.

(policemisconduct.net)(ASP/CID case files)

The list goes on and on, but tragically these are just instances where a thorough investigation vetted out a bad apple. The unknown accounts of “hero syndrome” events will never be accurately tabulated because the perpetrators will sometimes negate their own event prior to being found out. This issue is certainly not limited to Arkansas, it is a coast to coast, border to border problem, with instances arising in nearly every state as evidenced by the following event in Pennsylvania in 2012.

Police Officer Sentenced for Lying About Shooting

Officer Jon Cousin was sentenced to nine to 23 months in prison on Tuesday.

A Chalfont Police Officer was sentenced on Tuesday for [lying about being shot in an elaborate hoax](#). In August of 2012, Officer Jon Cousin told police he was shot in the parking lot of the Lenape Valley Swim Club in Bucks County after pulling over a maroon Oldsmobile Cutlass with two men and one woman inside

Cousin, a three-year veteran of the force, told police radio he was "hit in the chest, I think my vest stopped it, get a medic here," according to a probable cause affidavit obtained by NBC10. As police began to investigate, they became suspicious when they found no gravel disturbance where the so-called suspects' vehicle would have driven away from the scene. They also say they only found casings from Cousin's police gun at the scene and no other casings, despite Cousin's claim that the suspect fired at him.

Investigators say the way the bullet struck the vest indicated that it was shot at close range and that Cousin should have therefore suffered bruises. Finally, investigators say the slug embedded into Officer Cousin's vest came from a .380 pistol, the type of gun that Cousin legally purchased two years to the date of the shooting.

Investigators later determined that Cousin fired three shots in the air at the swim club. They also suspect he fired his own personal gun at his own vest at some other time at a different location. Police eventually called Cousin to a location to pick up his belongings and arrested him once he arrived. He was charged with making a false report, reckless endangerment, disorderly conduct, possessing an instrument of crime and other related offenses, [according to court records](#).

Read more: <http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/Police-Officer-Sentenced>

The pattern across the country is clear to me. The predominant amount of hero syndrome cases are perpetrated by fairly young male officers, who are new in their careers. They create these “events” usually late at night at locations where responding back up is limited, so as not to be discovered “too soon.” In the South, they tend to be from departments where they are many times the only officer on duty when these “hero” occurrences happen. They thrive on the attention gained from the event, even though motives vary. Some act to impress a person of the opposite sex, some act to gain notoriety, some just thrive on the attention derived from the overwhelming law enforcement response a “hero in need” seems to produce.

CONCLUSION

Hero syndrome, hero complex, vanity crime, whatever term you choose, the problem remains the same. For law enforcement to be considered a “profession” and not just an occupation, we must self-police our own ranks and vigorously select, train, and hold to the highest of standards, only those officer candidates with the mental fortitude and ethical and moral attributes of a leader. This starts with facing the issue head on, as the fire service has done, by commissioning an in depth and academic study of why police officers commit these acts, are there indicators present that can be discerned in the hiring process, and ultimately, holding law enforcement managers accountable for taking action. Law enforcement managers and investigators should be cautious in their use of the “Garrity” warning versus the “Miranda” warning. While Garrity allows an employer to compel an employee to answer questions or face termination, any statements made under the Garrity cannot subsequently be utilized in any criminal proceeding. The process of issuing Garrity rights to an employee has hampered many hero syndrome event investigations, ultimately allowing the alleged offender to be terminated, but never prosecuted, nor decertified.

The law enforcement profession must quit passing off bad officers to the ranks of another department. Law enforcement managers must actively seek out and investigate thoroughly, all officers that find themselves in “heroic” events. This will ensure the true heroes integrity is maintained and recognized, and the “false prophets” are vetted out and aggressively dealt with, removing them from law enforcement permanently. Police managers, whether appointed or elected, must exhibit the moral and ethical fortitude we look for in applicants and apply it to these cases, so as to decertify, prosecute, and ultimately, eliminate these officers from our ranks. The military coined the phrase “stolen valor” for those soldiers who claim credit for valorous acts which did not happen. The law enforcement profession should feel violated every time an officer commits an act of “hero syndrome,” for those un-scrupulous acts steal a part of

the valor deserved by the men and women who are the silent professionals, providing a blanket of protection for the citizens of their community, many of whom will never actually know one another, yet selflessly serve. I would be remiss if I didn't quote from renowned author, attorney, and retired California Highway Patrol Captain, Gordon Graham; "If it's predictable, it's preventable." The time has come to address this issue in an aggressive, proactive manner which will raise the bar as we select the next generation of police officers.

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