

SELECT LANGUAGE | ▼

LOG OUT



[Police Chief Magazine](#) | [Topics](#) | [Mental Health](#) | [Psychological Fitness-for-Duty Evaluations](#)

Psychological Fitness-for-Duty Evaluations

Lewis Z. Schlosser, PhD, ABPP, Institute for Forensic Psychology, and Andrew A. Kudrick Jr., Chief, Howell Township Police Department, New Jersey



Psychological Fitness for Duty Evaluations (FFDEs) are complex and powerful, yet often misunderstood, assessment tools within police psychology. Police officers who have been referred for an FFDE typically carry an assumption with them into the evaluation—that the FFDE will lead to the likely end of their police careers. This fear appears to be a byproduct of police officers tending to be worst-case scenario thinkers (what psychologists might call “catastrophizers”) and a lingering perception among some police officers that agencies weaponize FFDEs to get rid of officers. Given that being a police officer is typically central to an officer’s personal identity, it follows that any perceived threat to a person’s career and identity would be viewed negatively. This negative emotional reaction is heightened by the fact that most police officers do not fully understand how a psychologist makes a fitness determination. Hence, police officers have historically entered the FFDE situation with a very defensive posture,

viewing the police psychologist as an adversary and expecting a markedly negative outcome.¹

This catastrophizing of the FFDE appears unwarranted. A study of almost 500 FFDEs revealed that only 5.7 percent of officers were determined to be psychologically unfit for duty and unlikely to recover.² Said another way, over 94 percent of officers sent for an FFDE were returned to duty, either immediately or eventually.

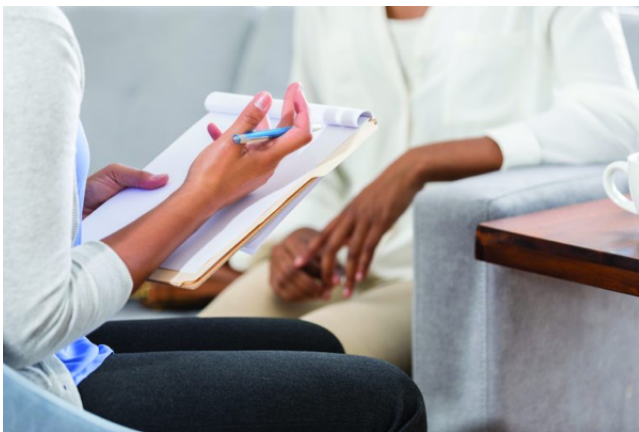
Despite the facts, negative perceptions of the FFDE remain. Helping law enforcement leaders and personnel reframe their view of the FFDE can facilitate the understanding of the FFDE's place as a component of an officer wellness program. Normalizing the FFDE is part of the larger effort that is currently underway to break the stigma surrounding mental health treatment among police officers. Instead of thinking about the FFDE as a career-ender, the FFDE should be seen as a means for saving careers and saving lives. Agencies can and should intervene when an officer appears to be struggling or is headed down a self-destructive or negative path; when other interventions are ineffective, a competently performed FFDE can have a profound impact on the direction of the subject officer's career and mental health.

Prioritizing Officer Mental Health

Police chiefs and other law enforcement executives must lead the way for their agencies in prioritizing officer mental health and infusing these issues into agencies' cultures. This attention to officer mental health must start on the first day of the police academy, and it should be maintained and promoted throughout the officer's career until retirement. An agency's goal should be for its officers to be physically and mentally healthy at retirement, especially as the impact of job-related traumatic events can sometimes have a delayed onset, emerging after retirement. Hence, proper "mental management" techniques can help save

officers' lives both during and after their careers. Agencies will spend significant amounts of time, energy, and money on ensuring officer safety; officer mental health and wellness needs should be seen as a component of officer safety—for officers to be physically safe, they must also be mentally healthy. With this focus on officer mental health, police leaders should also be transparent about the occasional need for an FFDE.

It is important to note that the authors are advocating for the use of the FFDE only when the lawful threshold has been met to do so. To refer an officer for an FFDE when that threshold has not been met would violate the rights of the subject officer and expose the agency to civil liability. Readers are encouraged to review the guidelines published by the Police Psychological Services Section of the International Association of Chiefs of Police; these guidelines were created to help both police agencies who may need to refer an officer for an FFDE and the examiners who conduct FFDEs.³ While these guidelines can help agencies understand the FFDE process, there is no substitute for consulting with a competent police psychologist when an officer's fitness for duty is called into question.



In addition to ensuring that the lawful threshold for ordering the FFDE is met, agencies would also be wise to heed the aforementioned guidelines when it comes to the selection of an examiner. Specifically, the guidelines enumerate several considerations regarding the qualifications and competence of the examiner. Having the FFDE serve as an

effective component of an officer wellness program means using a competent examiner who is experienced at working with the law enforcement community. Failure to utilize a competent FFDE examiner would be akin to seeking treatment

from a proctologist for a heart condition.

Understanding FFDE Goals and Outcomes

There are two primary goals of the FFDE. First, the examiner must determine whether a psychological condition or impairment exists that may render the officer unable to safely or effectively perform his or her duties. When the answer to this question is no, the officer must be declared psychologically fit for duty. If the answer to the above question is yes, however, and if the officer is seen as psychologically unfit for duty, then the next logical question to be answered is whether the officer can likely be restored to duty in a reasonable period of time. Laws and standards will vary by state or country, but in the authors' experience (in the state of New Jersey), "reasonable" has been determined to be one year. If the examiner believes that the officer can likely be restored to duty, then that examiner should articulate a recommended course of action so the officer can take the necessary steps to try and be restored to duty. The most common recommendations made are a course of individual counseling or a stay at a rehabilitation facility (the latter is typically recommended for substance abuse); in more serious cases, an officer may be referred to an inpatient mental health unit. Agencies would also be wise to consider how much money, time, and energy they have invested in the subject officer; thus, if a subject officer can be restored to a duty status, then the agency should support those efforts. However, if the examiner does not believe that the officer can be restored to duty in a reasonable period of time, then this opinion should be clearly articulated; this is the "worst-case scenario" outcome referenced earlier, which will likely lead to a voluntary or involuntary disability retirement for the officer.

It is important to note that one of the more difficult tasks related to an FFDE is identifying when an officer may be in need of assistance. The culture of stoicism in policing, coupled with the stigma that persists regarding seeking mental health

treatment, contributes to police officers masking their struggles or failing to disclose them to trusted colleagues and friends. Perhaps one of the most difficult things for a police officer to admit is that he or she cannot do the job right now (or, potentially, ever again). Hence, instead of articulating their need for help, police officers sometimes engage in conduct that will make the agency remove them from service—either temporarily or permanently, depending upon the severity of the officer's actions.



Make no mistake—the FFDE is a formal assessment, and the examiner must ultimately arrive at an unequivocal opinion regarding the subject officer's fitness for duty. That said, the FFDE experience has the potential to be therapeutic and even serve as an intervention of sorts for the subject officer. The skilled examiner can maintain the objectivity necessary to complete the assessment while simultaneously assisting the officer with his or her mental health and wellness. Although the examiner is not providing any mental health treatment, the examiner can provide feedback to the officer regarding areas in need of attention. It is noteworthy that the FFDE is likely to be the first time since the pre-employment psychological evaluation that the officer has met with a psychologist for any reason. Hence, the examiner can help shape the officer's view of mental health professionals—either in a more positive or more negative manner—through his or her interactions with the officer during the FFDE.

“When an officer is

Even under the best circumstances, the FFDE remains a high-stakes situation, fraught with possible

ordered to appear for an FFDE, the agency has an opportunity to shape the experience for the officer.”

missteps. As a result, and to reduce the likelihood of any claims of differential treatment, agencies should employ consistency with regard to FFDE. This means that when an FFDE is warranted, then it should be deployed regardless of whether the subject officer is a model employee or an underperformer. It may be advisable for agencies to have policies or procedures in place regarding the FFDE. In addition, when

an officer is ordered to appear for an FFDE, the agency has an opportunity to shape the experience for the officer. By expressing that the referral is being made out of care and concern for the officer’s welfare, the agency can contribute to the officer being open to the FFDE experience and, if needed, to seeking mental health treatment. Conversely, if the officer is not told why the FFDE is being ordered, then catastrophizing is likely to set in; this, in turn, will lead the officer to be defensive and to see the FFDE as the agency’s attempt to remove him or her as opposed to trying to help.

Reconceptualizing Misconduct

In addition to thinking about the FFDE in new ways, the authors also advocate that agencies reconceptualize poor work performance or officer misconduct. In seeking to understand why an officer acted inappropriately, one hypothesis that should be considered is that the officer may be mentally unwell. This is an important consideration, especially if agencies are to intervene before officers engage in more serious misconduct from which they cannot return (e.g., an offense warranting termination). Egregious police misconduct often does not

occur out of thin air; said another way, good officers typically do not just “snap.” Rather, officers who engage in misconduct have typically been on a downward trajectory. There may have been small, but noticeable changes in their work performance, including but not limited to lateness; decreased productivity; diminished engagement with colleagues, the agency, and the community being served; and problematic interactions with colleagues or members of the public. Beyond the challenging and stressful nature of police work, officers may be dealing with multiple stressors in their personal lives (e.g., financial stress associated with living above their means and relying on excessive overtime to compensate; marital strain, infidelity, and separation or divorce; child custody) and engage in maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., substance misuse, social withdrawal or avoidance of social supports, not engaging in therapy). To draw a parallel from the threat assessment vernacular, these officers are on the “pathway” to misconduct; if agencies can identify the “leakage” that emerges when they are on that path, then hopefully the FFDE (or other interventions) can be used to intercede and prevent the officer from heading down a path of self-destruction.

Changing Perceptions

IACP RESOURCES

[Psychological
Fitness-for-Duty
Evaluation
Guidelines](#)

[theIACP.org](https://www.theIACP.org)

Changing the perceptions about FFDE takes time and energy, but it is possible. In New Jersey, the Office of the Attorney General developed and implemented a new internal affairs training for the entire state; included in this training was a block focused specifically on FFDEs with the goal of helping people see the FFDE as a useful tool for saving officers’ careers and lives. For efficient

[“The Role of Psychological Fitness-for-Duty Evaluations in Law Enforcement”](#)

(article)

[“Chief’s Counsel: Selection of Professionals for Fitness-for-Duty Evaluations”](#)

(column)

dissemination, instruction was provided using master trainers and a train-the-trainer model. For each block, the master trainers had content area expertise. In the FFDE area, this included a police psychologist and an assistant prosecutor from one of the county prosecutor’s offices who had experience with FFDEs and issues pertaining to the disarming and rearming of police officers. Any training on FFDEs should always be conducted by content area experts who are steeped in FFDEs.

In conclusion, the FFDE has the potential to be a useful component in

an agency’s focus on officer mental health and wellness, and police leaders must lead the way for the understanding of this tool, along with the overall importance of officer mental health. Making and keeping officer mental health as a critical component of the agency culture, including FFDEs when needed, can help more officers thrive—instead of just survive—throughout their police careers and beyond.

Notes:

¹Lewis Z. Schlosser and Andrew A. Kudrick, “You Have to See the Psych’—Reducing the Stigma of Seeking Mental Health Treatment among Police Personnel,” *Police Chief* 86, no.5 (May 2019): 50–56.

²Lewis Z. Schlosser and Matthew E. Guller, “Unfit and Unfixable: A Closer Look at Officers Found Unfit for Duty with Little Chance of Recovery,” *The New Jersey Police*

Chief Magazine 22, no. 3 (March 2017): 11–13.

³IACP Police Psychological Services Section, “Psychological Fitness-for-Duty Evaluation Guidelines” (ratified at IACP 2018, Orlando, Florida).



Lewis Z. Schlosser, PhD, ABPP, is the managing partner at the Institute for Forensic Psychology, a licensed psychologist, and the chair of the IACP Psychological Services Section. He is board-certified in Police and Public Safety Psychology and Counseling Psychology, and he has conducted more than 10,000 law enforcement psychological evaluations.



Andrew A. Kudrick Jr. is a 27-year veteran of the Howell Township Police Department in New Jersey. During his tenure as chief, he has instituted programs within the department to increase employee mental and physical health. He currently serves as the president of the Monmouth County Police Chiefs Association.

Please cite as

Lewis Z. Schlosser and Andrew A. Kudrick Jr., "Psychological Fitness-for-Duty Evaluations," *Police Chief* 88, no.5 (May 2021): 54–57.

Share this article with anyone using the following URL:

<https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/psychological-fitness-for-duty-evaluations/?ref=b0371a1c635a8dabd9299f04212f3aa9>



The *Police Chief* is the official publication of the **International Association of Chiefs of Police**.

All contents © 2003–2021 International Association of Chiefs of Police. All Rights Reserved.

Copyright and Trademark Notice | Member and Non-Member Supplied

Information | Links Policy

44 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 200, Alexandria, VA USA 22314 | 703.836.6767 or
1.800.THE IACP

Designed and Built by Matrix Group International, Inc.®