



Safeguard and Mandatory Mental Health Check Programs: Review and Recommendations

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What Is Safeguard?

Safeguard programs involve the systematic application of proactive, mandatory mental health checks for public safety personnel for those that experience routine exposure to traumatic content in the course of their assigned duties. Though there is no consistent definition or framework in place for Safeguard, programs across the country most often consist of the following components:

- 1) Mandatory attendance for all members in designated sections within the police service
- 2) Designated sections are selected based on perceived frequency and intensity of exposure to potentially psychologically traumatic situations or other work-related stressors or content that exceed regular policing experiences
- 3) Delivered at regular, predetermined intervals
- 4) Provided by a mental health professional, most often a clinical psychologist
- 5) Codified in procedure and job descriptions for roles within the designated units

In contrast to fitness for duty assessments, which are reactive and focused on a particular issue, Safeguard sessions are proactive and aimed more broadly at reducing stigma, building self-awareness of personal signs of stress and coping strategies, and increasing willingness to seek out help when dealing with a mental health concern.

Is Safeguard Effective?

Due to the lack of a consistent framework for Safeguard and the limited number of studies on these programs to date, not much is known about the degree to which Safeguard impacts the mental health of public safety personnel.

However, there is evidence that the commonly used components of Safeguard programs are associated with positive mental health outcomes. For example, studies have suggested that making mental health counselling mandatory increased self-reported wellness among police members (Tanigoshi, Kontos, & Remley, 2008), that routine mental health monitoring is associated with lower self-reported severity of mental health symptoms (Shields et al., 2023), and that mandatory annual wellness checks among US military personnel improved help-seeking, increased self-reported resilience, and decreased stigma related career concerns (Adler, Bliese, Allard, & Sharp, 2023).

Should Police Services Implement Safeguard?

Safeguard programs should be considered one piece of a comprehensive mental health strategy for police services and should only be implemented if it fits with the unique needs, resources, and stage of development for a given service. If a Safeguard program is being considered, the balance of evidence suggests that the program should include the following:

- 1) Mandatory attendance for all members in the designated section, though the level of participation in and content of the session is driven by the member
- 2) Delivered at predetermined intervals, typically once annually
- 3) Confidential sessions that are delivered by a licensed mental health clinician with cultural competence in working with first responders
- 4) Only the member's attendance at the session reported back to the service and clear guidelines about how information is protected need to be explicit at the onset
- 5) Involves a self-monitoring component using open-source, free measures that the member completes between Safeguard appointments
- 6) Contains program evaluation and feedback mechanisms to monitor effectiveness

What Are The Next Steps?

Relying on these general principles when building a Safeguard program will help to establish a consistent framework for how these programs are delivered across Canada. As more police services adopt the same approach, researchers will be better able to measure the impact this program may have on key mental health outcomes.

References

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