



CITY HALL NEWS CHICAGO

Proposal would provide benefits to spouses of police officers, other first responders who die by suicide

The push for the suicide benefits ordinance, which would be retroactive to Jan. 1, 2018, included pleas from two women whose husbands took their own lives after serving a combined 30 years on the Chicago Police Department.

By Fran Spielman | Apr 26, 2022, 6:10pm CDT



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In July 2020, after a Chicago police officer committed suicide inside the department's Homan Square facility, CPD vehicles lined up to begin a procession to the Cook County medical examiner's office. | Manny Ramos/Sun-Times

Surviving spouses of Chicago police officers who die by suicide would receive the same financial benefits afforded to families of officers killed in the line of duty, under a proposed ordinance that already has drawn support from the entire City Council and Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

Ald. Matt O'Shea (19th) represents a Far Southwest Side ward that is home to scores of Chicago police officers, firefighters and paramedics.

He is among the council's most outspoken champions for those first responders at a time when Chicago Police Department officers are retiring faster than the city can hire replacements.

Now, O'Shea has devised a way to demonstrate to police officers who feel demoralized, overworked and unsupported that the city does, in fact, appreciate the daily traumas they endure.

With backing from all 49 of his colleagues, O'Shea plans to introduce an ordinance that would extend to the spouses of police officers, firefighters and paramedics who die by suicide the same survivors' benefits afforded to the husbands and wives of those who die in the line of duty or have taken their own lives over the past five years.

That is one year's salary and access to a fund that could provide anywhere from \$20,000 to \$40,000 for family health care, education and other permitted expenses.

O'Shea noted that, in recent years, 25% of the 632 law enforcement deaths across the country have been suicides. Over the last two years, suicide was the second-leading cause of death, next to COVID-19. In Chicago alone, 13 first responders have taken their own lives over the past five years.

"It's only right that government steps in to provide some assistance for the families left behind," said O'Shea, whose ward was home to Chicago Police Sgt. Edward Dougherty, who took his own life last month.

"We have failed our first responders — as a community, as elected officials and as a government — given what they've endured over the last few years and what they see

day in and day out. You can't just turn a switch off when you leave work. The scenes they drive up on. The tragedies they witness up close. We need to do more to support them. They need to know we care. ... Hopefully, this legislation will be part of a larger conversation.”

Alexa James, CEO of the National Alliance on Mental Illness Chicago (NAMI), said O'Shea is showing “tremendous leadership” by implementing a “policy to help surround and heal grieving families” of officers who take their own lives.

“A lot of people go away from families after they've lost somebody and they're left with a tremendous amount of financial strain,” James said.

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Asked why she believes police officers in Chicago and nationally are taking their own lives at alarming rates, James noted hopelessness — not mental illness — is “the main indicator” of suicide.

“It's when people do not think it's gonna get better. The context of our world, the context of policing has really exacerbated that narrative for many,” she said.

“The burden of the job and also personal factors — domestic issues, financial — coupled with high, high rates of unsteadiness in the workplace, trauma that they are experiencing and history of their own challenges is, unfortunately this perfect recipe for people feeling hopelessness.”

Last fall, Chicago Police Supt. David Brown lobbied the mayor to increase the once-paltry number of counselors assigned to assist troubled and traumatized officers.

Lightfoot obliged by including enough funding in her 2022 budget to hire 11 more mental health counselors — more than double the 10 currently on staff at CPD.

But James said the department has had trouble filling those new positions, as

required by the federal consent decree.

“It’s hard to recruit talent with the specialized needs of police officers,” James said, arguing that a salary that’s now “in the high 70s” might need to be raised.

Former federal prosecutor Patrick Collins worked behind the scenes to convince O’Shea to introduce the suicide benefits ordinance retroactive to Jan. 1, 2018.

Collins represents Anastasia “Stacy” Escamilla and Julie Troglia. Their husbands, Paul Escamilla and Jeffrey Troglia, took their own lives. They had 30 years of service between them.

After considering filing a lawsuit against the city, the widows decided instead to try and “change the system,” Collins said.

“It’s not a gazillion dollars. It’s modest, short-term financial benefits from the city. It’s the least that we could do to both honor the service that their loved one provided, but also to at least get them through this extraordinarily difficult time when their spouse doesn’t come home,” Collins said.

“In the case of the two people I represent, there really wasn’t a warning that this was gonna happen. That made it that much more difficult.”

In a letter to Lightfoot and Brown last summer, Collins argued that “from insurance issues to worries about financing higher education,” both widows are forced to live with a “daily, unsettling financial reality,” adding: “Based on the dedicated service of their husbands to our great city, neither Stacy nor Julie should have to face this daily, unceasing financial turmoil.”

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