

Grand Ronde police joining Polk County support effort

By Brent Merrill

Smoke Signals staff writer

Grand Ronde Police Lt. Tim Hernandez will participate in the Polk County Sheriff's Office's soon-to-be formed peer support group for officers involved in police shootings.

Hernandez, who was recently promoted to lieutenant in the Tribe's seven-man department, was tapped by Tribal Police Chief Jake McKnight to join Polk County's new program.

McKnight said he chose Hernandez based on Hernandez's previous experience with the major incident task force in Deschutes County.

"He's got the most experience and he's just a good guy," McKnight said. "He's really articulate and he cares. I just think he will be a good fit for the position."

Hernandez, who was the past vice president and president of the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office Employee Association, spent seven years in Central Oregon as a criminal detective primarily investigating deaths before joining the department in Grand Ronde.

"Those emotions and things you go through and the things you don't talk about like suicides and things like that – having that experience is helpful to be able to mentor somebody and tell them it's OK to feel the way you're feeling and it's OK to talk about it," Hernandez said. "More importantly, what the sheriff is doing is really, really important just so those guys know that there is somebody out there that is part of a peer group that you can reach out to."

Hernandez said his past experience took him to many crime scenes and that there is a bond between officers who have been involved in traumatic events.

"I've investigated a lot of officer-involved shootings so you know the emotions and the things the guys go through when they go through a critical incident," Hernandez said. "Having a familiar face that goes through and helps you go through the process. It's easier to tell someone how I feel than tell somebody who won't understand or maybe they think I'm weak. It's a lot easier to talk to somebody who has been through something like that."

Tribal Emergency Operations Coordinator Steve Warden agreed that Hernandez is the right person for the job.

"There is a guy who cares about where he's at and the people who he works with," Warden said. "He has years of experience under his belt and he is really into making sure that things get done right. I think he'll be a real benefit to the program."

Polk County Sheriff Mark Garton said the idea for the peer support team began after two officer-involved shootings in the local area last year got everyone's attention.

"We've had two officer-involved shootings in the last seven months – one for Dallas and one for my agency," Garton said. "The police chiefs and myself started talking about how we can help our own folks because we utilized the tra-



Lt. Tim Hernandez

"We thought let's address this as a county so all the chiefs and I figured out that we want to go forward with this so we've had a couple of meetings about planning how to build a team."

On July 5, 2016, 29 year-old Joshua Bolster of Salem was shot and killed by a Polk County deputy near Doaks Ferry Road. The deputy was cleared by a Polk County jury one month later.

On Dec. 16, 2016, Jeremiah Anderson of Dallas was shot and killed in the Walmart parking lot in Dallas by responding officers after Anderson allegedly resisted arrest for drunken driving.

Garton said the Polk County Sheriff's Office will supervise the team and that each area police agency will send a representative to be a team leader.

In an article written by retired Lane County Sheriff's Office Lt. Dell Hackett, he said officers have always confided in each other when they faced tough times.

Hackett, who graduated from the FBI National Academy and worked in the Police Services Division during his career, wrote that the idea for peer support teams found its genesis from police officers gravitating to other officers on the force who were natural listeners and good communicators.

"It is no secret that our profession is wrought with emotional turmoil," Hackett wrote. "Critical incident exposure, cumulative stress, organizational stress, family and relationship difficulties can all seem overwhelming at times."

Hackett, who was a board certified expert in traumatic stress, said that in Oregon communications and information gathered during officer peer counseling sessions is now privileged information protected by law.

Garton said officers involved in the peer support team will undergo training to help them prepare for the issues they will face in supporting their fellow officers who have been involved in crisis situations.

Garton has tasked Polk County Sgt. Todd Fink with heading up the peer support team.

"He has the right temperament and truly the right mentality of wanting to help take care of people," Garton said. "Todd can really talk to anybody and calm them down. He's a good people person and he interacts well with people

from Marion County at the Dallas shooting. We called for their help and they came over and helped our guys.

he doesn't know. He's that guy that wants to take care of our fellow deputies. He has a good perspective.

"It takes a special person to be that peer support person. It has to be the right person – not everybody can do it. The team leaders will find the right people within their organization that they think would be good at listening and helping in that way. The mission will be the same for all of us."

Lane County Sheriff's Office Sgt. Greg Rice oversees the peer support team in his department in Eugene and he said the key to making the peer support concept work is the language in state law that makes information gathered during peer support sessions confidential.

"The ORS gives the support team some protection," Rice said. "If a

department has a team then the communications between staff and that person is confidential. That is huge for us because that enables the staff to feel comfortable talking to the peer support team."

Warden said he has only had to pull the trigger on his weapon once during his law enforcement

career and it still haunts him.

Warden had received a call about a burglary and hostage situation near Sheridan early in his career. When he arrived on scene he saw a young man pointing a handgun at him after already shooting a man and firing the gun at joggers.

"He saw me and I jumped out with the shotgun," Warden recalled. "He turned and I could see him squeezing the trigger so I squeezed the trigger on the shotgun and nothing happened and nothing happened on his end of it. He threw the gun away and I racked another round in it and came down on him and told him to freeze and he did."

To Warden's surprise the shooter turned out to be an 11-year-old boy with a history of problems greater than his age.

"He was a kid," Warden said. "It had an impact. Even though the

guns didn't go off, it had an impact. When I retrieved his handgun it was a revolver and it had three dented primers on rounds that didn't go off. I figure those are the ones he was squeezing off at me."

Warden said he still has nightmares about that moment.

"Just pulling the trigger is a tough deal," Warden said. "That set me back quite a ways. I don't talk about it to anybody. I've just gotten to the point recently where I think it's important to share those feelings."

Warden said he found help through a state-sponsored program that helped him deal with the aftermath of the near shooting incident.

"That was really helpful because I got to listen to a lot of other people tell their stories and we discussed a lot of the same feelings of not wanting to be in that position again," Warden said. "Hopefully it (finally talking about his feelings) helps others realize they have to be prepared all the time."

Warden said he is glad Polk County is beginning this program to support officers at such a critical point.

"Having peer support groups is a real important thing," Warden said. "To have that support group there, I think that's huge."

Incidents like those mentioned by Garton are happening closer and closer to Grand Ronde and they led McKnight to ask Hernandez to get involved with the peer support team.

"The biggest thing is I agree with the other chiefs and the sheriff that it is important that you have that support there as soon as possible," McKnight said. "You know I've never been through anything like that. I can't imagine what they are thinking or what's going on in your head when you go through something like that. The more stress you can take away from them the best."

"Unfortunately, slowly but surely, surrounding Grand Ronde the county has been involved in a lot of shootings. Yamhill County has been involved, Lincoln City has been involved. It's just a matter of time unfortunately that something will probably occur here. When it does I want to make sure I have all my ducks in a row and that my guys know they are going to be supported and that we will take care of them like a family." ■

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~ Tribal Emergency Operations Coordinator Steve Warden



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