

Counselling Services for Police Officers with Unmanageable Debts

A multi-modal and multi-pronged approach has been adopted by the Force to prevent, manage and assist police officers with unmanageable debts, and the provision of counselling services is one important element of the whole range of work done by the Force. To present a holistic picture of the issue, apart from counselling services, other important aspects of the work done by the Force in this respect are also set out below.

Prevention

2. The Administrative Instructions on the Management of Police Indebtedness, which provide guidelines for officers at various levels to promote financial prudence, and identify and manage indebted officers, have been issued by the Commissioner of Police since 1994. Apart from regularly reviewing the guidelines, the Force Management also monitors closely the situation of indebtedness by conducting regular surveys on officers having unmanageable debts. Performances of these officers are closely supervised and where applicable, postings may have to be restricted.

3. The importance of prudent management of personal finance is a subject covered in various stages of training for police officers at all levels. In particular, management of personal finance has recently been included as a subject in the training syllabus for Recruit Police Constables, and thematic seminars on financial management are also organised regularly for Force members and their families. Moreover, briefing sessions are regularly held to further instil the culture of prudent personal financial management for senior Recruit Police Constable squads, Probationary Inspectors, Sergeants and Station Sergeants. In these briefings, the supervisory role of the senior officers in early identification and management of police indebtedness is highlighted.

4. At a more general level, various publicity campaigns aiming at reminding officers of the adverse effect of gambling and promoting the physical and mental health of officers are also lodged.

Assistance to Indebted Police Officers

5. On the actual assistance to indebted officers, a one-stop hotline service manned by Force Welfare Officers, providing access to information on

indebtedness-related subjects, is available for officers. Officers can choose to remain anonymous when seeking help. Debt/loan rescheduling arrangement with low interest rate is also available for needy officers since 2003.

Counselling Services available/offered to officers with unmanageable debts

6. Bearing in mind the need of officers with unmanageable debts, at Police District and Regional levels, all supervisory officers performs a 'gatekeeper' role in providing positive influence to these officers. In particular, the Training & Staff Relations Officers, as well as Divisional Commanders (at Superintendent level), would interview the officers concerned on a regular basis.

7. At the Headquarters level, apart from manning the financial helpline mentioned in paragraph 5 above, Force Welfare Officers provide counselling services to officers who have newly emerged as having unmanageable debts, and as well as officers seeking information on matters relating to debt rescheduling, bankruptcy/Individual Voluntary Arrangements, discipline, conditions of service and the Force policy on the management of officers with unmanageable debts.

8. General stress relief is also available through provision of regular stress management workshops for officers in financial plight. The Psychological Service Group in the Force Headquarters, with five police clinical psychologists, runs special workshops for officers with unmanageable debts to provide group and peer support services for better stress management. A total of 40 such stress management workshops had been organised between 1996 and 2006 with a total of 468 officers having attended.

9. To further help alleviate and reduce the stress faced by officers who might be at financial risk, a pilot one-day voluntary stress management workshop has been planned. Officers attending this workshop would again remain anonymous. If proven successful, more such courses would be arranged.

10. Personal counselling services with a special view to improving personal stress management and warding off undesirable habits are also available through the Psychological Service Group on a voluntary basis or on referral by Force Welfare Officers. The number of officers with financial

problems seeking help directly from the Psychological Service Group was 17 in 2003, 7 in 2004, 10 in 2005 and 3 in the first half of 2006.

11. Having regard to the changing need of officers and prevailing circumstances, the Force would review the mode and emphasis of the counselling services provided to officers from time to time to identify possible areas for improvement. The last comprehensive review was conducted in 2003, with a thorough review of the strategy of the Psychological Service Group and service priorities. One of the major changes has been the re-direction of counselling services for family members to Welfare Officers and other external agencies, so that resources of the Psychological Service Group can be focused more on the counselling demands of Police officers and the provision of enhanced services to them. In light of the recent incidents involving police officers having emotional problems, further reviews will be conducted. The strict adherence to confidentiality according to the highest professional ethics of the Police Clinical Psychologists will never be compromised, and such counselling will continue to be provided outside Police premises. Help-seeking either from internal or external sources is being encouraged, reinforcing the caring culture of the Force.

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