Chaplain has helped deputies for 25 years

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It's a job defined by hours of boredom, shots of adrenaline, tedious paperwork and blood-spattered pavement.

A trooper or deputy starting his tour of duty has no idea what the next 12 hours hold or even whether he'll be alive at the end of the shift.

It's stressful, to say the least, and that's why Ken Gross is here.

As chaplain for the Richmond County Sheriff's Office and several other local agencies, Gross is the on-call counselor when tragedy strikes.

But during his more than 25 years on the job, Gross, 70, has found it's often not a single event as much as the daily grind that erodes a deputy's well-being.

Most studies agree that law enforcement officers have higher rates of divorce and suicide. The likely culprits are long hours and odd shifts that rob a family of precious time together. Years of witnessing violence inflicted on children, bloody homicides and grisly car wrecks chip away at mental health.

But even on an "uneventful" shift, deputies are under constant pressure to show restraint. They cannot berate the mother who left her baby alone for hours or throttle the suspect baiting them on the way to jail. Maintaining calm wears down the mind, Gross said.

That's why you'll find Gross at the scene of a line of duty death and at a substation or headquarters during the roll call before shift change. His job is all about availability.

"I'm here to serve those who serve," he said.

Gross also teaches classes on ethics at several area institutions to prepare recruits and state patrol cadets for the challenges they can expect on the road. Bribes are an obvious no-no, but he also addresses issues such as prejudices and how to avoid profiling.

"These are ordinary humans faced with extraordinary temptations," Gross explained.

He prepares new officers for the possibility they will have to fatally shoot a suspect.

A common question is: "Will I go to hell if I kill someone?" Not from Gross' perspective. The Bible teaches "Thou shalt not kill," but when a suspect points a gun at a deputy or someone she is sworn to protect, then the suspect gives up his right to live, Gross said.

"And if the deputy doesn't respond, he gives up his right to live," Gross added.

Gross has discovered that troopers who grasp this concept in training usually have an easier time of handling the mental trauma that goes with a fatal shooting.

The chaplain job is demanding and Gross volunteers for it 24/7. A supportive wife makes it easier, along with knowing that he's steered deputies away from divorce and suicide.

There have been between 300 and 400 law enforcement suicides a year since 1997, or one every 17 hours, according to research gathered by the National Police Suicide Foundation.

Gross doesn't push religion as a rule, because he doesn't want to drive deputies away. But he does encourage deputies to take a "spiritual inventory" of their life. Deputies are most inclined to listen to spiritual matters after a tragic event, but often it's newly retired deputies with time on their hands who start to contemplate their mortality.

The average age of death for a retired law enforcement officer is 57, according to the National Police Suicide Foundation.

Whether it's a soul-searching conversation or a simple prayer request for an ailing grandfather, Gross is on hand to listen.

"We are surrounded by broken-hearted people," he said.