

An Organization Emerges (V.I.P.O.) to Educate and Advocate for Permanently Injured Police Officers

By Mario Oliveira, NESPIN Field Representative, Metro Boston and Cape

Through my work with the New England State Police Information Network (NESPIN), I have been fortunate to be able to speak to numerous police officers about an issue that is deeply personal to me and has the potential to impact each and every one of them.

With NESPIN's support, I've been traveling around New England sharing my personal story on behalf of the *Violently Injured Police Officer's Organization (VIPO)*. I have had occasion to witness first-hand how police unions and police chiefs have come together in an unprecedented show of unity and collaboration around a critical issue: Having a plan to take care of officers who are severely injured in the line of duty and are forced to cut their careers short.

On Nov, 2, 2010, while serving an arrest warrant with agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), I was shot six times at point blank range by a gun trafficker who we were trying to place in custody for an outstanding warrant. I literally died on the operating table before being brought back to life by my skilled surgeons and have been battling significant on-going health problems and hospital stints ever since.

Nearly as difficult, however, is the internal battle I find myself struggling with each and every day since coming to the realization that things might have been easier for my family in the long run had I not survived my ordeal.

Imagine you are a police officer who was critically shot while responding to a call of an armed robbery in progress at a local bank. If you die, your

spouse is automatically entitled to a one-time federal and state tax free payment totaling over \$600,000 plus your base pay (tax free) for the rest of their life. Plus, there are also several other programs that forgive property taxes. In addition, your kids will get free college tuition to a state college (comparable to UMASS) and will also be placed at the top of any entry level civil service list (402A status) to potentially follow in your footsteps as a police officer.

However, if you respond to that same type of call under similar circumstances and are lucky enough to survive the tragic event, but sustain devastating and career-ending injuries, you are only entitled to 72 percent of your base pay for the rest of your life with no additional benefits for your spouse and children. What's worse, the process of trying to collect on that 72 percent is incredibly difficult, time-consuming, and leaves the officer feeling ashamed as they oftentimes face an adversarial city or town government and the burden of proving that their injuries, even gunshots, are job related and require you to leave the job you love.

Quite frankly that should never happen. It's always upsetting to me when I have occasion to break that



Continued on Page 5

news to police officers who have no idea what kind of battle they would be in for if, God forbid, they ever had to experience a similar situation.

I am extraordinarily grateful to NESPIN for allowing me to take this message to so many in law enforcement. Their support has enabled my VIPO partner, **Bob DeNapoli**, a retired police officer from Woburn Police Department, who also suffered career ending injuries after being shot multiple times, and I to educate police officers and build a unified base among unions and police chiefs.

There is an important bill currently pending before the Massachusetts Legislature that would significantly improve the benefits and also streamline the existing complicated process for injured officers who suffer career ending injuries as the result of a violent attack. The fight for this bill's passage has placed both rank-and-file police labor unions and police chiefs alike on the front line on the same side of the aisle. I could not be prouder than to watch both labor and management come together in a unified manner and put aside any potential administrative differences for the common good and well-being of all police officers in our state. I feel compelled to single out both **Chelsea Police Chief Brian Kyes** and **Bedford Police Chief Robert Bongiorno** representing all the Massachusetts Police Chiefs for their unyielding dedication and commitment to this effort. This was on full display when they testified in front of the Senate Public Service Committee on Beacon Hill alongside **Bob DeNapoli** and myself and advocated for more financial support for critically wounded officers and their families.

Beyond backing me as I travel throughout Eastern Massachusetts educating police officers about this hugely important issue, NESPIN has also dedicated resources to make a model line of duty injury policy available to all departments so that officers never feel alone in navigating the fallout from a career-ending injury. That battle is one I had to fight on my own, but VIPO and NESPIN are working together to ensure that police officers don't have to grapple with these issues after suffering life-altering injuries.

