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Justice/Mental Health

Putting police in the picture

Dooley, Danette

A Senate committee reviewing mental-health services across the country has finally recognized the important role that police officers play in the process

While the names Norman Reid and Darryl Power will forever be linked to their untimely deaths, for police officers like Sean Ryan, their names bring to mind the tragedy of inadequate mental-health services.

Reid and Power were both shot by police in separate standoffs five years ago.

Ryan, an RNC inspector, was one of three police officers in Ottawa last month to speak before the Senate of Canada on the role of law enforcement in dealing with the mentally ill.

The Senate is conducting a review of mental illness and mental health systems in Canada.

Ryan, along with Moose Jaw Police Chief Terry Coleman and Agent Michael Arruda of the Service de Police de la Ville de Montreal, recently sat on a panel before the Standing Senate Committee on Social Issues, Science and Technology.

The trio were representing the Canadian National Committee for Police/Mental Health Liaison (CNCPMHL), a sub-committee of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police . The committee, composed jointly of police officers and mental-health professionals, provides information, contacts and support to police officers in their work with mentally ill individuals.

The CNCPMHL's presentation to the Senate sub-committee was entitled Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction: Issues and Options for Canada.

Formed four years ago, CNCPMHL works to ensure individuals who suffer from mental illnesses are not "criminalized," but rather are directed toward the system where they'll get the help they need.

Sadly, once an individual becomes detained under the Mental Health Act (MHA), they are in police custody whether or not they've committed a crime.

"We were always willing to help, but never had a facility where we could take people, with the exception of emergency rooms where physiological illnesses would take priority," Ryan says.

"And then it became an issue whereas opposed to us helping people, by virtue of our mere presence, we were a contributing factor to their crisis, which was wrong, horribly, wrong," he adds.

In some cases, because of a lack of facilities for mentally ill individuals, in the past, police would take them to the city lockup where they would be evaluated by an on-call psychiatrist.

Individuals now apprehended under the MHA in the St. John's area are taken to a short-stay psychiatric unit at the Waterford Hospital rather than the lockup.

Ryan says police forces across the country have come to understand the need to train officers so that they appropriately handle people with common mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and depression.

CNCPMHL annual conferences to address these and other concerns regarding the care of the mentally ill have attracted officers from Ireland, England, Australia and other parts of the world.

"This helps us to adopt best practices and to look beyond our own backyards to see how police forces worldwide deal with the mentally ill," Ryan says.

The notoriety brought to the police in this province in regards

to their dealings with the mentally ill was the direct result of the shooting deaths of Norman Reid of Little Catalina and Darryl Power of Corner Brook, who were both shot by police in 2000.

As one of the leaders of CNCPMHL, Ryan works with others to strengthen partnerships between correctional facilities, mental-health facilities and the police. Other issues on its agenda are research and data-collection mechanisms to support the development of best practices, promoting the need for effective mental-health legislation as well as less lethal use-of-force tools.

"Our national group gives police an opportunity to address less lethal options, which was an issue with Judge (Donald) Luther, who very eloquently and articulately addressed the necessity for continual analysis of whatever else is out there to reduce issues without a fatality," Ryan says.

Ryan says Luther's judicial inquiry into the Reid/Power deaths was extremely valuable in bringing numerous issues to the forefront.

"We learned a lot from other provinces, as well, with some of the experiences they went through. And the inquiry put the entire health-care system under a microscope to see how all respond to mentally ill individuals."

Geoff Chaulk heads the provincial branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). Chaulk agrees with Ryan that many positive recommendations came from the inquiry into the two tragic deaths.

"Judge Luther talks about enhancing the community support system, and that's where things fell down for people like Norman Reid and Darryl Power where they were, perhaps, not as well connected to supports within the community."

Chaulk says that while, in his report, Luther talks about reforming the MHA (which is the oldest such act in Canada), he feels that if there was a well-established community mental-health structure, officials might be less reliant on the act.

As a result of the recommendations of the Luther inquiry, CMHA is now piloting an educational program called Changing Minds. The eight-module training package looks at living with such illnesses as anxiety, depression and psychosis.

"First and foremost in the program are mental-health consumers who tell their stories on video. Learning from such first-hand accounts is what makes the program so powerful," Chaulk says.

"They are telling their story and their experience. So people get to hear a bit about that and learn about the experience and hear and learn about better ways to potentially understand and communicate," Chaulk says.

As well as helping to steer the project, the RNC ensures that its new recruits receive the Changing Minds training before they hit the streets.

"It's our hope and our expectation that we'll be training the entire (police) membership as we go," Chaulk says.

"So the RNC, in my opinion, has very much bought into this training program."

Chaulk says in addition to the province's police officers, the training should apply to any individuals that work in a frontline setting, such as ambulance attendants, emergency department personnel, firefighters and home-care workers.

Dr. Dorothy Cotton is co-chairwoman of CNCPMHL. Ryan describes her as "the patron saint of police mental-health liaison and the driving force behind the issue in the country."

Cotton serves as neuropsychology consultant with Correctional Service Canada (Ontario Region), maintains a private consultation service, speaks to a wide range of professional and community groups, and writes columns including her syndicated newspaper column entitled Kitchen Sink Psychology and a column for police officers in Blue Line national police magazine.

Cotton says she understands the dynamics police officers

face when dealing with the mentally ill.

Like it or not, she says, police are the front extension of the mental-health system. They respond to calls for help 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Cotton writes in her soon-to-be-published monthly police column:

"When someone in the community is acting oddly and the public feels uneasy, it is not the local hospital they phone. When their son with schizophrenia threatens to burn down the house to rid it of demons, they don't phone the fire department. When someone thinks there are aliens invading their apartment, they don't phone the exterminator. When an eccentric woman living under a bridge is beaten and has her blanket and shopping cart stolen, it is not her lawyer who comes to her aid. When life no longer seems like living and an adolescent is perched atop that bridge, it is not the school guidance counsellor who talks him down."

In all these cases, she says, it's police who are called and the police who respond.

As part of its nation-wide visit, Senator Michael Kirby and his group will be in this province in June to hear from other stakeholders, as well as mental-health consumers.

In his presentation to the Senate committee, Ryan suggested that a national response strategy to dealing with the mentally ill should be established.

"One pervasive theme that emerged from the comments of all three panelists was the need simply to be at the table. Until and unless mental-health systems see the police as collaborators and colleagues, the problems will not go away," Cotton says.

Ryan also recommended to the Senate committee that the government establish a centralized repository where data from police agencies that have been involved with people suffering from mental illness could be collected throughout the country. Once collected, it could be analysed to see if

there are trends to be shared with various agencies. Ryan says such a data collection system could serve two purposes.

"We recommended that there be a pocket of funding made available to that centralized group that could then disburse funding to law enforcement agencies and corrections for research to assist with the development of better programs and approaches in dealing with the mentally ill."

Ryan says the government should also provide funding for national educational training for both police and health-care workers, while launching a public education campaign designed to decrease the stigma and fear attached to those suffering from mental illness.

That stigma is something Ryan has first-hand knowledge of, not only as a cop but closer to home, where he's witnessed the lack of services for a mentally ill relative.

Ryan says support must also be given to police and health-care professionals to break down the bureaucracy and regulatory barriers on both sides in relation to information sharing.

Jails as asylums

Asked to comment on Ryan's presentation, Senator Michael Kirby said Ryan offered some "valuable insight" into the way in which police officers deal with those suffering from mental illness.

Kirby also appreciated Ryan's corroboration of the view that "jails are becoming the asylums of the 21st century."

Ryan says police involvement with the mentally ill increased several years ago when a move was made to reintegrate individuals who had been placed in institutions back into the community.

Without the skills and supports needed to survive in such a social setting, many have ended up behind bars. This has been frustrating for the police, not to mention the stress on those not capable of caring for themselves.

"There was no consultation with law enforcement' but law enforcement became the catch basin for the lack of a social network to assist these people," he says.

Cotton says that, as Ryan pointed out to the Senate committee, education and training are not the sole answers. The problem is not so much a lack of training as it is a lack of communication and lack of co-operation.

"Insp. Ryan referred to many of the recommendations of the recent Luther report in Newfoundland that spoke of needs like interagency agreements and co-ordinated efforts and co-operation between hospitals and police services. He mentioned the need for systematic data collection and research and standardized response strategies.

"Why, he asked, could we not develop a national response strategy?"

Cotton says the fact that the CNCPMHL was even given an opportunity to speak to the Senate committee represented a new precedent.

"As the panelists pointed out, when major shifts in the mental-health systems began a decade or two ago, no one thought to talk to police services, no one anticipated the impact that would be felt by police services."

The fundamental message to the Senate, she says, was, "Let's not do that again."

"The mere fact that Chief Coleman, Insp. Ryan and Agent Arruda were invited to make submissions to this august body indicates a significant shift in the relations between the police and the mental-health system. It may be the first time that police have been invited to make a specific contribution to the planning of mental-health services in Canada."

Illustration(s):

Dooley, Danette
RNC Insp. Sean Ryan (left) recently participated in a presentation to the Standing Senate Committee on Social

Issues, Science and Technology. At right, Geoff Chaulk, provincial head of the Canadian Mental Health Association, agrees that its important for police to be involved in the mental-health equation.

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