

Councillors hear what's being done to address PTSD

By Bill Rea

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a very real concern for people in emergency services and first responders, and Peel Region is taking it very seriously.

Regional councillors last week received an update on what's being done to help staff exposed to PTSD, especially paramedics. There will be follow-up reports going to council.

Much of this was prompted by the untimely death late last month of paramedic Martin Wood. In fact, Regional Chair Frank Dale spoke a few words of tribute to Mr. Wood at the start of last week's meeting, and asked that a moment of silence be observed.

Paramedic Chief Peter Dundas and Human Resources Director Mary Killeavy delivered the presentation, with Dundas stressing that first responders are at risk for developing PTSD.

"I've had my share of really difficult situations in my 35 years," Dundas observed.

He also mentioned Mr. Wood, commenting "a small piece of me went with him that day, just like it did with every paramedic in our service."

He added the last couple of weeks have been among the toughest in his career.

Killeavy said PTSD carries a range of symptoms. Some people have flashbacks to particularly stressful incidents, with accompanying feelings of helplessness and guilt. "They worry they should have done more," she observed.

Others experience anger, loss of sleep, nightmares, and sometimes develop problems with drugs or alcohol.

She added occupational stress injuries like PTSD are complex and personal.

"Each person experiences the effects of PTSD in their own unique way," she commented, adding it can sometimes be triggered by one incident, or it can build up over time.

Dundas observed it had been about two weeks since Bell's Let's Talk Day, which prompted about 126 million calls and tweets aimed at helping to reduce the stigma of mental health, as well as increase understanding and awareness of things like PTSD. He said there are some jurisdictions that now recognize PTSD, or work-related mental illnesses as a work place injury when it involves police, firefighters or paramedics. He added the Province launched a public awareness campaign earlier this month.

"We, I, do not want to see any more tragedies," he declared.

"Prevention is key," Dundas added. "We want to minimize stress and increase support for our paramedics when it is needed, before it gets worse."

Killeavy said there had been plans to set up peer-support training for supervisors to address traumatic situations, but that has been changed to provide critical stress training. She explained they took a long look at peer-support programs available in other jurisdictions that were available in 2008. These have been grass-roots efforts with no accreditation, so it's been difficult to assess how well they have been working. Killeavy stressed the need to make sure they have a program that delivers what's needed.

"A peer support worker program is a long-term commitment," she remarked.

"As a paramedic, we learn to swallow our emotions when we're on the job," Dundas observed, "and many of the stress reactions are delayed sometimes for hours, days or even months after a traumatic incident."

He added superintendents and front-line supervisors play an important role in enabling staff to open up about what they've experienced.

"It's important to do that early, not late, in the process," he said. "PTSD can be prevented through early intervention."

"Every paramedic, including me, can remember difficult calls in vivid detail, even years and decades later," Dundas reflected. "We all have scars from these calls."

Superintendents hold early debriefings right after serious calls, and they can take a staffer off the road after a particularly traumatic incident, as Dundas pointed out too many bad calls in a row can lead to trouble.

Debriefings took place soon after the call involving Mr. Wood.

"Peel paramedics responded to that scene and found one of their own," he remarked. "We had counselling sessions set up within hours. This helped us through the moments right after that situation."

Dundas also said one-on-one counselling is available.

Disability management and accommodation are important supports when paramedics return to work after an absence, and Killeavy said benefit coverage is part of their collective agreement. That includes making \$400 per paramedic available annually for them to see a registered psychologist.

Dundas also said that like the Province, the Region is working on a communication strategy to raise awareness and reduce the stigma

associated with mental illness. Psychological health and safety skills building will be part of the Region's leadership program for supervisors, he added.

As well, he said the Region will be bringing in Road to Mental Readiness training, which will be available to all paramedics. Dundas said it was started in the Canadian Forces, and has been used by police services throughout Ontario.

‘It’s really unfortunate that it took a tragedy to sort of really focus on this,’ Caledon Councillor Annette Groves commented.

She was among several councillors who wondered \$400 per year for paramedics to see a psychologist is sufficient.

Killeavy said collective bargaining is currently going on, involving the Ontario Public Service Employees’ Union (OPSEU), and that has been discussed. She couldn’t comment further.

Groves also agreed it’s important to get rid of the stigma.

‘When someone goes for help with this issue, it’s not because they are crazy, but it’s because they are dealing with situations that are sometimes out of their control,’ she observed, adding that reality applies to all first responders, as well as doctors and nurses.

Mississauga Councillor Carolyn Parrish said her father had been a police officer who had to face some gruesome scenes. She also agreed that ‘\$400 is absolutely inadequate.’

She argued things like peer-to-peer support should not come from the bargaining process.

‘These are people who are our best front-line workers who live lives that you and I couldn’t live,’ she declared. ‘So it’s about time we took care of them.’

Caledon Mayor Allan Thompson commented there’s been a lot of investment at the Region toward helping first responders, but there’s more to do.

‘I think what really kicks us all in the teeth is losing Martin,’ he remarked. ‘Going forward, you want to make sure Martin’s our last casualty.’

Mississauga Councillor Pat Saito observed that no matter what’s done, there will always be those who slip through the cracks.

‘Unfortunately, that’s reality and that’s life,’ she said.

She also agreed that \$400 is not sufficient, calling it ‘almost an insult.’

Caledon Councillor Johanna Downey commented that Caledon has a large volunteer firefighter contingent, but there is also a chaplain, Pastor Jeff Enns, there for counselling.

‘He has a great rapport with all the guys,’ she said.

Downey suggested hiring one or more counsellors to be on hand to talk to the paramedics after certain types of calls.