

Jones charges Grits not doing enough to help first responders

By Bill Rea

The Province is not doing enough to help police deal with mental health issues, according to Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones, and she called the Premier to account for that.

Jones opened Question Period in the Legislature last Wednesday, reminding Premier Kathleen Wynne that the government passed the Supporting Ontario's First Responders Act last year, recognizing the increased risk of serious disability that police officers face, according to Hansard. She charged the government is trying to "gut" the employment rights of disabled officers through Bill 175. "This bill overrides police collective agreements that protect members from discrimination and limits the human rights of disabled police officers," Jones charged. "Section 115 gives police employers a fast-track to firing disabled police officers, regardless of whether their disability is temporary or permanent, without regard to how serious it is."

"We have worked in partnership with first responders, with police officers in particular, to make sure that we do everything we can to create the safest Ontario possible," Wynne responded. "I want to acknowledge the work of police officers and the organizations that have worked with us. We value their advice, but more than that, we value their service to the people of Ontario every single day."

Jones countered the police service in London in 2015 reported that mental health calls took up 15 per cent of their budget, adding police in Windsor report they are responding to eight mental health crisis calls per day.

"This is a common story in our cities and towns across Ontario," Jones declared.

"Ontario's police have become the de facto front-line mental health workers, but they don't have the resources necessary," Jones added in the House. "Why does this government fail to provide police with the means necessary to deal with mental health issues in our communities?"

Labour Minister Kevin Flynn cited how the government obtained unanimous support for doing a better job for first responders who have to deal with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), calling it "one of the best things I've ever worked on in this House."

He added a representative of the Police Association of Ontario, as well as police officers, firefighters, paramedics, etc., had called for better coverage for PTSD for their members.

"We delivered on that," he said. "I am proud of that legislation. We should all be proud of that legislation."

"We are," Jones replied. "That's why we passed it unanimously."