

Police and mental health workers combine in crisis support

By Bill Rea

Knowing how to handle people with mental health issues can reduce the strain on police resources and the health care system. That's the motivation behind the formation of the new 24.7 Crisis Support Peel Team, that was officially launched last Wednesday (Feb. 17) at the Caledon OPP station near Caledon East.

Although the program just had its official launch, it's actually been up and going since Dec. 1. David Smith, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Peel, said it's been busy too. As of last Wednesday, he said there had been 190 interactions. Smith was very excited about the launch of the program, pointing out a lot of work, involving various partners, went on behind the scenes to bring it about.

The partners included the Central West Local Health Integration Network (LHIN), as well as OPP, as they all embraced the benefits of minimizing the criminalization of mental health.

The program is an expansion of the success in dealing with mental health and addiction issues in Brampton and Mississauga. Smith said there have been more than 20,000 interactions since March, commenting that "speaks volumes of where the need is."

And people wind up in hospitals in only about nine per cent of these cases. The figure is a lot higher when they are dealt with by police alone.

"The right people go to the hospital emergency department," he observed.

Smith said the goal of the program is to enable people with illness and addictions to stay in the community.

It will see a mental health professional riding with an OPP officer to calls which might involve mental health issues. By allowing these people to act at the scene, it reduces the stress on the criminal justice system, while also avoiding the clogging of hospital emergency rooms.

As well, he said these officers are in plain clothes, and ride in unmarked police vehicles.

"It's a much quieter affair," he said, adding the hope is the lack of uniforms and sirens will help calm situations.

"Mental Health Awareness is something that's very important," Mayor Allan Thompson observed.

He added Caledon is regarded as one of the safest communities in Canada, but there's still a lot that could be improved.

"We can't work in silos any more," Thompson remarked, stressing the need for collaboration. "Every little step in the right direction is important."

OPP Superintendent Rose DiMarco (former commander of the Caledon detachment) observed that all involved in the program have been working toward the same goal. She added OPP is committed to removing the stigma of mental illness and the barriers it creates. She also said awareness and education is important.

She also said police recognized there was an increase in the number of calls involving mental health, and they have been studying the situation through Ontario.

"We took a very wholesome approach," she said.

Inspector Tim Melanson, commander of Caledon OPP, said they have two officers assigned to the program, with four others as back-ups. These officers are in plain clothes, and are working 12 hour shifts (from 10 to 10).

Charlene Heyer, manager of crisis services at CMHA Peel, said there are 20 full-time crisis workers with the agency, and they are working with the police on a rotating basis. "It's an integrated team," she said.

"You get a little different perspective from each worker," Melanson added.

Heyer said the crisis workers can do assessments and decide the best course of action.

"We know that taking people to hospital is not a great experience, and they don't always get the help they need," she added.



OPP?Superintendent Rose DiMarco, Mayor Allan Thompson, Central West LHIN?CEO?Scott McLeod, CMHA???Peel
CEO?David Smith and Constable Brenda Evans were on hand for last Wednesday's launch.Photo by Bill Rea