

Law Enforcement Needs to Change Its Approach to Responding to People in Mental Health Crisis

June 25th, 2020 (Winnipeg, MB) – The Schizophrenia Society of Canada (SSC) is troubled by several news stories of law enforcement responding inadequately to people in mental health crisis – situations which have tragically ended in physical injury or death.

Over the last three years, SSC has been involved in a nationally-funded research study alongside Ryerson, Wilfrid Laurier, and the University of Victoria to evaluate the effectiveness of scenario-based training in teaching police officers in Southern Ontario how to engage in de-escalation when dealing with a person in mental health crisis.

“Our early analysis indicates that scenario-based training involving high intensity mental health crisis simulations is successful in bringing about marked improvements in officer’s de-escalation skills in pre-post-testing,” said Dr. Jennifer Lavoie, Associate Professor, Wilfrid Laurier University. “At the moment, police training in mental health crisis intervention is haphazard and regrettably, not prioritized by leadership. In the absence of provincial standards in this area, it is vital that new training programs be evaluated and are shown to work.”

“Real de-escalation training that is evidenced-based, skill-based, and scenario-based is virtually non-existent in Canada,” said Chris Summerville, CEO of SSC. “Whether responding to a call that involves schizophrenia or any other type of mental health crisis, it’s clear that a broad, informed strategy for how to respond to these types of events is required. Unfortunately, this is currently not the case across Canada and Canadians are suffering because of it.”

SSC urges our governments and police boards to increase the number and availability of mobile crisis teams and front-line mental health experts to respond to those in mental health crisis. We also accept the reality that officers will inevitably find themselves in unanticipated situations involving individuals in mental health crisis where harm to self or others is imminent. Standardized, sustained, and frequent training for officers in de-escalation and mental health crisis response is urgently needed to save lives. Our project also confirms that an evaluation framework to assess officer competencies in de-escalation is vitally needed.

Some cities such as the City of Toronto have begun to address these issues. On June 23rd, Toronto Mayor John Tory submitted a police reform motion to City Council.

“We agree with the need for extensive community consultation on a proposed response model and also agree with Tory’s call to the Province for an increased focus on de-escalation,” said Lavoie.

“There will be critical times when sending a mental health professional into a crisis situation is not appropriate. You don’t always know if it is a mental health crisis and not all professionals are adequately trained in de-escalation techniques,” added Summerville. “Public safety and the safety of individuals in crisis should be paramount, and that begins with ensuring that police officers are safe so we can ensure the protection of the person who is experiencing the mental health crisis.”

The status quo of tragedy and physical and emotional harm is simply unacceptable and must be immediately addressed. We judge our society by how it treats those who are most vulnerable: in this vein, we are failing our community.

- 30 -

Schizophrenia Society of Canada

The Schizophrenia Society of Canada (SSC) exists to "Build a Canada where people living with early psychosis and schizophrenia achieve their potential." This is possible with early intervention and recovery focused mental health services. The heart and soul of SSC is the conviction that things can be better for those experiencing early psychosis and schizophrenia. Hope changes everything.

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