

Ontario and OPP failing to support police officers affected by operational stress injuries: Ombudsman

(TORONTO – October 24, 2012) Ontario Ombudsman André Marin today called on the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) and the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services to take concrete action to support police officers across the province who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, risk of suicide and other forms of operational stress injuries.

Both the OPP and Ministry have been reluctant to acknowledge and tackle operational stress injuries among police and have shown little leadership in implementing proactive, preventive programs to help officers, Mr. Marin concludes in his report, *In the Line of Duty*.

“Protection of the psychological welfare of police officers is a systemic issue calling for a systemic solution,” the Ombudsman says. “The officers who put themselves on the line to protect Ontario’s citizens deserve assurance that the province has their backs.”

Mr. Marin makes 34 recommendations in the report, focusing on the need to confront the persistent stigma against operational stress injuries in police culture, increase the psychological services available to officers and develop comprehensive, provincewide programs aimed at preventing and dealing with operational stress injuries and suicide.

The investigation – the most extensive ever undertaken by the Special Ombudsman Response Team (SORT) – involved more than 190 interviews over 18 months. It determined that the OPP has no consistent, co-ordinated programs for dealing with operational stress injuries or suicide prevention. It has only one staff psychologist for the entire province, who does not actually diagnose or treat officers, and it does not keep lists of outside mental health professionals from whom members could seek help. Nor does it track how many officers and families have turned to its employee assistance program for help with operational stress injuries.

There are no statistics kept or formal acknowledgement of OPP suicides, no prevention program and no analysis of why they occurred. Mr. Marin’s report reveals, based on ad hoc data kept by the OPP’s former psychologist, that 23 active and retired OPP members have killed themselves since 1989 – two more than were killed on duty over the same period. There were five OPP suicides in the past 18 months alone.

The investigation also prompted the OPP to compile data on the estimated cost of operational stress injuries. Although it does not keep formal statistics, its data on workplace illnesses and insurance claims revealed 269 incidents of operational stress injuries since 2006, at an estimated cost to Ontario taxpayers of about \$3.5 million, plus more than 22,000 lost workdays.

The OPP's existing wellness and awareness programs on the issue vary across the province – its own psychologist called them “haphazard.” While it does have a laudable “Safeguard” program for some specialized officers deemed to be in high-risk work, it is unnecessarily limited to those units, the Ombudsman found.

Among his 34 recommendations, Mr. Marin calls on the OPP to dedicate a full-time, senior-level officer to developing a comprehensive, proactive and preventive program to tackle operational stress injuries and suicide prevention. He supports expansion of the “Safeguard” program, including offering regular mental health checkups to officers, and improving supports for retired officers and all officers' families. Several of these recommendations are based on what is already being done by police services in Calgary, Montreal and several U.S. jurisdictions.

He also urges the Ministry, which has historically left the issue of operational stress injuries to individual police services, to recognize it as a systemic problem and conduct a provincewide survey to determine the extent of operational stress injuries among Ontario police.

In addition to numerous firsthand stories, comments and suggestions from active and retired OPP members, municipal police officers and their families, the 155-page report pulls together recent academic research on operational stress injuries among police as well as best practices from throughout the police world.

Although the Ombudsman's report and recommendations were sent to both the OPP and the Ministry for a response in late August, Mr. Marin said their reaction to his findings amounted to a deeply disturbing “bureaucratic brushoff,” with no specific commitment to implement them. It was not until Oct. 18 that the OPP Commissioner sent a letter pledging to have a senior officer lead a working group to review the recommendations “and take appropriate action.” The same day, the Deputy Minister wrote to say Ministry staff would be “examining options to respond to the recommendations” and would report back to the Ombudsman on a quarterly basis.

“Regrettably, it is the men and women who risk their lives and health in the line of duty who will pay the price for this indifference,” says Mr. Marin, who also conducted the first investigation of operational stress injuries among Canadian soldiers when he was the national military ombudsman in 2002. “It is incumbent on the OPP and the Ministry to undertake efforts to protect officers in this province who place their psychological welfare on the line.”

Since Mr. Marin's appointment in 2005, SORT has conducted more than 30 investigations into broad systemic problems affecting large numbers of Ontarians. The government has implemented almost all of the recommendations from his reports, including improving newborn screening, increasing lottery security and overhauling the property tax assessment system.

Aussi disponible en français

For further information, please contact:

Linda Williamson, Director of Communications, 416-586-3426, lwilliamson@ombudsman.on.ca

Patricia Tomasi, Communications Officer, 416-586-3402, ptomasi@ombudsman.on.ca

Ashley Burse, Communications Officer, 416-586-3521, aburse@ombudsman.on.ca

Elena Yunusov, Communications Officer, 416-586-3525, eyunusov@ombudsman.on.ca