



ONTARIO'S WATCHDOG
CHIEN DE GARDE DE L'ONTARIO

In the Line of Duty – Ombudsman’s remarks ***André Marin***

The report I am releasing today tells the stories of dozens of courageous police officers from across Ontario. They are police officers who put their wellbeing on the line for the people of this province and were injured in the line of duty.

But because their injuries are mostly invisible, their stories are rarely talked about. Some of them were even fatally injured, but for them, there are no memorials or large ceremonial funerals.

Of course I’m talking about the police officers who have operational stress injuries because of the demands and trauma of their work. They battle every day with depression, anxiety, nightmares, addictions and post-traumatic stress disorder – and on top of all that, they battle a culture that tells them they should “suck it up” and be strong. They battle a bureaucratic structure that is so behind the times that it doesn’t have any idea how many of them have this kind of injury or even how many of them have killed themselves.

The Ontario Provincial Police and the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services both say they take the issue of operational stress injury seriously. But my investigation shows they are failing, and the results are frankly tragic. It reveals for the first time that 23 OPP officers have committed suicide since 1989 – two more than have been killed on duty.

This is the most extensive investigation my office has done, and the report is the largest we have ever produced. When we began our research, we were struck by the lack of information available, not just about what the OPP and Ontario were doing about operational stress injury among police, but about what is being done about it throughout the policing community.

My hope is that this report will help police services, policy makers and service providers further their understanding of the issue, promote best practices that are already in place in some police services, and eliminate the stigma that is at the core of the problem.

As many of you know, this topic is not new. Nor is it new to me. When I released the first report on post-traumatic stress in the Canadian military in February 2002, we saw many of the same issues of stigma and a culture of denial. The military had no idea how many soldiers were suffering from operational stress injury, and the war in Afghanistan was just beginning.

That report woke up a lot of people, but there was also a great deal of backlash. A national columnist called it “whining.” A former general called my findings “spurious allegations.”

The Canadian military was slow to recognize the existence of operational stress injury, but 10 years later, the culture of denial is gone. In fact, as some people told us in this investigation, the military has often provided help to Ontario police who have nowhere else to turn.

If the military culture can evolve, I am optimistic that police culture can too – but we certainly cannot afford to wait another 10 years.

That is why I am so concerned about the lack of substance in the OPP's and Ministry's responses to this report.

The OPP and Ministry received my preliminary report in late August. The OPP had five weeks to review my recommendations. The Commissioner responded with little more than platitudes about caring for OPP members. He made no concrete commitment to addressing any of the specific issues raised in this investigation. The Ministry's response was simply indifferent.

It was only when they viewed the final report last week that both wrote letters indicating that they will respond to the recommendations after further study. The OPP Commissioner is setting up a working group and the Ministry will have its staff study "options" for responding and get back to me in three months. I've released their letters with my report – you can judge them for yourselves – but I remain disappointed by what still looks to me like a bureaucratic brushoff.

My recommendations call on the OPP to do basic things that many police services have been doing for years: Train officers and their families about dealing with trauma and preventing suicide; make sure they have access to people who can help them. Keep data on operational stress injuries and suicides. This is about supporting the people who put their lives on the line in the most difficult kind of public service, and keeping them healthy and functioning. It's hard to think of a better public investment.

The Ministry could show leadership where the OPP has not – and extend that leadership to help officers in the municipal forces across the province. It needs to acknowledge that operational stress injuries are a real threat to the health and wellness of our police, and it is in all of our interests to support sensible systemic solutions.

I will keep a close eye on this issue and I have asked the OPP and Ministry to report back to me in three months. I am also hopeful that whenever the Legislature returns in a new session, this issue will find champions among all parties.