

Opening remarks – *A Matter of Life and Death*

Ombudsman Paul Dubé, June 29, 2016

Good morning, and thank you all for being here, both in person and via live webcast, for the release of this important report.

The issue of how police are trained to handle situations of conflict with people in crisis is not a matter of academic debate. It is a literally a matter of life and death, and one that has been neglected in this province for too long.

When I say neglected, I do not mean that it hasn't received any attention. Quite the contrary. For more than 25 years, coroner's juries have looked into death after death and made hundreds of recommendations, in the hope of preventing more fatalities. Instead of ending, these tragedies seem almost to repeat themselves.

For example, in 1997, Edmond Yu – killed as he was alone on a bus, holding a small hammer.

In 2004, O'Brien Christopher-Reid – killed when he refused to drop the knife in his hand.

In 2008, Byron Debassige – killed as he held a three-inch knife.

In 2009, Douglas Minty – killed, armed with a pocket knife.

In 2012, Michael Eligon – still in the gown from the hospital he escaped from, killed, carrying two pairs of scissors.

In 2013, Michael MacIsaac – killed in the street, naked and brandishing a table leg; and Sammy Yatim – killed on an empty Toronto streetcar, holding a small knife.

And in 2015, Andrew Loku – killed in his apartment hallway, holding a hammer.

Just during the course of our investigation, which began in the wake of Sammy Yatim's death, 19 more people were shot dead by police. In many cases, these were vulnerable people in crisis. I want to welcome and thank the family members of some of the victims for being here today.

So, why do police respond in this way? As we have heard time and time again, it's not because they aren't following their training. It's because they are. Because the majority of their training focuses on exerting authority and establishing control over armed or hostile subjects – principally by drawing their weapons and yelling commands. As we say in the report, once an officer's gun is drawn in a confrontation with someone in crisis, it can be a short step to a deadly conclusion.

Now, I want to be very clear: My report is not critical of police. It is critical of the inadequate training they receive. We actually empathize with police officers who often have to face difficult – and potentially dangerous – situations without sufficient skills to avoid lethal outcomes. These shootings are traumatic for everyone, including the officers involved.

The gist of my report is that police need to be better trained to handle these situations. They need better tools and a broader skill set. Basic training in Ontario is half as long as it is for the RCMP and it does not place sufficient emphasis on de-escalation and dealing with people in crisis.

I also want to stress that our investigation looked at this issue in depth. We received 176 complaints and submissions. Our investigators conducted 95 interviews and reviewed thousands of pages of documentation. They studied de-escalation training in other jurisdictions, and even attended police training sessions. I am also grateful to the two distinguished special advisors who lent their enormous expertise to this investigation, former police chiefs Mike Boyd and Vern White. Their perspectives and guidance helped us craft 22 recommendations that are practical and will benefit police as well as the public.

The Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services has the responsibility for setting standards for Ontario police services. As our report makes clear, it is time for the Ministry to direct police services on how to de-escalate situations of conflict before they result in the use of lethal force against people in crisis. It is not just a matter of long-overdue leadership, but of saving lives.

We don't need another study to prove that too many people in crisis have died at the hands of police. We don't need another study or consultation to determine that police training on de-escalation is inadequate. What we need is recognition by the government that the status quo is not acceptable. We need a plan for meaningful action to enhance public safety.

I am making the case that there is an urgent need for improvements to police training in Ontario that will provide frontline officers with the skills to better respond to situations of conflict with people in crisis, and reduce the odds of those people ending up dead.

As you know, a new Minister was appointed just two weeks ago, as my report was being finalized. I believe strongly in procedural fairness, and so I made sure to give him and the Ministry another chance to respond to my report.

The objective of an ombudsman is not to name, blame, and shame public sector bodies. The objective is to investigate problems in government administration, to make feasible recommendations for corrective action, and to use moral suasion to convince the public sector body to "do the right thing" and implement those recommendations. That is why I am always looking for opportunities to work independently but collaboratively with the public sector bodies we oversee to solve problems and make Ontario a better place to live and work.

I had the opportunity to meet with the new Minister yesterday and was encouraged by his willingness to listen. I left that meeting with the impression that the Ministry recognizes the need for change, and hopeful that the Ministry will do the right thing and accept my recommendations. I am looking forward to the Ministry's formal response and am optimistic that the necessary and long-overdue changes we are calling for will come.

Going forward, my Office and I will regularly monitor the Ministry's actions on this file, we will keep this conversation going and continue to make the case for meaningful change. We will use all the moral suasion and communication resources at our disposal to advocate for change, and I can assure stakeholders that our efforts will continue as long as necessary.