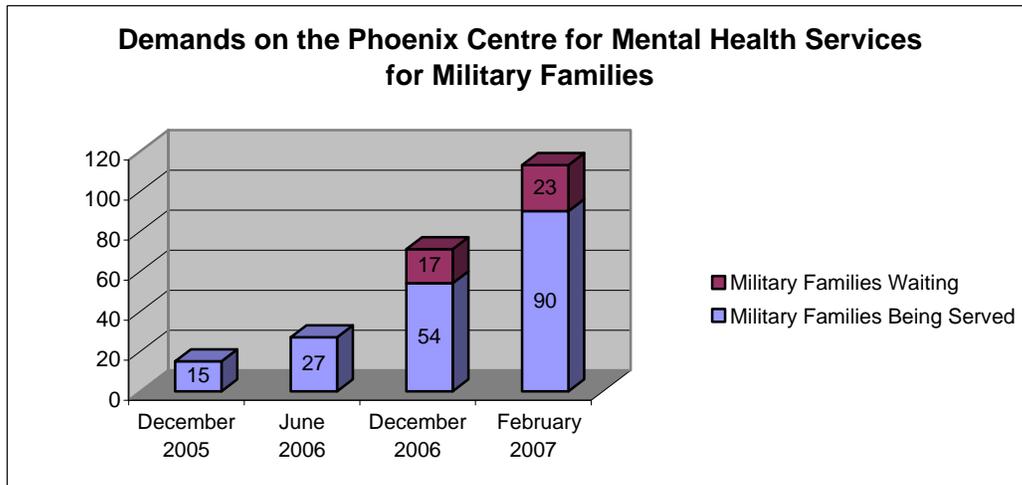


Backgrounder – The children’s mental health crisis in Petawawa

Canadian Forces Base Petawawa has provided the main contingent of Canadian troops to the Afghanistan mission. To date, some 2,000 soldiers from the base have been deployed to Afghanistan; 1,500 recently returned, another 500 began their tour of duty last month, and at least 1,000 are due to go in August 2008. Since August 2006, 16 Petawawa-based soldiers have been killed during the mission and some 80 wounded – at least half of those experiencing severe, permanent physical injury such as the loss of a limb.

The Ombudsman’s investigation was launched March 1 after his office received a complaint from the Executive Director of the Phoenix Centre – the only Children’s Mental Health Centre serving residents of Renfrew County, which includes CFB Petawawa – that the provincial government was failing to provide adequate mental health services for military children. The Phoenix Centre reported that demand for psychological counselling had grown from just 2% of its cases to 20% since August 2006 and children were being forced to wait 4-6 months for treatment.



Overall, children’s behavioural problems had increased and their academic performance declined, the Phoenix Centre staff told the Special Ombudsman Response Team (SORT). The investigators also learned of increases in substance abuse and youth crime, eating disorders, self-mutilation and suicidal tendencies among the affected children. One distraught mother asked the Ombudsman’s team: “Do I have to be standing over the grave of my child before someone helps me?” As the American Psychological Association stated in February: “Having a primary caretaker in a war zone can be one of the most stressful events a child can experience.”

Even when those in uniform return home, as many from Petawawa did in January and February, the problems do not necessarily ease. As many as 20% of soldiers are coping

with Operational Stress Injuries, which can cause secondary psychological trauma to their families. The Phoenix Centre's waiting lists for counselling have grown since December, and the rate of area couples seeking divorce has reportedly doubled in the past year.

The Phoenix Centre is funded primarily through transfer payments from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, and has been in operation for almost 29 years. It received a 3% funding increase in 2004 – its first in 14 years. In the 2006/07 fiscal year, it was given a budget of \$1.77 million from the ministry to provide services to Renfrew County, including the town of Petawawa (pop. 15,500, comprising the military base's 5,100 soldiers and 7,800 family members). It also received \$584,550 from other sources.

In September 2006, the centre asked the Ministry of Children and Youth Services for an additional \$536,250 over the next two years, to fund two additional therapists and two child and youth counsellors. The request was supported in writing by the local MPP, the base commander and the non-governmental organization Children's Mental Health Ontario, which represents more than 80 of Ontario's Children's Mental Health Centres – but it was twice rejected by the Ministry.

Both the federal and provincial governments released budgets in March. The federal budget of March 19 included \$1 million a year “to support families of Canadian Forces members,” but this funding is intended for “peer support” only, not professional counselling, and is limited to helping returned soldiers with Operational Stress Injuries and their families – as opposed to relatives of those who are overseas or deceased.

The provincial budget of March 22 promised \$8 million in new funding to ease waiting lists at children's mental health centres provincewide. The Ombudsman's recommendations arising from the Petawawa investigation were provided to the government on March 28. Six days later, the province announced an additional \$24.5 million for children's mental health services – including a 5% increase in base funding for child and youth mental health agencies (totalling \$18 million), \$4.5 million to address regional priorities and \$2 million to enable agencies to provide immediate children's mental health support to communities facing crises or extraordinary circumstances.

Premier Dalton McGuinty has confirmed that this investment is in reaction to the Ombudsman's recommendation to resolve the situation at Petawawa, and that provincial officials will also consult with the federal government in order to ensure long-term mental health support for military children. On April 10, Ministry of Children and Youth officials met with Phoenix Centre staff to discuss a service contract that will allow them to hire two new therapists and two new youth workers. They have also entered into discussions with federal National Defence officials. In addition, on April 2, National Defence approved a one-time funding allotment of \$100,000 to CFB Petawawa's Military Family Resource Centre so it can contract with the Phoenix Centre to provide services to children on the base.