

Under Fire

By Dan Birch

Violent criminals and anxious moments — police officers across Canada accept these as a part of the job, something to be expected from time to time. What may not be expected, however, is to face those risks alone, without the assurance and protection of a trusted partner.

All too often, say officer safety advocates, police in remote locales have little choice but to go it alone, concerned that the time waiting for back-up will be long enough to transform dicey circumstances into unmanageable conditions. Waiting as long as an hour for help is an option, advocates argue, though, clearly, an unrealistic one if a victim's life is on the line.

Police staffing levels — and the clear impact that can have on officer safety — have long been a smouldering issue recently fully ignited by a number of deaths in small, isolated communities and by occupational health and safety rulings that have criticized police services for failing to provide adequate officer back-up.

On the face of it, the remedy appears deceptively simple: hire more officers. But more officers equal higher expenses. And even if police services manage to wrangle more cash from budget-conscious governments, there is still the competition with other forces to attract new recruits in a tight labour market.

Ultimate price

RCMP Constable Douglas Scott, 20, was one such recruit. The native of Brockville, Ontario had been on the job for just six months when he was shot dead in the small Nunavut community of Kimmirut, on the southern tip of Baffin Island, last November. Scott had responded, alone, to complaints involving an impaired driver.

One month earlier, in Hay River, Northwest Territories, RCMP Constable Christopher Worden also had been killed in the line of duty. The 30-year-old Ottawa native had responded to a disturbance at a private residence. Worden, too, was alone.

The deaths have set the public spotlight squarely on the issue of officer back-up and the wisdom of having a lone officer respond to calls. Last December, RCMP Deputy Commissioner Bill Sweeney

stood before a throng of reporters to outline what events, henceforth, would require at least two officers to respond:

- domestic disputes;
- violent incidents/incidents where violence is anticipated;
- incidents involving weapons or threat of weapons;
- incidents where subjects are physical threats to themselves or others;
- incidents in areas with poor police radio communication capability; and,
- any case in which officers, based on their own risk assessments, consider back-up necessary.

The policy's key objective, Sweeney said, is to "reinforce in [members'] minds that certain calls must be handled through a multiple-member approach, so that there is no ambiguity."

Parameters, however, are not meant to squelch flexibility or practicality. Officers will continue to exercise prerogative; if public safety is at risk, and waiting for back-up is inadvisable, then officers can respond on their own.

Sweeney described the policy as an "affirmation" of what the force already teaches its recruits: consider the risk factors in a situation and apply appropriate tactics to safely respond. "This includes stopping, perhaps tactically repositioning oneself, and waiting for back-up to arrive to continue with the intervention."

Because human and financial resources are finite, it will take time before the policy is fully adopted at all of the RCMP's approximately 200 remote detachments. Exactly how long, police officials are not certain, says Sergeant Nathalie Deschênes, an RCMP media relations officer in Ottawa. Officials must consult with contracting partners — provinces and territories where the police service is employed — before coming to any conclusions regarding cost and timelines for implementation, Deschênes says.

RCMP Sergeant Mike Ingles, a staff relations representative in Surrey, British Columbia, says it's difficult to develop an overarching back-up policy when there is such a diversity of detachments. The new policy, Ingles says, is to be regarded as the "minimum."

He estimates it will take at least two years to achieve full com-

pliance. Doing so will likely demand closure and amalgamation of small detachments so that officer ranks can increase, he expects.

Culture block

There is little debate that more front-line officers are a must if Canada's police force is to fulfill the promises of its new back-up policy. For the RCMP, says Deschênes, implementation costs are likely to run in the tens of millions of dollars.

A federal task force examining the need for changes to RCMP governance and organizational culture, findings of which were released last December, urged the Mounties to complete implementation as soon as possible.

The task force determined that the RCMP's culture pressures members to get work done, without complaint. "A young officer properly trained and aware of RCMP policies may feel that commitment to the RCMP requires him or her to take risks that are contrary to those policies. They might not, for example, call upon a colleague for back-up out of compassion for the workload of that colleague," the report states.

That culture does not influence only recent recruits. Veteran officers, too, may decide not to call in back-up, as the death of RCMP Constable Jurgen Seewald, 47, in March of 2001, shows.

Stationed in Cape Dorset, on Baffin Island, Seewald chose to respond on his own to a domestic disturbance call, even though dispatch had cautioned him about the possibility of weapons on site. Seewald was familiar with the people, which may have influenced his decision to go it alone, Deschênes suggests. Whatever his thinking, the result remains the same: he was shot and killed.

Underlying danger

Far too many conflicts that have left officers dead clearly illustrate policing is an inherently dangerous job that thrusts officers into unpredictable situations. Scott, for example, was responding to an impaired driver call — a call seemingly less likely to result in harm than, say, a domestic disturbance.

Dale Kinnear, director of labour services for the Canadian Police Association (CPA), says "any situation has the potential to be dangerous or fatal."

Patrick Mehain, an RCMP officer in British Columbia's Lower Mainland and president of the BC Mounted Police Professionals Association, agrees. "There's no such thing as a routine call," Mehain says, citing Scott's death. "Unless you know it's going to be dangerous, you're not going to call for back-up."

It was a domestic dispute call that ended with Worden dead. Jodie Worden, his widow, has been vocal about remote policing issues since her husband's death, and has demanded that two officers be dispatched each and every time — regardless of the type of call. Worden says she believes her husband may be alive today had there been a fellow officer by his side.

"If it's me out on the street," says Ingles, "I would like my odds a lot better with a second member there."

Kinnear says the mix of dangerous work and incomplete dispatch information makes it difficult for an officer to evaluate con-

ditions and calculate risks. The CPA supports two-officer response in isolated areas.

Officials for the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) say, in general, two officers are safer than one. "But we [also] all know that there could be six officers there sometimes and [a suspect will] still go and swing a baseball bat at you," says Chris Lewis, deputy commissioner of field operations for the OPP.

Back-up backlog

Even before the deaths of Scott and Worden last fall, RCMP back-up capabilities in remote areas had been a years-long concern voiced by members. Ingles, chairman of the RCMP's officer safety committee since 2005, reports that in 2000, a federal court ruled that the *Canada Labour Code* (CLC), including associated provisions, was applicable to the RCMP. Prior to that determination, Ingles says, "we had nowhere to go when our management refused to act."

With the code protections in mind, Ingles says a member at a NWT detachment filed a complaint in 2001, pointing to the "ineffective or non-existent" back-up available. The RCMP responded, he says, but not much changed.

A similar complaint filed by a New Brunswick RCMP member in 2005, however, ended with the labour department concluding the RCMP failed to ensure officer health and safety, Ingles says.

Despite implementing changes, many officers continued to find themselves in situations where "there was no one available to provide back-up in a timely manner," he adds.

The complaints spurred the RCMP to move on its back-up policy, which had been under development for about two years before Scott and Worden were killed.

The CPA's Kinnear is not won over by the RCMP policy, suggesting that requiring a determination of when back-up is necessary puts an "unfair" onus on an officer to decide to act with or without support. If the RCMP had sufficient resources — for example, always having at least two officers on shift in remote locations — the decision to call for back-up would be a far easier one.

But if an officer has requested back-up numerous times that proved unnecessary, this may open the door to criticism for wasting resources, Mehain suggests. This, in turn, may dissuade remote officers from seeking help in warranted — and essential — circumstances, he adds.

Following the deaths of Scott and Worden, the OPP "had a hard look at our own [back-up] policy just to make sure that [it] didn't have any loopholes," says Lewis. The conclusion was that it was "either equal to or exceeds the proposed [RCMP] policy."

A solid policy, however, does not remedy staffing woes. Karl Walsh, president of the Ontario Provincial Police Association, which represents about 5,500 officers, charges that a staffing shortage means the back-up policy is frequently not met at isolated detachments. "If our officers adhered to the policy [at all times], it would put the citizens of Ontario at risk," Walsh argues.

The nearest back-up may be more than 100 kilometres away, he points out. "Somebody's in the house screaming and yelling, or

somebody's being hurt or killed — you don't have time to wait.”

Lewis does not share Walsh's view, reporting it is “very seldom” the case a detachment does not have at least two officers on shift.

Border to border

Officer back-up appears to be an issue, regardless of jurisdiction; regardless of type of police force. At a recent case in Quebec, the Association des policières et policiers provinciaux du Québec (APPQ), which represents Sûreté du Québec (SQ) officers, launched a complaint before a provincial ombudsman tribunal about inadequate back-up in remote regions. The commission des lésions professionnelles (CLP) concluded last December that single-officer patrols pose a health and safety risk. The CLP stated that provincial officers should not be permitted to intervene alone in territory where police radios are unreliable, and the SQ must develop safety training particular to the needs of officers who work alone in remote locations.

Robert Bronsard, workplace health and safety advisor for the APPQ, reports that officers in remote regions have found that designated back-up is not always available; back-up, when available, may be ineffective; and police radios are not reliable in portions of remote detachments. Policing carries inherent risks; that is obvious, Bronsard offers, adding that risk shouldn't be increased because of inadequate procedures.

The APPQ's case focused on five detachments — scattered throughout the remote Gaspé, Abitibi and Cote Nord regions — but the ruling has relevance for more than 30 provincial detachments, Bronsard says. It is unlikely new officers will need to be hired; it's more a case of the SQ having to arrange back-up and improve radio technology, he says.

SQ spokesperson Joyce Kemp reports that lone-officer interventions in areas where radios do not work are now prohibited.

APPQ president Jean-Guy Dagenais says the SQ will probably have to buy satellite-signal phones. “I understand it's expensive, but that's for the safety of my members and public security.”

Far and wide

The RCMP back-up policy also has obvious resource implications: without an injection of a significant number of officers (Ingles estimates this will run in the hundreds), the policy will not be met each and every day, in every single remote detachment. The RCMP, he charges, is “grossly understaffed.”

The federal task force's findings echo Ingles's concern, pointing out that RCMP officers and civilian employees “are expected to cover their own work, the work not done by others due to vacancies and the work required to fill ever-increasing administrative demands.”

In Canada's most populous province, the OPP requires between 350 and 500 new front-line officers, says Walsh, rhyming off a list of northern detachments in particular need.

The OPP's current staff level review is being done with an updated and overhauled formula, Lewis says, one that is meant to more accurately account for the realities of modern policing.

The new formula has been applied in more than a dozen detachments, and in every case it has indicated existing staffing levels are inadequate, says Walsh.

Funding injection

Those in charge of the purse strings have heard the calls for more resources.

- Ontario spent millions in 2003 to fund its share of 1,000 new officers across the province.
- In 2006, the federal government directed just shy of \$200 million to the RCMP so it could fill 1,000 vacancies by 2010, as well as physically expand its national training academy in Regina.
- Most recently, in its 2008 budget, Ottawa earmarked \$400 million over five years toward the hiring of 2,500 new officers nationally, with funding directed to the provinces on a per capita basis.

Rick Bartolucci, Ontario's minister of community safety and correctional services, says that while police organizations and provinces welcome the federal money, representatives worry about the timeframe attached to the funding.

Bartolucci says he wants a program that will pledge to fund officers for the length of their careers so long-term planning can happen. Nobody “wants a temporary police program,” he adds.

There are also concerns, Walsh says, that the funding will not go to front-line officers exclusively, that provinces will be able to use it for general public safety purposes.

The RCMP task force indicates that budget constraints have prevented the force from recruiting the necessary number of new officers. “Additional financial resources must be allocated immediately to enable the force to meet its commitment without unreasonable pressures on its members.”

Small pool

Even if Canadian police forces had unlimited resources, some would still have difficulty solving their staff shortages, thanks to a tight recruit labour market.

“We're all competing for a very small pool of people that want to be police officers,” says Lewis. The fact that the OPP gets fewer recruitment applications now than in the past shows the pool is shrinking, he adds.

The RCMP, Ingles notes, “just can't find the people, and certainly you don't want to lower your standards because you're in a situation where you need people on the ground.”

Attracting recruits to serve in isolated locales presents particular difficulties. “In addition to the physical challenge of these locations, separation from families and loved ones makes it difficult for the RCMP to attract members and employees to those locations,” the task force reports. It also notes northern recruitment has been made more challenging by the erosion of housing and vacation allowances and other incentives in recent years.

Junior officers are often stationed in remote RCMP detachments because senior officers are unwilling to serve there. This creates an experience void, Ingles says.

Walsh further cautions that “when you send nothing but new

recruits up, then you don't get any continuity. You don't get people who are invested in the community."

For the Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service (NAPS), a First Nations force that serves 35 Northern Ontario communities between Thunder Bay and Hudson Bay, attracting and retaining officers is a challenge that is compounded by the sorry state of its detachments and a lack of housing for its officers. John Domm, NAPS acting police chief, describes some detachments as "decrepit" and says many don't meet national building code standards. As a result, officer turnover is high.

The OPP has strategies in place to attract more recruits and draw officers to serve in remote northern communities, Lewis notes. Officers are paid higher salaries and are offered signing bonuses to work in the North, though the financial incentives have not attracted as many officers as expected, he says.

Ingles says having too few officers in a given situation — for instance, when confronted by a violent subject — tends to require officers to employ a higher level of force to resolve the situation, which is not preferred.

As well, the prospect of waiting an hour or more for back-up makes officers leery, suggests the OPPA's Walsh. "You've got officers that are unwilling to do what they're supposed to be doing because they're worried about whether or not they're going to get into trouble and there is not going to be any back-up there for them."

The APPQ's Bronsard points to, as an example, SQ operations in Matagami, where the closest town is more than 200 kilometres away. Lone officers, often apprehensive about making arrests when so far from the detachment, protect themselves by patrolling within a 20- to 30-minute range of the detachment, he says.

Health on the line

If police are short-staffed, overworked and working alone too often, then what are the implications for officer and public safety, and for the quality of police service provided?

The task force found that the RCMP "continues to meet its commitments only because its members are prepared to work too long and too hard to compensate for the lack of resources." Such an approach is unsustainable, as it hampers the RCMP's ability to recruit new members and takes a toll on staff health.

"A significant danger to member safety is overwork. Fatigue and burnout will inevitably lead to challenged judgement and exposure to greater danger," the report notes.

For Domm's force, burnout is also a critical issue. He describes a common scene: the lone officer in a community, having just completed his shift, arrives home for a little rest. But within an hour, he is disturbed by someone knocking at his door, asking for assistance.

"They have a hard time getting any rest. They have a hard time escaping the demands of office. And ultimately we all pay the price," says Domm. ●HS

Dan Birch is editorial assistant of OHS CANADA.