

Mental health crisis team gets full-time officer

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Traditionally, police services have handled crisis calls involving the mentally ill the same way they would any other. In recent years that's changed for the Chatham-Kent Police Service with the development of the HELP Team and Mobile Crisis Team (MCT).

The Chatham-Kent Police Services Board strengthened its commitment to the MCT at a meeting Tuesday when members voted to assign a full-time officer to the unit. The MCT was created in 2007 as a pilot project in partnership with Chatham-Kent Health Alliance. It pairs a plainclothes officer-- Const. Jason St. Denis-- with a crisis nurse -- Becky Elgie. Together they respond to calls involving mentally ill people in an effort to provide better, more appropriate service, explained co-ordinator Sgt. Gabe Tetrault.

He said it's a very forward thinking approach to working with that sector of society. "The way police view people with mental illness has radically changed," he said. "There's a lot more compassion, willingness to understand and desire to help the person and their families."

Chief Dennis Poole said the MCT was developed to work alongside the HELP Team, which consists of 55 officers who received special training to assist in calls involving people experiencing mental health issues.

He said the MCT reduces the time spent by frontline officers dealing with mentally ill people who come into contact with police and provides better service to the individuals and their families.

The unit is working well and has exceeded expectations, he said. "In our spirit of community policing, the team has a very proactive role to play," he said. When the team isn't reacting to crisis calls, the officer and nurse visit the homes of mentally ill people and develop relationships with them and their loved ones. They also provide referrals to appropriate community agencies.

"At the end of the day we are able to do what we need to do to assist the mentally ill," Poole said, noting everyone has heard of volatile situations between police and those experiencing a mental health crisis.

"Sometimes the incident does end in a violent confrontation with police and that's what we want to avoid."

The board approved a recommendation to create a full-time, posted position by reallocating a patrol officer to the unit.

West Kent Councillor Bryon Fluker, who sits on police board, praised the service's efforts in dealing with the mentally ill. "This is one of the most progressive, proactive services we provide," he said. The councillor said the CKPS has successfully expanded the traditional role of a police officer as an enforcer.

Tetrault said the reallocation will actually result in more time on the road for frontline officers. He said in 2006, local police responded to 375 Mental Health Act and attempted suicide calls. Officers spent an average of an hour and 50 minutes per call and situations requiring hospital admissions commonly took three to five hours. In 2009, Tetrault said officers responded to 415 Mental Health Act and attempted suicide calls and half were investigated and followed up by the MCT. Officers spend an average of an hour and 50 minutes per call but the hospital admissions were mostly handled by the MCT, he said. The MCT responds to 50–60 calls per month.