

Vancouver street cops still 'de facto mental health workers': report

By ANDREA WOO, VANCOUVER SUN September 12, 2011

VANCOUVER — Vancouver 'street cops' are still filling the gaps in B.C.'s flawed mental health system, despite recommendations in a powerful 2008 report on policing the city's mentally ill, an updated report finds.

The 2008 report, titled *Lost in Transition: How a Lack of Capacity in the Mental Health System is Failing Vancouver's Mentally Ill and Draining Police Resources*, detailed flaws in B.C.'s mental health system and their effects on policing.

The problems included the lack of available long-term care, lack of hospital space and difficulties in getting people assessed.

The updated report, titled *Policing Vancouver's Mentally Ill: The Disturbing Truth* [<http://vancouver.ca/police/assets/pdf/reports-policies/vpd-lost-in-transition-part-2-draft.pdf>] and released Monday by the Vancouver police department, states that while there have been some positive changes, Vancouver police officers are still considered "society's de facto 24/7 mental health workers."

"There has been progress and positive outcomes in the areas of supported housing, police record management and analysis and moderate to long term treatment services for dual diagnosed patients in a quasi-institutional environment," the report stated.

"The police, however, are still responding day after day to 'difficult to manage' and 'treat' chronically mentally ill and addicted individuals on the streets of Vancouver. Other issues relating to suicide, suicide attempts and missing persons consume police resources, frustrate police, and in some cases endanger the lives and safety of patients, front-line police officers, other first responders and the public."

City-wide, more than one-third of police service calls involved the mentally ill, with the figure jumping to about half in some neighbourhoods.

Lorna Howes, director of mental health at Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH), said the report's findings are "challenging to see ... in black and white," but said the report is effective in pointing out areas that need improvement.

"What we've really been able to take out of it has been the ability to focus on some particular things that we know we need to be doing together," she said.

“Although there is criticism in the report — there is no question about that — we also know that we actually need to come alongside the rest of our community ... and continue to focus on trying to provide what is the best care for people in the community.”

The draft report, dated September 2010, was intended to be released after further discussions with VCH, but police felt they had no choice but to make it public after a copy was recently leaked to the media, Deputy Chief Const. Warren Lemcke said.

About 800 police officers have had special crisis intervention training to deal with the mentally ill, and have been identifying mental health issues on a more frequent basis, Lemcke said.

But the sheer number of encounters points to a larger systemic problem, the report noted.

“The VPD submits that community based treatment can hardly be described as a ‘success’ given the high number of police contacts exhibited by this cohort and that unfortunately the police concerns regarding chronic individuals in the community who cause harm to themselves and others carry little or no weight in the health system,” the report stated.

“This implies that the Downtown Community Court must be used as the ‘entry point’ for chronic individuals to access services despite the fact they have to commit a criminal offence in order to do so.”

The report also provided anecdotes about two mentally unstable chronic offenders, with dozens of police interactions each year, and proposed involuntary institutionalization should be looked at.

“It is a legitimate question then to ask whether they and other chronic individuals (and the community) would be better off if they were involuntarily committed to an institutional model of care,” it stated. “It is also a legitimate question to ask whether there is sufficient capacity in the institutional model of care for these very difficult to manage individuals.”

The updated draft report concluded with six recommendations, including an “information sharing and feedback mechanism” between medical facilities; that St. Paul’s and Vancouver General hospitals speed up the admission process so police who have arrested someone under Mental Health Act provisions don’t have to spend so much time waiting in hospital; and the establishment of an ‘Urgent Response Centre’ where people can be assessed and triaged according to their needs.

awoo@vancouver.sun.com

Read more:

<http://www.vancouversun.com/health/Vancouver+street+cops+still+facto+mental+health+workers+report/5390804/story.html#ixzz1Y8zbYfgc>