

Police Make SAR Partnerships Work

The benefits of community-based policing and the value of the resulting partnerships have long been touted within policing circles. There is still a perception among many frontline officers however, that there are few tangible benefits arising out of this policing philosophy. It is remarkable then, to observe the advancements made within the Ottawa Police Service (OPS) Search and Rescue program as a result of non-traditional, community partnerships.

The Ottawa Police Service has maintained a SAR response in many forms for more than a decade. That capacity is now being maintained within the ranks of the Emergency Services Unit (ESU).

The ESU is an on-call unit, numbering 80 officers, who provide the OPS with both a SAR and Public Order capacity. While OPS has maintained a SAR team for some time, formalized SAR training was only introduced in 1999. Since that time, the OPS SAR response has improved by leaps and bounds. Initially, this development was internally driven, through the improvement of training, the upgrading of equipment, and changes to SAR policy and deployment strategies. Most recently however, improvements within the ESU SAR program, have been driven by external partnerships, primarily with the Alzheimer Society of Ottawa (ASOC) and Victim Services of Ottawa-Carleton (VASOC). These community partners have provided the OPS with subject matter expertise, access to a large network of health care providers and caregivers, funding, and innovative ideas.

These partnerships were supplemented with an integrated, Service-wide, commitment to change within the Ottawa Police Service, in the form of the Dementia Assistance Committee (DAC). The Committee was formed with a broad cross-Service representation, along with representation from ASOC and VASOC.

The inspiration for the DAC came in the fall of 2002, after OPS Duty Inspector Lance Valcour, noted that the Ottawa

Police Service was responding repeatedly to missing person incidents involving the same individual. In the majority of these cases the missing person was suffering from Alzheimer disease or a related form of dementia. Inspector Valcour also noted that while the SAR response was effective in locating the missing person and consistent with OPS policies, the missing person was simply being returned home without any follow-up or supports offered for the family and/or caregiver.

Further analysis of the situation revealed that missing person incidents involving persons with dementia represented the largest number of ground search operations conducted each year in Ottawa.

Inspector Valcour felt that the Ottawa Police Service was obligated to provide better service to the community and better protection for this vulnerable community.

The DAC was therefore formed as a coordinated OPS and community response to the situation. The OPS Committee membership was drawn from Patrol Division, Emergency Operations Division, the Communications Centre, Adult Missing Persons / Mental Health Unit, the Youth Section, the Victim Crisis Unit, the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC), IT Support and the Emergency Services Unit.

The DAC sought to increase the safety and security of persons with dementia in the community, by first introducing measures to prevent missing person incidents, and second, by improving the community and police response to missing person incidents. The DAC sought to fulfill this mandate by addressing three key aspects of SAR response, namely: Public Awareness; Police Training & Education; and Technology.

The DAC launched an aggressive public awareness campaign that targeted the general public, families of persons with dementia, caregivers, retirement homes, long-term care and health care facilities. Through this campaign, the public and families were introduced to the disease and the Safely Home Program, a national registry (associated with the CPIC database), launched by the Alzheimer Society of Canada to assist police agencies locate missing persons with dementia. These activities were advanced through the media, seminars, workshops and display booths at various locations throughout the city.

The OPS Victim Crisis Unit played an important role by undertaking to follow up



OPS Patrol officers and members of the ESU on a training exercise, respond to a health care facility for a missing person incident. >>

on every missing person incident in the city, to educate families on available supports, and to provide information on the Safely Home Program. Additionally, long-term care and health care facilities were educated on their responsibilities in the event of a missing person incident and provided with prevention strategies and response tools. This training was provided through a series of workshops and presentations, provided jointly by the OPS and ASOC.

Training of OPS members was also improved and updated. Officers voluntarily attended a series of educational sessions administered by ASOC, in which national training materials (associated with the Safely Home Program) were piloted and refined. Patrol officers and supervisors were provided with a basic overview of search theory and lost-person behavior, along with initial search strategies that could be utilized in advance of the ESU deployment. This measure was designed to ensure that the OPS SAR response is effective from the moment a missing incident is reported. This is critical, as statistics provided by ASOC reveal that if persons with dementia are not located within 12 hours, they have a 50% chance of being found injured or dead.

ASOC also provided training designed to assist ESU members during ground search operations. Plans are now in place to provide training on Alzheimer disease and SAR strategies to new OPS recruits and to Patrol Division during regular Platoon training days.

In addition to this in-class training, several large search scenarios were held, aimed at improving SAR response and familiarizing ESU members with newly introduced deployment strategies. The first of these scenarios utilized the full resources of the OPS, including the mobile command post, the air unit, canine officers, bicycle and ATV officers, and Patrol Division. The scenario also involved more traditional OPS partner agencies such as the National Capital Commission, and the Ottawa Paramedic Service.

An additional scenario involved a police-response to a long-term care facility, for a missing person incident involving an elderly gentleman with Alzheimer disease. In order to benefit as many facilities as possible, long-term care and health care facilities citywide were invited to attend this training as observers.



Inspector Lance Valcours (standing) oversees a training exercise for long-term care and health care facilities, in which facility administrators are validating their missing person protocols.



OPS ESU officers prepare for ground search training exercise. From left: Constables Wayne Wilson, Scott Pettis, Tami Casselman, and Fernando Vieira.

The scenario required the host facility to simulate the activation of their missing person protocol, an exercise that allowed them and the observing facilities to validate their own missing person procedures. The subsequent police response then allowed them to witness the potential police response.

The final area of improvement made in the OPS SAR response was in technology. Several changes were made to the in-car mobile workstations to allow officers direct access to the Safely Home Registry.

Further improvements to the mobile workstation provides access to aerial photographs of the entire City of Ottawa; a valuable tool in the planning of ground search operations. Additional tools, such as a "Police Reference Card" for missing person incidents (emphasizing persons with dementia), were also designed by DAC, and incorporated a step-by-step response checklist for front-line supervisors and patrol officers. Furthermore, the funding provided by ASOC to the ESU has facilitated the acquisition of personal issue kit for ESU members and new technologies such as GPS units.

The results of these activities have exceeded initial expectations. Local registrations in the Safely Home Program have increased dramatically. Numerous long-

term care and health care facilities have implemented and/or revised missing person protocols for their respective facilities, based on the recommendations of the OPS. These procedures have accounted for several of these facilities locating their own missing residents, mitigating the need for a large-scale police response. Additionally, Patrol Division is having greater success in locating missing persons quickly, being equipped with their new knowledge of search strategies and lost person behavior.

Given these successes, the Dementia Assistance Committee, has been recognized by Chief Vince Bevan and nominated for several community-based policing awards. The Committee has been showcased at a national conference on disability issues and within the local media. More importantly however, the Ottawa Police Service has developed an effective model for change, which can be adopted and modified to meet future challenges.

Benefits of non-traditional community partnerships on the OPS Search and Rescue program have been numerous and profound. The positive value of an integrated community-police response to missing person incidents has been evident during a number of recent incidents, especially in the initial Patrol response phase. As police agencies seek to improve programs, they must work closely with traditional and non-traditional partners to develop comprehensive and sustainable solutions to community issues and crime problems. In the final analysis, the importance of these partnerships is in ensuring that police agencies remain relevant and vital organizations within their respective communities. **FL**

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