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NEWS

IS OPP EQUIPPED TO HANDLE MENTAL HEALTH CALLS?

TRAINED CRISIS WORKERS IN THE COMMUNITY READY TO RIDE ALONG WITH POLICE

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When 38-year-old Sheena Jackson was shot to death by police Aug. 5 in Burk's Falls, it again raised questions about whether local police are properly equipped to respond to mental health calls.

"If someone is having a mental health crisis now, they're going to be less likely to call the police and get that help," said Ryan Baptiste, an Almaguin mental health and addictions counsellor.

He and other trained professionals in the community are advocating to work with police to better respond to situations like Jackson's.

In 2019, Almaguin OPP received 70 calls for service related to the Mental Health Act. In 2020, that number climbed to 133. Data available for 2021 revealed 38 mental health-related calls as of March 31.

Almaguin OPP could not confirm by deadline the number of

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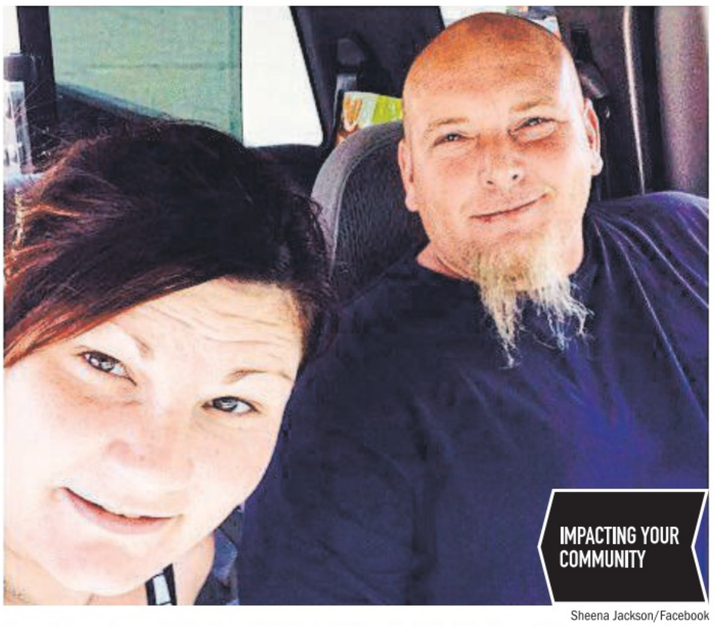

Sheena Jackson/Facebook

Sheena Jackson, who was killed by Almaguin Highlands OPP Aug. 5 in Burk's Falls, is here with her partner Devon Boston.

'THEY SHOT TO KILL'

WOMAN KILLED BY OPP

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Sheena Jackson was in pain but she was starting to get back on her feet.

The 38-year-old mother who split her time between Oshawa and Burk's Falls had just suffered the loss of a child, for the second time.

"That's the second kid she's had to bury," her older brother Roger Jackson said of his niece, who died in June. "Her son died at six of brain cancer. She was going through a lot."

It is still unclear exactly what happened Aug. 5 when Almaguin OPP were called to Ye Olde Cutter Camp, a campground and trailer park where Sheena and her partner Devon Boston spent their summers.

SIU, now investigating the incident, say Sheena was wielding a knife when police encountered her at 8:19 p.m. A witness in the park who heard the next 11 minutes unfold said Sheena was shot by 8:30 p.m.

Multiple shots were fired from the guns of two officers, SIU confirmed.

The coroner told Sheena's mother Melanie she was shot twice in the heart, Roger said.

"They didn't have to do that," he said, questioning why a Taser wasn't used instead. "They shot to kill. They didn't shoot to disarm someone, they shot to kill."

Metroland spoke with members of Sheena's family who said Boston called police that night "like he has done before" because Sheena was in need of help. They said she had a "very small knife, one for peeling potatoes" that she was waving around because she did not want to go to the hospital.

"She's not a violent person," Roger said. "I don't want her painted like this bad person. She was amazing."

Living with the grief from the sudden death of her 20-year-old daughter Chloe, in June and the loss of her 6-year-old son Kurtis to brain cancer in 2010, had led to her having a nervous breakdown, he said.

Sheena was in Burk's Falls where she and Boston had a cabin at the park, after she had taken a week of leave from her job in Oshawa.

A week ago, at a family barbecue Roger said his sister was in good spirits, having just secured a new job following her daughter's funeral.

He understands that what happened in the moments before the shooting created a stressful situation for everyone present and that officers need to protect themselves but he said he has been told by people present that his sister was 15 to 25 feet away from the of-

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GoFundMe photo

Chloe Faith Kreisz, left, and her mother Sheena Jackson of Burk's Falls. Kreisz died on June 18, 2021 and Jackson died Aug. 5, 2021.

PROTESTING AFTER OPP FATALLY SHOT WOMAN MULTIPLE TIMES

SHEENA JACKSON WAS KILLED AUG. 5

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Brenda Hovdebo never met Sheena Jackson, but when the 38-year-old died after being shot by Almaguin Highlands OPP Aug. 5, the Burk's Falls woman took a Sharpie, wrote "Distress Should (not equal) death" on a flattened box and took up a post outside the police station.

"I believe when you are called to a mental distress call of a middle-aged woman with a knife, it should not result in a death," said Hovdebo the evening of Aug. 9, talking over a rain storm, lightning and thunder booming.

Hovdebo called it quits for the day just before 5:30 p.m. She pledges to return daily and protest until "I am not moved to do it anymore."

> "(Sunday) I woke up and paced for a while and got my Sharpie and some cardboard and headed down."
>
> – Brenda Hovdebo

"(Sunday) I woke up and paced for a while and got my Sharpie and some cardboard and headed down," said Hovdebo, who also said she's not an activist for mental health.

On Monday, Aug. 9 a community member arrived with a chair for her after she spent the day before standing or sitting on a sheet on the ground. She's had community members bring her lunch and water. Another person joined in to protest later.

"I'll be back tomorrow," she said.

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MAN, 21 CHARGED WITH SEX OFFENCES

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A 21-year-old Magnetawan man has been charged with a number of offences in connection with an online child sexual exploitation investigation.

In a news release, Nottawasaga OPP said its Major Crime Unit arrested and charged Noah Dunnett on Aug. 5 following the execution of a search warrant at a home in Magnetawan.

The Child Exploitation Unit and Digital Forensics Unit assisted in the search, where several electronic exhibits were seized for examination.

Dunnett is charged with: luring a person under the age of 18 by means of telecommunication; possession of child pornography; luring a person under the age of 16 by means of telecommunication; indecent exposure to a person under the age of 16; distributing sexually explicit material to a person under the age of 16; and invitation to sexual touching under the age of 16.

Dunnett was released from

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COUNSELLOR WANTS BETTER MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT IN POLICING

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officers in its detachment, or whether crisis workers accompany them on calls.

Currently, Almaguin OPP works in partnership with Muskoka-Algonquin Healthcare at the Huntsville District Memorial Hospital through a referral system.

Jackson, a mother of three who lost her 20-year-old daughter in June, following the 2010 death of her six-year-old son from brain cancer, was grieving and on medical leave from work, her family said.

Family members said her partner Devon Boston, whom she rented a cabin with at the Burk's Falls campground where she was killed, had called that night for help. They said Jackson was breaking down.

In a statement, the Special Investigations Unit said Almaguin OPP arrived at 8:19 p.m., referring to Jackson as an "unwanted person" who was "wielding a knife."

Witnesses who heard the shooting said multiple shots were fired by 8:30 p.m. What transpired in those 11 minutes is unclear.

> "Why the police? Yeah, we're not social workers."
> – Bracebridge OPP Const. Samantha Bigley

Details are scarce as the shooting is under investigation and neither police nor the SIU will comment.

"You're not trying to de-escalate by yelling at someone in mental distress," Baptiste said. "Even just the yelling is going to bring somebody (in crisis) up."

Trained in de-escalation techniques and non-violent crisis intervention at the Crisis Prevention Institute, Baptiste wants to see better mental health support in policing. He thinks crisis workers should be on scene when officers respond to mental health calls; at least one assigned to every detachment, he said.

"A lot of counsellors now are happy to volunteer to do it just so things like (Jackson's death) don't happen," he said. "Just slap a vest on us, just in case, and stick us in the car."

Sarah Cooke/Metroland

Burk's Falls mental health advocate Ryan Baptiste says he would like to see at least one mental health crisis worker per police detachment to aid in mental health-related calls.

SIU records show Almaguin OPP has been investigated by the civilian watchdog three times. One investigation was from 2019, after a man overdosed in police custody and later died in hospital. No charges were laid. A sexual assault allegation from September 2020 is ongoing and now the Aug. 5 shooting death of Jackson is under investigation.

A mental health professional is trained to help those experiencing a crisis, Baptiste said, "whereas (police are) not — they're trained to know the laws and they're trained to enforce the laws."

Mental health is integrated into classroom and practical training all police recruits are required to complete in a 12-week program at Ontario Police College, said Brent Ross, spokesperson for the Ministry of the Solicitor General.

Officers attend OPC and receive training through their respective police services who "should review" the Policing Standards Manual annually, Ross said. It includes information on mental illness and communication awareness, mediation skills and de-escalation.

Training is provided by civilians and police officers with specialized knowledge, he said. "The content is developed and reviewed by mental health professionals with various accreditations."

Lethal force, Ross said, it always a last resort. "When lethal force is necessary, a recruit is taught to employ their firearm and aim for the thoracic area (vital organs — resulting in rapid incapacitation as well as minimizing the possibility of injuring bystanders)."

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: The police shooting death of Sheena Jackson raises serious questions about how officers interact with members of the public so we thought it important to look at police mental health training.

PRIORITIZING SAFETY?

In South Muskoka, Bracebridge OPP Const. Samantha Bigley rides two days a week with a Canadian Mental Health Association crisis support worker. Similar programs are being developed at other detachments, she said.

Currently, Almaguin OPP works in partnership with Muskoka-Algonquin Healthcare at the Huntsville District Memorial Hospital through a referral system "to ensure citizens in need have access to services."

Asked why police are sent to mental health calls at all, Bigley said if someone expresses to a mental health helpline they intend to injure themselves, 911 is immediately called. Public and officer safety is always a priority, she said, citing the staunch police motto, preservation of life.

"Most often it goes fine because police training these days isn't like it was 40 years ago, so we're very mindful of peoples' mental state," she said, admitting there is always room for improvement.

As the intersection of addictions and mental health becomes more commonly understood, she said the training evolves.

Still, the question of who responds when and how remains. "Why the police?" Bigley asked. "Yeah, we're not social workers."

SHOOTING VICTIM'S BROTHER EXPRESSES PAIN, ANGER

Continued from page 1

ficers.

They are trained professionals, he said, and they did not handle the situation accordingly, in his opinion.

"I would like to know the whole story but we're not getting it," he said.

On Aug. 9 a protester sat outside the Almaguin OPP detachment in a lawn chair with two signs. One read, "Distress should (not equal) death" and the other, "Surely, there are options."

Matthew Orr, whose family owns the park, also said Boston was the one who called police. "The important thing that hasn't been conveyed is that it was a call regarding a mental health incident."

Roger, a father of three, put it plainly: "If you bury your daughter, you already bury your son, you wouldn't be in your right mind."

"She was murdered in my mind," he said. "We can't even trust the police anymore. They're supposed to protect, not kill."

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