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Mass Casualty Commission calls for policing transformation

By Raissa Tetanish

raissatetanish@advocatemediac.com

Restructuring the RCMP, a change in policing education, government Mutual Accountability Body, changes to firearms restrictions and creating a framework for tracking mass casualties.

Those are just some of the 130 recommendations included in the Mass Casualty Commission's final report released on March 30. Of those recommendations, 75 fell under the commission's "policing" volume. The final report is available on the Mass Casualty Commission's website.

The report is the final step in a two and a half-year process looking into what happened in Nova Scotia in April 2020 when a gunman killed 22 people, including a pregnant woman, injured a number of others, and set multiple fires.

Commissioner Michael MacDonald, chair of the commission, said the commission's mandate was broad in scope, with he, Leanne Fitch and Kim Stanton looking at what happened, how and why it happened, and what lessons were learned.

"Our focus and findings are on how institutional, structural and systemic factors shaped or were reflected in the actions of individuals," said MacDonald, during the proceedings. "However, we do not shy away from declaring hard truths and accountability. We identify them precisely so we can learn from them and do better."

Fitch said they designed the recommendations with two objectives in mind.

"One, how can we prevent violence from happening in the first place, and second, when violence does occur, how can we ensure we have an effective approach, and, when need be, an effective critical response."

Attaining these objectives, says Fitch, will decrease the likelihood of similar incidents and "minimize the lethality" of critical incidents.

"Together we can substantially decrease the threat and impact of violence, including mass violence," said Fitch.

The commissioners focused on three pillars for their report - community, policing and violence.

"This helped to connect the dots between specific facts, issues, contexts, causes and consequences," said Stanton.

Many of the main findings in the report pinpoint the RCMP's failures surrounding its response to the situation, including vague and inaccurate communication with the public and families, poor navigation technology and not



Mass Casualty commissioners Leanne Fitch, from left, chairperson Michael MacDonald and Kim Stanton responded to media questions following the release of the commissioners' final report into the April 2020 tragedy that saw a perpetrator kill 22 Nova Scotians.

(Tetanish photo)

having a critical incident commander in place, which meant roles and responsibilities were unclear. The RCMP's communications misled people about the severity of the unfolding event and the risk the perpetrator posed to the public. The findings also spoke to inconsistent information from witnesses being relayed to officers, including the fact several eyewitnesses and 911 callers gave descriptions of the replica RCMP vehicle and clothing the perpetrator possessed.

Fitch says the report shares specific steps the RCMP, municipal police and other public safety partners can take for improving preparedness for critical incidents, planning and response.

"These changes will help better protect community members and the police officers who step up to respond to critical incidents," said Fitch.

She said the commissioners, in their report, emphasize that "effective police agencies are learning institutions."

Those within police agencies, she says, are "capable of recognizing and responding to the changing expectations of their communities."

She also says they can learn from their mistakes in order to do better in the future.

The final report documents at length the violent history of the perpetrator, which included family violence dating back through several generations.

The commissioners say the

pattern of escalation to mass casualties from gender-based violence is "well established."

"It is alarming to know that some people responded to the early RCMP communications on the night of April 18, 2020, by thinking, 'It's a domestic situation,'" reads the report.

The commissioners say this mistaken implication is that a "domestic situation" doesn't set off warning bells.

"And yet it should, not because every incident of gender-based or family violence will result in mass casualties, but because the first step in prevention is in recognizing the danger of escalation inherent in all forms of violence.

"As commissioners, we believe this lesson to be the single most important one to be learned from this mass casualty. Let us not look away again."

MacDonald said no one could have predicted the perpetrator's actions in April 2020, however "his pattern and escalation of violence could have and should have been addressed."

"The evidence shows clearly that those who perpetrate mass casualties often have an unaddressed history of gender-based, intimate partner or family violence," said MacDonald.

The commission made numerous recommendations surrounding gender-based violence, including the development and delivery of prevention materials and social awareness programs that counter victim blaming and hyper-respon-

sibilization, or holding someone to higher standards than that of the average person, of women survivors of gender-based violence.

There's also a recommendation to create safe spaces for reporting violence and government funding to end gender-based violence should commensurate the scale of the problem.

"It should prioritize prevention and provide women survivors with paths to safety," the report recommendation reads.

One of the lessons learned the commissioners pointed out, was the province hasn't fully met the needs of the communities most affected - Colchester, Cumberland and Hants counties - in terms of mental health, grief and bereavement supports.

This, they say, has resulted in a "health deficit and public health emergency."

"The long-term impact of unresolved complicated grief and traumatic loss can be devastating to individuals and is counter to the community deep-seated need to build a positive community legacy," reads the report.

The commission is recommending the provincial and federal governments address public health emergency and jointly fund a program by May 1. The recommendation includes a local multidisciplinary team of health professionals developing and implementing the program with the ability to draw on external resources as needed. It should,

says the report, provide concerted supports on an urgent basis and transition to long-term care over time. The recommendation includes funding the program to carry out needs and impact assessments in 2023, 2025 and 2028.

Within the policing recommendations, the commissioners touched on a number of points, including revitalizing rural policing and adequate police services in rural and remote communities.

They are also calling for the federal public safety minister to undertake a comprehensive external review, specifically examining the RCMP's approach to contract policing and work with contract partners, and also its approach to community relations. Following the review, the commission is recommending Public Safety Canada and the minister restructure the RCMP, making clear the RCMP's priorities, retaining the tasks suitable to a federal policing agency, and identifying responsibilities that may be better reassigned to other agencies.

"This may entail a reconfiguration of policing in Canada and a new approach to federal financial support for provincial and municipal policing services," reads the recommendation.

Another recommendation the commissioners are making is to

phase out the RCMP's training depot in Saskatchewan by 2032 and replace it with a three-year degree-based model of police education for all police services across the country. The recommendation is that Public Safety Canada work with provinces and territories on the educational model, which may also mean partnering with existing institutions of higher education, and collaborating with ministries of higher education and research, and ministers responsible for policing. Public Safety Canada, in implementing the program, should "consult with the Finnish Police University College and Finnish Police in the design of this program."

The commission is also recommending a fundamental review of the Alert Ready system to determine if and how the system could be reformed so it meets the legal responsibility to warn the population of an emergency that threatens life, livelihoods and property. It would be a joint review between the federal, provincial and territorial governments.

The commissioners say it's not just on a single person or organization to implement all the recommendations, that it's a shared responsibility between many Canadian and Nova Scotia agencies in the public safety systems, as well as community groups and the public.

"Shared responsibility is effective only when it is led by champions; advocated for by stakeholders, communities, and individuals; and supported through mechanisms for monitoring and accountability."

The recommendation is for the federal and Nova Scotia governments to establish and fund a Mutual Accountability Body by May 31 that would provide "mutual accountability, exchange of knowledge, and support among all organizations and actors involved in the implementation process."

The accountability body would consult with the public on priority areas for action and strategies, establish a monitoring framework, and monitor it on an ongoing basis.

MacDonald called the report a blueprint for preventing future tragedies and a blueprint for recognizing the lives of the 22 victims weren't taken in vain.

"They cannot have been taken in vain," he said, calling on all leaders - political, police, policy makers, and more - to do right by all those who remain suffering in heartache.

"Future acts of violence are preventable, if we have the will to do what is necessary."

For more Mass Casualty Coverage, see page 7.



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