

Crown Jewels for Mental Health WordPress blog entry

<https://crownjewels4mh.wordpress.com/2014/07/25/helpless-helpers/>

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# HELPLESS HELPERS: A CALL TO ACTION?

*By Emilio Barends*

What happens when those who serve to help us have no one to help them?

Recent news reports have shed light on the struggle that police officers and other first responders – both in Ontario and the rest of Canada – face when dealing with mental illness in their workplace.

CityNews ran a story<sup>1</sup> on July 16 on the plight of former Toronto police Sgt. Simon Fraser who became a “virtual outcast” within the Toronto Police Service (TPS) after he was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He eventually left the force after having served for 28 years.

Fraser’s PTSD was triggered by a series of phone calls that left him deeply traumatized. He underwent treatment and soon his family doctor allowed him to resume his full duties. After returning to work, Fraser submitted an Injured on Duty form for PTSD. As a consequence, he “got transferred off of my platoon and assigned to an empty desk in the basement of my station,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.citynews.ca/2014/07/16/exclusive-former-toronto-police-sgt-says-force-is-failing-officers-on-mental-health/>

no computer, no phone, no duties.” That was a big step down for him, as he has been running “city-wide squads and task forces.”

Police Chief Bill Blair countered that the force has taken steps to address mental illness among its members, “including hiring two full-time psychologists,” but Fraser maintains his position that the TPS is not doing enough.

A similar story<sup>2</sup> was published by Global News regarding mental illness among first responders across Canada. An alarming 11 first responders across Canada – seven of whom were from Ontario – had killed themselves over a period of 10 weeks.

Vince Savoia, a former paramedic and founder of the Tema Conter Memorial Trust (which promotes mental health awareness among first responders in Canada), argues that PTSD and other mental illnesses are behind these suicides. Savoia himself developed PTSD in 1988 after he saw the brutal murder scene of 25-year-old Tema Conter.

He too blames a non-supportive workplace atmosphere for these cases, where mental illness is seen as a sign of weakness rather than a call for help – much like the calls that they themselves respond to as paramedics, police officers, firefighters, etc.

Both of these stories beg the question posed at the top of this post: what happens when those who serve to help us have no one to help them? Do we, the general population, have a duty to help these people, to raise awareness of their situation, to somehow promote proper education on the subject matter? Let us know in the comments!

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<sup>2</sup> <http://globalnews.ca/news/1455093/11-first-responders-have-killed-themselves-in-the-past-ten-weeks/>