



Canadian policing wellness check conference 2023

Justine Reid*

ABSTRACT

Across the globe, leaders in policing are increasingly recognizing the urgency and significance of addressing the health and wellness of law enforcement personnel as concerning trends related to the mental health of officers continue to grow. Emerging from three years of some of the most challenging circumstances that Canadian policing has faced, and over five years since the last national check-in, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACP) designed the 2023 Canadian Policing Wellness Check Conference to bring about a renewed sense of focus to the wellness of the policing community. Organized by the CACP and moderated by esteemed advisor and educator Norm Taylor, the conference brought together 176 delegates, speakers, sponsors, and leaders from the international and national policing and mental health communities for an inspiring, fast-paced two-day conference at the Fairmont Château Laurier in Ottawa, Ontario, on March 7 and 8, 2023. The following paper provides a comprehensive report on the proceedings.

Key Words Police mental health; police leadership; post-traumatic stress; workplace mental health.

SETTING THE STAGE

The sworn and civilian employees who comprise the Canadian police and related community safety and well-being (CSWB) sectors are slowly emerging from a three-year period unlike any other in their collective experience. While all Canadians also experienced the dual challenges of a global pandemic amid the heightened prominence of long-standing social equity issues, all human service providers had the additional challenge of continuing to serve others under uniquely demanding conditions at work and at home. In addition, during this same period, perhaps more than any other public service sector, policing has faced a steep increase in public and media scrutiny, many volatile and high-profile circumstances, and a perceived erosion of already fragile trust with many communities and interests.

The mental health and general wellness issues facing police were already the subject of considerable and rapidly growing attention prior to 2020. The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACP) hosted two national conferences on these issues in 2015 and 2017. Each of these events led to notable advances in the national awareness and study of police employee wellness and related expanded programming.

The full effect of this recent period upon the sector and its employees remains highly anecdotal at this stage. However, it is safe to assume that the momentum behind many promising initiatives has been affected to a considerable degree, while

the underlying conditions have worsened to acute levels. Staffing gaps, degraded workplace morale, work-life balance challenges, and general health conditions have combined with unprecedented levels of fatigue, anxiety, and other mental health conditions to place all employees at a heightened risk, while the sector itself also faces existential challenges in terms of the public trust that is essential to the Canadian policing model.

2023 OBJECTIVES, GOALS AND STRUCTURE

Wellness checks are not an unfamiliar concept in the policing community, at least not as they relate to checking in on the health and well-being of community members as a common part of the job. What is less familiar, however, is the application of a similar internal check on the individuals who regularly conduct these checks on others. Acknowledging the need to turn wellness checks inwards on the policing community, the objective of the 2023 CACP Conference was to do just that—check in on the well-being of Canadian law enforcement personnel following an emotionally and physically taxing three years of frontline pandemic response, heightened media scrutiny, alarming levels of violent incidents against police, and perceived eroded trust in communities, and focus the conversation inward on what must be done to protect those who dedicate their lives to protecting our communities.

Correspondence to: Justine Reid, Master of Public Health (MPH). E-mail: justinekreid@outlook.com

To cite: Reid, J. (2023). Canadian policing wellness check conference 2023. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 8(2), 57–65. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.325>

© Author(s) 2023. Open Access. This work is distributed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license. For commercial re-use, please contact sales@sgpublishing.ca.

SG PUBLISHING Published by SG Publishing Inc. **CSKA** Official publication of the Community Safety Knowledge Alliance.

As provided in the conference program, the overarching goal of the 2023 Policing Wellness Check Conference was as follows: to establish a renewed national baseline upon which to build continued developments in the policies, practices, and knowledge bases for improving mental health and general wellness outcomes for police service employees, their families, and their CSWB partners; to examine and remedy inequities experienced in wellness outcomes and available services; to restore momentum to the most promising prior initiatives; and to highlight and advance innovative forward strategies based on new lessons learned.

Additional stated objectives were to:

- 1) Share new quantitative and/or qualitative insights into the direct and varied impacts of 2020–2022 upon the wellness conditions facing Canadian police employees and their key CSWB partners.
- 2) Examine the nature and experience of these impacts to determine inequities in the impacts themselves, as well as in the supports, remedies, and access available to all employees across the system, and to devise appropriate action plans to address evident disparities.
- 3) Showcase, examine, and advance recently emerging and promising policies, practices, and knowledge models for others to apply.
- 4) Determine new and existing gaps in the policies, practices, and knowledge base surrounding police employee (and family) wellness, and potential solutions to address these gaps.
- 5) Develop a shared plan for both urgent and longer-term actions among key partners, including police agencies, CACP standing committees, associations, governments, health and mental health providers, and researchers.

To achieve these objectives, the conference drew on knowledge from the broad sectors of policing, mental health, occupational health, human resources, policy, and research to form the following ten sessions:

- Session 1: CACP Standing Committee Perspectives: The Current State of Wellness in the Canadian Policing Sector – What We Know, What We’re Seeing, What We’re Doing & What More Needs to be Done
- Session 2: The Wellness Journey in the United Kingdom – Oscar Kilo
- Session 3: Managing the Wellness Impact on Police Capacity – Case Studies in Successful Return-to-Work Strategies
- Session 4: Using the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace to Advance the Wellness Culture in Policing
- Session 5: Showcase Sessions – Emerging and Promising Practices in Police Wellness
- Session 6: Deconstructing Impacts & Responses to Tragic Experiences in Policing – Three Case Studies
- Session 7: RCMP Longitudinal PTSD Study – Project Design & Initial Results
- Session 8: Caring for Those who Protect Us – Exploring

Best Practices and Interventions for Police Psychological Support after a Potentially Traumatic Event

- Session 9: Updating the Evidence to Support Police Wellness in an Environment of New Challenges
- Session 10: Town Hall Session – Resetting the Baseline and Looking Forward to an Equitable Culture of Wellness in Canadian Policing

SESSION SUMMARIES

Day One: Laying the Groundwork

Following reflections and an opening prayer delivered by Monique Manatch, Anishinaabe Algonquin Knowledge Keeper and member of the Algonquins of Barriere Lake, a sense of hope, commitment, and obligation was evident throughout the room as day one of the conference began. Taking to the stage for opening remarks, Chief Danny Smyth of the Winnipeg Police Service, and President of the CACP, welcomed participants and reflected on the challenges experienced by the policing community and the broader society over the last three years. He acknowledged the context of eroding public trust and deterioration within the sector and spoke candidly about the many internal pressures that services are collectively facing. Setting the tone for the next two days, he had a clear message for those in attendance: this year’s event is about healing, restoring focus, and bringing about a renewed sense of hope to restore wellness among those who put their lives on the line to serve and protect. It is about a path forward.

Echoing those sentiments, Karla Thorpe, Vice President of External Affairs and Development at the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), underscored how tirelessly officers have worked over the last few years, all while directly in harm’s way during the pandemic. Though significant strides have been made to address mental health stigma within the policing community, she acknowledged that many continue to suffer in silence and ongoing work is needed to address the unique challenges at play for officers. She pointed out that the MHCC is working hard to raise awareness and promote mental health in first responder settings through initiatives like The Working Mind and Mental Health First Aid, and called on those in attendance to approach this year’s event with an openness and a willingness to learn.

Session 1: CACP Standing Committee Perspectives: The Current State of Wellness in the Canadian Policing Sector—What We Know, What We’re Seeing, What We’re Doing & What More Needs to be Done

Turning to members from three of the CACP’s standing committees, the first session laid the groundwork for the next two days by bringing attention to the current state of wellness in Canadian policing. Dr. Kyle Handley, Staff Psychologist at York Regional Police Service and Chair of the CACP Psychological Services Committee, opened, noting how the focus of mental health and well-being in Canadian policing has experienced a period of tremendous growth and innovation in response to current issues in policing since these conversations began in 2013. With this rapid growth, however, the sector has also seen a rapid increase in the demand for training, programs, and services, leading to a gap in the current evidence base to support officers. Defining a path forward for wellness in Canadian policing and reshaping the culture around wellness

requires inclusive and innovative approaches to current issues and challenging long-held beliefs. Showcasing the York Regional Police Wellness Centre, a first of its kind police-run service in Canada, Dr. Handley explained the need for eliminating barriers for officers accessing care and operating a consistent system of support, and the importance of aligning federal and provincial services to better support members of the policing community.

Focusing on the aspect of prevention, Dr. Vivien Lee, Chief Psychologist and Commander with the Healthy Workplace Team at the Ontario Provincial Police and member of the CACP Psychological Services Committee, spoke to the need to prioritize and address the root causes of mental health and wellness in the workplace. Drawing from her experience of overseeing the implementation of the Ontario Provincial Police's (OPP's) Healthy Workplace Teams, Dr. Lee spoke to the importance of providing supervisors, managers, and senior leadership with training to promote the implementation of the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace to advance the wellness culture in policing. Referring to a culture of secrecy and stigma around talking about mental health that is known all too well in the policing community, she emphasized the need for organizations to be proactive in addressing the causes of poor mental health outcomes and to ensure that early intervention is a priority of organizational wellness programs. Instead of only seeing people when they are having a tough time, she would like to see a shift to where clinicians and leaders are involved in the day-to-day aspects of policing wellness and seen as a resource to help make every day better and healthier, not just the bad days.

In the next presentation, Deputy Chief Lucie Tremblay of the Via Rail Canada Police Service and Co-Chair of the CACP Human Resources & Learning Committee presented on the mandate and focus of the recently formed CACP standing committee and provided insight into some of the key emerging issues that the team is turning their attention to. Key topics on the committee's radar include competency-based management, cyber-crime training and awareness, and policing wellness and mental health. She invited police agencies to take advantage of the event, to ask questions, and to bring lessons learned back to their respective organizations surrounding best practices in policing wellness to keep the momentum going.

Joining Deputy Chief Tremblay to speak about the results of the Human Resources & Learning Committee's 2022 strategic planning sessions, Director General Jennifer Richens of the RCMP, and Co-Chair of the committee, provided an overview of the committee's action plan and how they are working to further refine their strategy based on identified best practices. She explained that they are striving to promote a culture of active inquiry and identified key priorities for the committee, including identifying increased opportunities for training and learning, enhancing employee wellness in the workplace, and addressing current challenges related to recruitment and retention. These priorities will form the basis of the committee's work until 2025, with desired outcomes resulting in the development of stronger peer networks for officers, a decline in grievances and sick leave, and the development of a collective path forward. She, too, echoed the sentiments that policing leaders must work together to

find solutions to enhance well-being and address the need to bring the next generation of officers to recruitment fairs.

Next, attendees heard from Alicia Lauzon, Equity and Inclusion Specialist with York Regional Police Service and member of the CACP Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Committee, as she spoke of the value of fostering an inclusive workplace. Stemming from the 2018 CACP Executive Global Studies Program Report, the EDI committee was formed in response to a call to action for a national inclusion working group to: challenge and change our assimilative policing culture, widen all pathways to talent, and engage in courageous leadership. Referencing a Catalyst study of over 700 Canadian participants, she discussed the concept of "emotional tax"—the combination of feeling different from peers at work because of gender, race, and/or ethnicity, and being on guard to experiences of bias—and the associated effects on health, well-being, and the ability to thrive at work. She shared that not only are staff who are experiencing emotional tax more likely to consider leaving their jobs, but these patterns of behaviour and a perceived need to assimilate into the police culture may also lead to significant psychological injuries for members. She emphasized that to improve well-being in the workplace, EDI needs to be a top priority for leaders and integrated into everything the organization does, noting that someone who feels included and feels that they belong in the workplace is someone who is well.

Session 2: The Wellness Journey in the United Kingdom—Oscar Kilo

Stepping out of the Canadian context for the next session, guest speaker Andy Rhodes, Service Director of Oscar Kilo, the National Police Well-Being Service (NPWS) in the United Kingdom, took to the floor to share his experience of the policing wellness journey across the pond. Growing from a small working group in 2016, Oscar Kilo is a first-of-its kind service developed by police for police to address the diverse needs of those working in law enforcement. Through a range of specialized and unique services, including the deployment of wellness vans that provide outreach services to officers directly at their workplace, along with extensive research and data collection initiatives, Oscar Kilo seeks to equip police organizations with the support and guidance needed to improve and maintain employee well-being.

Referencing findings from Oscar Kilo's latest research activities, in which input from over 36,000 officers was received through a national survey, Rhodes highlighted that the transactional side of the job is very rarely where issues occur. Instead, it is the emotional toll of policing culture and hindrance stressors (i.e., the organizational factors) that are driving negative outcomes in this line of work. The good news, however, is that the data shows that most of these stressors are things that can be addressed. To effectively do so, he underscored that interventions must acknowledge the complex relationships between individual and organizational responsibility. No intervention will survive contact with policing culture if it is not engaged at the forefront of the culture with the leaders. Before organizations can start to build in effective well-being support, building trust amongst staff and senior leadership is vital. Oscar Kilo helps organizations do this critical work through its Blue Light Wellbeing Framework, which he urged leaders to explore.

Speaking to additional research objectives, he presented work undertaken by Oscar Kilo to track the relationship between types of policing roles and the impact of potentially traumatic events on officers' mental health—noting that while we are great at keeping records of physical health exposures (e.g., falls and fractures) in policing, something similar is not in place for psychological health exposures. He pointed to the value of data that can be collected via wearable technology that records users' biometric information, demonstrating how it has the potential to significantly alter the game for policing wellness research by providing opportunities to measure stress responses following exposure to a potentially traumatic event. Lastly, acknowledging how policing wellness work cannot be done in silos, he provided an overview of the recently enacted *Police Covenant*, a critical piece of UK legislation that brings into law the commitment to support the mental health and well-being of officers, staff, and their families.

When asked by session moderator Grant Edwards, Retired Commander of the Australian Federal Police, what he saw as the critical challenges needing to be addressed in policing, he spoke to the issues of high turnover rates, and improving diversity and inclusion within services, particularly when it comes to gender and addressing varying health needs. He underscored the value that can be gained from listening to staff voices, emphasizing that this is something that organizations can do for free, and challenged leaders in the room to not overlook the significance of employee engagement.

Session 3: Managing the Wellness Impact on Police Capacity—Case Studies in Successful Return-to-Work Strategies

Beginning the session on successful return-to-work strategies was Chief Paul VandeGraaf of the Cobourg Police Service. Speaking of his personal investment in improving policing wellness, Chief VandeGraaf outlined the changing nature of policing and the compelling fact that there is not a single person serving today who has not managed an operational stress injury. Urging that this cycle must be changed, while acknowledging that some level of harm is almost inevitable in this line of work, he challenged attendees to think critically about what is being done to protect the next generation of officers entering the profession. He emphasized the need to engage with and learn from staff who are off work and cautioned about the impacts of being blind to the system that people face when they return to work. Outlining the steps that need to be taken moving forward, he stressed the importance of early intervention and providing meaningful work that is informed by an employee's interests when they return to the job. His insightful presentation concluded with the observation that we cannot continue to recruit people and break them. To support staff in returning to work, we must paint a vision of growth and ability, not restrictions.

The second half of the session was led by Dr. Katy Kamkar, Clinical Psychologist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry with the Temerty Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto. Referencing current literature on disability management, return to work, and inclusive leadership, Dr. Kamkar discussed the significant impact that organizational stressors can have on an individual's mental health and well-being, and the benefit of collaborative care

models in helping employees return to work following a mental health-related absence. She pointed to the significant rising costs associated with presenteeism and sub-optimal performance as a result of occupational stressors, in addition to rising mental health needs and absenteeism costs. She drew attention to the importance of building resiliency at both the individual and organizational level, and the need for a systemic, holistic, and whole-of-person approach to return-to-work strategies. What used to be an administrative back-to-work perspective, Dr. Kamkar noted, is now being transformed into a collaborative care model. To minimize the risk of moral distress, optimize the prognosis for recovery, and effectively return employees to work, approaches must operate under a continual care pathway and prioritize meaningful work, gradual returns, and continuous training to help employees regain their capacity.

Session 4: Using the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace to Advance the Wellness Culture in Policing

Building on the theme of occupational health and well-being, the next session featured presentations on the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace by Karla Thorpe, Vice President of External Affairs and Development at MHCC, and Lauren Bernardi, Lawyer and Human Resource Advisor with Bernardi Human Resource Law.

Speaking to a renewed focus on workplace mental health at the MHCC, Thorpe opened the session with an overview of the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (the "Standard"). Designed to help promote mental health and prevent psychological harm at work, the Standard provides a framework to assist organizations in advancing workplace mental health by aiming to reduce stigma, recognize the signs and symptoms of mental illness, and educate management on the impacts of trauma and stress at work. Acknowledging the profound impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the Canadian population, especially among frontline workers and those who are marginalized, Karla spoke about how these challenges led to targeted work on sector-specific mental health resources and trauma-informed resiliency initiatives, including resources for police and first responders. The key to successful implementation of the Standard in your workplace, she said, is identifying a set of champions who can help drive positive change.

Next, Lauren Bernardi, trained in law and human resources, walked the audience through the 13 psychosocial factors for psychological health and safety in the workplace and applying the Standard to the policing workforce and culture. Referring to the factors as a collection of organizational, job-related, and interpersonal elements, Lauren singled out how civility and respect, on the one hand, and clear leadership and expectations, on the other, are the two factors they encounter as challenges most often across organizations, especially regarding the current state of workplace bullying and harassment present in policing. She discussed the presence of an overwhelming fight instead of a collective approach to adjust this culture and cautioned about the harms of not paying attention to micro-incivilities until they become serious issues. Lauren urged policing leaders to "sweat the small stuff" and to set the standards for acceptable (and unacceptable) behaviour in their services. Ending with a quote from Hermes

Trismegistus, “as above, so below, as within, so without...,” she underscored how actions at the top of an organization among supervisors and leaders have the power to be translated into group change within the workplace.

Following the presentations, the floor was opened to the audience, who supplemented the conversation with their own questions, comments, and perspectives stemming from the content. This led to discussions around what it means to be an authentic leader, the value of reviewing internal policies for implicit biases and inequities that may be present, and a broader conversation about the need to build awareness within policing leadership to better prepare officers for the psychological demands of the job and support in this area. The key takeaway: there are no winners and losers in authentic inclusion. Transforming workplace culture is complex, but a sustained and collective effort can lead to positive change.

Session 5: Showcase Sessions—Emerging and Promising Practices in Police Wellness

Shifting the pace of the addresses, the final session of day one consisted of five 20-minute presentations on a variety of topics relating to emerging and promising practices in police wellness. From learning about the power of awe and sleep, to encouraging case studies from the MHCC, Lethbridge Police Service, and the RCMP, there was no shortage of information and lessons learned to be gleaned from the afternoon showcase sessions.

The Awe Project for Resilience

Combining high impact with some well-received levity at the end of an action-packed first day, Dr. Jeff Thompson, Research Scientist in the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University and Retired NYPD Detective, captivated the audience with his presentation on “Leadership & Awe.” Defining awe as “a complex emotion that captivates a person in the presence of something or someone extraordinary and challenges their thinking,” he spoke of the emotion as a gateway to other resilience practices. In his address, he outlined the many potential benefits of experiencing awe, all of which are backed by extensive research that was cited throughout his presentation. By encouraging delegates to think about moments when they experienced awe in their lives, he demonstrated that awe can be experienced in a variety of ways and that it is something that we all have access to at any time, in any place. Acknowledging that it is not a silver bullet to fix the challenges of policing, he described awe as a powerful tool that can be used alongside other evidence-based resilience practices to shift our perspectives of how we respond to challenging situations. He stressed that there is no finish line to the work that we do and that the best way to motivate your workforce is to show them that you are doing your best. Positivity is something that we need to make space for and make a priority within our services, because if you do not make time for the good, there is no balance during the bad. For more information about The Awe Project, visit 5daysofawe.com.

The Role of Sleep

Next, Dr. Philippe Stenstrom, Scientific Director and Co-Founder of HALEO Clinic, and Julien Heon, Vice-President of Growth and Client Success at HALEO, provided an informative presentation on the importance of sleep in maintaining

physical and mental wellness. Recognizing the high correlation between sleep and the current challenges that police services are facing, HALEO has shifted focus to the policing sector to help services better understand the impact of sleep on officers’ job performance, wellness, and safety. They highlighted how quality sleep is especially important in policing given the nature of rotating shiftwork and the frequent exposure to stressful and potentially traumatic events. If left untreated, poor-quality sleep and chronic insomnia can lead to impaired cognitive functioning and loss of productivity for officers, as well as increased risks of developing anxiety, depression, and addiction disorders. Speaking to the latest research and strategies for improving sleep, they shared promising findings from their Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) program, which was recently adapted for law enforcement. Collaborating with the Montreal Police Department, they found that officers who participated in the program reported lower medication use, lower anxiety, and lower suicidal ideation. A benefit of CBT-I, they shared, was that it can help address mental health symptoms, even if the individual is not yet willing to speak about them.

MHCC Innovative Cross-Over Case Studies from First Responders

In the third showcase session, Dr. Julie MacMillan-Devlin brought attention to the critical role that policing leaders play when it comes to ensuring the well-being of their staff. Building on the content presented earlier in the day by Karla Thorpe and Lauren Bernardi, Dr. MacMillan-Devlin provided an overview of the MHCC’s The Working Mind First Responders (TWMFR) program, an adaptation of the original The Working Mind course designed specifically for first responders and public safety personnel. She spoke to the challenges of reducing stigma in policing culture, noting how there is still a prevailing fear of saying or doing the wrong thing when talking about mental health. To help address this, she suggests demystifying the conversation and shifting the focus to what *keeps you healthy* versus what makes you sick. She mentioned the significance of leading by example and modelling positive coping strategies by having regular check-ins and conversations with staff—during both the good and the bad times of policing, she stressed. She encouraged policing leaders in attendance to start, if they are going to do any mental health training, with The Working Mind training and urged leaders to be brave and willing to start the conversations on wellness within their services.

Hands-On Wellness Leadership: A Case Study

For sustainable change to occur within the policing culture, leaders must play an active and visible role in their organizations to create an environment where staff feel safe, supported, and valued. Speaking about how this can be achieved, Chief Shahin Mehdizadeh of the Lethbridge Police Service provided an inspiring presentation on the steps he took as Chief of Police to increase organizational wellness and his experience as the first service in Canada to implement the Active Bystander in Law Enforcement (ABLE) training. Chief Mehdizadeh joined the Lethbridge Police Service in September 2020, and he spoke to the value of making connections with all employees, addressing issues of the past, and looking to the future with confidence and pride in your team. He highlighted the

significance of employee-driven initiatives and underscored that an organization's most important asset is its people, including the families of officers. As he shared the findings from the service's latest employee survey and improvements were seen across the board in satisfaction and engagement, the impacts of these efforts were evident.

RCMP Periodic Psychological Health Screening Project

In the final showcase session, Dr. Norman Shields, RCMP National Chief Psychologist, provided a high-level overview of the RCMP's Psychological Health Screening Program (PHSP) and lessons that can be learned from its implementation. With increasing empirical literature highlighting the prevalence of mental health conditions among public safety personnel, the PHSP began in 2021 as a proactive approach to protect the psychological well-being of RCMP members. Through a series of psychological health screening questions and semi-structured interviews, Dr. Shields explained that the PHSP enables the psychologist and member to engage in a member-centred constructive conversation about their psychological health and well-being and identify opportunities for early intervention in the event of a traumatic exposure. The hope is that administering the PHSP to all members will help reduce stigma around seeking mental health support. It is important to note that, given that policing is an inherently stressful and hazardous occupation, the PHSP operates under a secondary prevention model that assumes that mental health conditions are likely the rule, and not the exception. Dr. Shields stressed that workplaces and wellness programs need to reflect this assumption, and that programs must be designed to support all members from the outset.

Day Two: Leading Evidence-Informed Action

Following a content-heavy first day, day two of the Policing Wellness Check was a stark reminder of the inherent risk that is present within the profession. Diving into the darker side of this line of work, the presentations from the second day brought into focus the content of day one and signaled the urgent need among leaders to act to protect those who are dedicating their careers to a potentially traumatic and injurious line of work.

Before commencing the second round of presentations, conference moderator Norm Taylor led the audience through a recap on the content from the previous day, encouraging delegates to reflect on some of the themes and action areas that were starting to emerge. What stemmed from the reflection were themes of courageous and authentic leadership (not being positional or authoritative), the value of individual and personalized approaches to wellness, the complexity of the profession and how it has evolved, and the acknowledgement that a generational change is long overdue.

Session 6: Deconstructing Impacts & Responses to Tragic Experiences in Policing—Three Case Studies

Pivoting to where the rubber hits the road, the opening session of day two took a somber tone as the Chiefs of Police from the Saanich Police Department, Burnaby RCMP, and Halifax Regional Police candidly recounted the tragic incidents that their services had experienced in the last two years. Vulnerable insights into the impact, response, and aftermath of each of the events were shared, including reflections on how the

speakers attended to the critical needs of their officers, staff, and communities. The session was moderated by Australian Federal Police Commander (Retired) Grant Edwards and was designed for delegates to take stock at how these situations inform policing wellness work and how we can learn from them. A common key message from each of the presentations was the criticality of the human element of being a leader, and the power of showing vulnerability.

Multi-Casualty Bank Robbery Trauma

Starting with an event that occurred more than 4,700 kilometers across the country on Vancouver Island, Chief Constable Dean Duthie of the Saanich Police Department began the session with a recap of the multi-casualty shooting and hostage trauma that occurred in Saanich, British Columbia, on June 28, 2022. Recounting the events of the morning in which six members of the Greater Victoria Emergency Response Team (GVERT) were shot and injured during a shootout with two heavily armed suspects, Chief Duthie spoke to the investigative finding that the suspects' primary objective was to "shoot and kill officers," and how this has since reverberated through Saanich and the national policing community. Speaking to the immediate aftermath of the situation, he highlighted the importance of several actions, including taking a team approach to reduce the demand on individual officers, embedding mental health and support services directly within the unit, and identifying a family liaison officer to support staff and their families. He noted how easy it is for senior leadership to not prioritize their own mental well-being during traumatic events and stressed that in order to check in on others, you must be aware also of how you are doing. Reflecting on the weight of being present and personally attending to staff, his poignant presentation concluded with the following remark: "No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care."

RCMP Burnaby Outreach Tragedy

In the next presentation, Chief Superintendent Graham de la Gorgendière of the Burnaby RCMP delivered a moving presentation in memory of Constable Shaelyn Yang, an officer on the Police Mental Health Outreach Team who was fatally stabbed while responding to an outreach call in Broadview Park, Burnaby, British Columbia. Recalling the immediate steps that his team took to support staff following the tragic events of October 18, 2022, Chief de la Gorgendière underscored the value of ongoing and free-flowing communication with staff, quickly setting up supports for employees and Constable Yang's family and balancing the need for continuity of operations alongside ensuring that staff were provided with time to process the impact of the incident. Describing the all-hands-on-deck approach that was taken for ensuring the care of staff, he explained that dedicated wellness spaces were created for employees to gather in and provide support to one another and a great deal of effort was devoted to identifying those who may need extra support. Like Chief Duthie, he spoke to the need to expect the unexpected and acknowledged that leaders must be prepared to support staff over the long term as emotions and reactions will ebb and flow in the aftermath of a tragedy.

Following his presentation, moderator Grant Edwards commended Chief de la Gorgendière for the vulnerability that

he showed in the aftermath of this tragedy. Showing emotions and being vulnerable has a profound, vicarious, and moral impact on staff, he said, and is something that the profession has largely failed to adopt and has resisted to a fault.

Mass Casualty Impacts on Police

On April 18, 2020, during the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada's deadliest mass shooting began in the small rural community of Portapique, Nova Scotia. Spanning a 13-hour period, a total of 22 people, including Constable Heidi Stevenson and an unborn child, were killed by a single gunman posing as a police officer, while an additional three people were injured. Addressing the events and aftermath of April 18 and 19, 2022, was Chief Dan Kinsella of the Halifax Regional Police Service. Following an overview of the timeline of events, Chief Kinsella provided an account of the far-reaching impacts that this incident had on the law enforcement community. While the physical impacts of the incident were unimaginable, the emotional impact and the effect on the mental health of all those who were involved were substantial. Attuned to the accumulated grief that officers were feeling as a result of multiple traumatic events impacting the province and law enforcement simultaneously, he explained how vital it was for senior leadership to be visibly present to staff and to develop programs to help one another over the long term. He detailed the sharpened focus on first responder, victim, and family wellness that emerged following the incident, and noted the profound impact that seemingly small measures can have when it comes to providing support in the wake of tragedy.

Before bringing the session to a close, the audience had a chance to hear briefly from Ivy Nanayakkara, Manager of the Wellness Unit at Toronto Police Service, and the support provided by the Unit following the death of Constable Andrew Hong in September 2022. Nanayakkara emphasized the critical role that peer support teams play in supporting staff wellness, and shared how immediate supports for staff just entering their policing career are urgently needed to address the declining number of people interested in pursuing a career in policing.

Moderator Grant Edwards drew the session to a close by validating the huge step forward that has been taken by acknowledging and deconstructing these awful moments, sharing lessons learned, and engaging in conversations about their profound impact. He advised that while great strides have been taken, there is still much work left to be done.

Session 7: RCMP Longitudinal PTSD Study—Project Design & Initial Results

Adding a research lens to the conversation, Dr. Nicholas Carleton, Scientific Director of the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research (CIPSRT), presented on the project design and initial findings of the innovative RCMP Longitudinal Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Study. With approximately 2,000 members of the RCMP community (nearly 10% of the entire force) currently on leave for PTSD and related mental health injuries—an issue referred to by Dr. Carleton as the “wicked problem” of police mental health—evidence-based protocols for assessing and reducing post-traumatic stress injuries in those who serve are urgently needed. With funding from the Government of Canada, researchers at CIPSRT and the University of Regina are conducting a multi-year

research project to investigate the impact of policing on the mental health of RCMP members, with the goal of reducing the incidence and prevalence of PTSD and associated injuries among public safety personnel (PSP) through a skills-based training program. It is important to note that although PSP may be exposed to tens of thousands of potentially traumatic incidents throughout their careers, these are not the only factors that are contributing to negative mental health outcomes among the law enforcement community. Dr. Carleton noted that structural and organizational issues also play a significant role and account for almost half of the incidents researchers are seeing among PSP (the latest numbers from the National Police Federation dataset will be available in fall 2023). Research shows that these factors can include various barriers, ranging from a lack of clinicians informed on the unique needs of PSP, to the relative dwindling capacity of officers due to recruitment and retention challenges, and a general lack of research into effective early interventions.

To address this research gap, the RCMP PTSD Study follows a group of voluntary cadet participants from the moment they join the RCMP on their first day of training through the first five years of their careers. Participants are divided into two groups, with one group receiving the “standard” Cadet Training Program, and the other receiving specialized Emotional Resilience Skills Training (ERST). Through a variety of assessments at different points throughout the study, including the use of a wearable seismocardiography device, participants are asked to reflect on and record their mental and physical state in real time, which helps to form a dashboard of information they can access to monitor trends in their health. The goal, Dr. Carleton shared, is that enabling participants to monitor their own health, in addition to check-ins with a clinician, will help them start to identify potential changes in their well-being and reach out for support before it escalates to the level of a crisis or injury.

Although the study is in its early stages, Dr. Carleton shared that the program is already showing promising preliminary results, with the cadets receiving the ERST program reporting lower prevalence of anxiety-, mood- and trauma-related mental disorders, far lower suicidal ideation than serving RCMP or the general population, and better risk and resiliency variables. Among next steps for the study, he noted that efforts are currently underway to scale up participation and expand to more services so that greater support can be provided to uniform personnel. More information about the study can be found at rcmpstudy.ca and saskptsistudy.ca.

Session 8: Caring for Those who Protect Us—Exploring Best Practices and Interventions for Police Psychological Support after a Potentially Traumatic Event

Continuing with the research theme, the next session involved an overview of current research into evidence-based best practices and interventions for police psychological support following a potentially traumatic event (PTE), presented by Andrée-Ann Deschênes, Professor at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières and Annie Gendron, Researcher with École nationale de police du Québec. With a substantial proportion of the policing community reporting symptoms associated with PTSD and a greater likelihood of being exposed to PTEs, the researchers at RIPTOP (Recherche sur les interventions post-trauma dans les organisations policières) have been

exploring the psychological support needs of officers in Québec police organizations to determine the effectiveness of support programs in meetings officers' needs. What they have found is that although a large inventory of primary, secondary, and tertiary supports exists, these are overwhelmingly not meeting officers' needs due to a combination of barriers, which include the ambiguity of services and accessing help, fear of being judged, and a lack of clinical knowledge about police-specific life. They highlighted that officers exposed to traumatic events tend to seek out support from five main sources: their organization, manager, union, peers, and psychosocial workers—each with different needs in mind, demonstrating why it is essential to diversify the type of supports offered.

With the exploratory aspects of the research complete and an experimental prevention protocol in place, they are now assessing its impact on psychological health and well-being and its effectiveness as a post-trauma intervention. Although the study's small sample size makes it difficult to draw statistically significant conclusions, the preliminary results are encouraging. Early results are showing trends that peer supports, immediate follow-ups by supervisors, and check-ins with a psychological worker following a PTE are all having a positive impact on self-reported psychological health at work. They shared that while official conclusions are still in the works, the research provides practical implications for future studies by helping to identify how and when to intervene to best support staff after exposure to a PTE. By providing organizations and public safety personnel with the tools and support they need to enhance wellness, we can help protect those who put their lives on the line to protect us every day.

Session 9: Updating the Evidence to Support Police Wellness in an Environment of New Challenges

This session brought together selected panelists from the research community to highlight features from the special wellness issue of the *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, "Updating Global Efforts to Promote and Secure First Responder Wellness," released in February 2023. The aim of the session was to highlight the work being done to update the baseline of policing wellness knowledge, to reset the conversation on the current challenges facing the policing community, and to collectively determine a path forward that prioritizes the well-being of all police employees. Forming the panel were guest moderators Lauren Jackson, Consulting Partner at Deloitte (the journal's special wellness issue sponsor), and Matt Torigian, Chief Strategy Officer of Public Safety for Niche Technology and the Journal's Senior Contributing Editor, special issue guest editors Dr. Linna Tam-Seto from McMaster University, and Drs. Jeff Thompson and Katy Kamkar representing the CACP's own Research Advisory Committee. Panelists shared their personal inspiration around the special edition, the need for action among policing leaders, and strategies to effectively foster an authentic culture of wellness in policing.

Affirming that you cannot have healthy resilient communities without healthy resilient police services, the panelists underscored the following key messages:

- There has been a lot of great talk in the last decade about policing wellness. It is now time for action.
- A focus on evidence-based policing strategies is needed to ensure that the best available research is being used to influence policy and practices in the most efficient way possible. The special wellness issue provides this by pulling together easily digestible, cross-sectoral pieces of literature that are focused on the common goal of improving police wellness.
- Workplaces and operational environments are key determinants of health that contribute to an individual's health and well-being. Protection and prevention must be centred at the heart of an organization's approach to wellness. The key ingredients to achieve this are building relationships, identifying shared goals, establishing a clear purpose, and reinforcing a collective vision.
- Quick fixes to mental health and well-being do not work. Organizations must act to define the responsibility of leaders in protecting and promoting officer wellness.
- Resilience is not built by listening alone, it is built by doing. Individual resilience programs cannot fix an organization unwilling to address inherent culture issues and a lack of effective support.
- We cannot continue to ignore the significant impact of policing on the families of law enforcement personnel. Families of officers experience unique challenges posed by their loved one's line of work that must be taken into account at the organizational level.
- Even the greatest leaders have an opportunity to improve. Everyone, especially leaders and senior management, has a role to play in improving wellness in policing. Moving focus upwards helps create genuine accountability and trust within an organization.

The complete, open access issue can be found at journalcswb.ca.

Session 10: Town Hall Session—Resetting the Baseline and Looking Forward to an Equitable Culture of Wellness in Canadian Policing

For the final session of the conference, moderator Norm Taylor was joined by a panel of selected speakers who showcased in rapid town hall sessions the work being doing in their respective organizations to enhance an equitable culture of wellness in Canadian policing. The presentations highlighted identified action topics on anti-stigma programming, people-centred leadership training, specialized investigations support, mental health service gaps in the private sector, and MHCC's Roots of Hope program.

Beginning with an overview of the province's Mental Health Secretariat (MHS), Karen Prokopec, Manager of the MHS at the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General, spoke about the work being done by the ministry to implement the recommendations from the Office of the Chief Coroner's expert panel report on police suicide, *Staying Visible, Staying Connected, For Life*. Aligned with the government's Roadmap to Wellness, she explained that the MHS has a vision "to build an integrated safety net that provides the right mental health supports at the right time for all public safety personnel across Ontario." Recognizing that mental health does fit into just one sphere, she summarized the six strategic goals that the newly formed Mental Health Collaborative Tables are working towards, and the shifting focus to research and action on supporting families

of public safety personnel and the return on investment of workplace anti-stigma programs.

Addressing the topic of people-centred leadership, Dr. Vivien Lee returned to the lectern to discuss the training program that is currently being rolled out to superintendents and detachment commanders in the OPP on this topic. Speaking to the lack of clear definitions of what people-centred leadership looks like day to day, she highlighted that a critical component of this work is the human element of being present. She provided a recap of the 13 psychosocial factors under the National Standard for Psychological Health & Safety in the Workplace and emphasized that showing vulnerability is the essence of courageous leadership—a prominent theme that emerged earlier in the day when deconstructing police tragedies—and how impactful humility and support from leaders are in earning the trust of members.

Moving the discussion to a national level, Cheryl Tremblay, Senior Research Analyst with the RCMP, presented on the Virtual Global Taskforce International Research Project on the Health and Wellness of Employees Working in Online Child Sexual Exploitation that was led by the RCMP, whose findings are being used to support the Sensitive Materials and Specialized Investigations Support (SSIS) team. Drawing on the three realms of responsibility among individuals, management, and organizations that were identified through the research, Tremblay spoke of the range of variables that contribute to a positive work environment and the impact of seemingly small actions on mental health and well-being. To help mitigate the impacts of the SSIS team's exposure to difficult work and graphic material, she highlighted the variety of evidence-based tools and techniques that are being used to help reduce exposures, such as setting up an ideal workspace, adjusting how content is viewed through wearable devices, and engaging in employee resilience training. Encouraging employees to identify accountability partners and enhance opportunities for peer support, she said, are key focuses of the work around building resiliency.

Next, Derek Sienko, President of Diversified Rehabilitation Group, spoke about the work that his organization is doing to enhance psychological wellness and support for first responders. Introducing the concept of psychological engineering, he discussed the need for service providers supporting public safety personnel to better understand and tailor their services to the unique needs of first responders. He noted that it is imperative that both the provider and the organization be speaking the same language when it comes to supporting mental health, especially when it comes to supporting individuals in returning to work following a mental health-related absence. When working with organizations to support first responder mental health, he stressed the significance of starting with open conversations between the individual, employer, and provider in order to build trust in the

relationships and support lasting improvements in wellness.

For the final presentation, Nitika Rewari and Logan Seymour, the Director and Manager of Prevention and Promotion Initiatives at MHCC, respectively, provided an overview of the role workplaces have in preventing suicides and supporting employees in the policing sector. Following the release of the MHCC's Workplace Suicide Prevention Guide in 2021, they shared that work is currently being done to tailor the guide and best practices for suicide prevention to the needs of the policing sector, recognizing the growing prevalence of mental health issues and suicide among police officers. They presented on the MHCC Roots of Hope program, an adaptable community-led initiative that aims to reduce the impact of suicide, drawing attention to the applicability of the program's five pillars of action (Means Safety, Awareness, Research, Specialized Supports, and Training) to the policing sector. They concluded by encouraging policing leaders to become involved with the local suicide prevention and life promotion initiatives happening within their communities and invited delegates to take part in the Roots of Hope National Community of Practice that is starting in June 2023.

CLOSING REMARKS

In drawing the conference to a close, CACP President, Chief Danny Smyth, expressed sincere gratitude and thanks to the delegates for taking the time to check in and engage in critical conversations about how to move forward in building a stronger culture of policing wellness. He expressed hope that we never go five years without another check-in and reflected on the invaluable insights and work that was shared over the action-packed two days in Ottawa, noting that while the CACP will continue to lead the action and conversations surrounding policing wellness, leaders in policing must also rise to the challenge to own the content and momentum for putting it into action. With clear, tangible information provided on how to act, it must now be put into practice within the policing community.

The conference adjourned on Wednesday, March 8, 2023, with those in attendance expressing great satisfaction with the refreshing nature of the proceedings, along with a resounding reflection that a conference on this topic would have never occurred when many of today's policing leaders entered the profession. A strong sense of optimism and eagerness to put the content into evidence-informed action for policing wellness was apparent as the conference concluded.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

*Session Recorder, CACP Wellness Check Conference 2023