

Report PSR-TAPS-09-16

To: Chair Bell and Members of the Transportation and Public Safety Committee
From: Wendy Bieman, Quality Assurance Manager of Paramedic Services
Meeting Date: August 18, 2016
Subject: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Prevention Program Development
Status: Recommendation adopted as amended per Resolution TAPS93-16; Endorsed by County Council September 6, 2016 per Resolution CC110-16;

Recommendation(s)

WHEREAS the Ontario Government has enacted legislation requiring emergency services employers to provide programs aimed at reducing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD);

AND WHEREAS Grey County is developing the required employee wellness program aimed at reducing PTSD;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT report PSR-TAPS-09-16 be received;

AND THAT Grey County Paramedic Services proceed with further development of the preventative PTSD program, including the acquisition of the services of a therapy animal.

Background

The Ontario government has new legislation requiring Emergency Service employers to develop programs to help with trauma and mental health initiatives for workers and the fallout from their traumatic experiences in their work.

Grey County Paramedic Services (GCPS) would like to be innovative and pro-active in supporting staff and making attempts to mitigate the fallout and severity of post trauma stress on paramedics. Animal therapy has been shown to help. With the assistance of community partner Robyn Hewitt GCPS would obtain and train a dog specifically to the

GCPS environment. This animal would spend time with staff and would be used to attend to staff that may require support after a traumatic event. Cumulative stress is more common and with the benefit of a therapy dog to aid those paramedics with a need it, it is hoped that the service can help avoid a more severe mental health crisis with this pro-active therapy.

Research has shown that therapy dogs help with calming of anxiety as well as lower blood pressure. There is a decrease in the stress hormone cortisol, adrenaline and aldosterone and an increase in “health inducing and social inducing” hormones such as oxytocin, dopamine and endorphins after 20 minutes with a therapy dog. *Uyemura, B. (2016). The Truth About Animal-Assisted Therapy. Psych Central. Retrieved on August 5, 2016.*

Therapy dogs are being used in children’s hospitals, rehab centres and in senior’s homes to provide comfort for people in stressful situations and for those with mental health concerns. The Canadian Military has also seen the benefit of this and has enlisted the use of therapy dogs for veterans with PTSD. The Ottawa Paramedic Service has also enlisted a therapy dog which rides with a paramedic handler on the first response vehicles during the day. The policies and procedures for this program are being shared with GCPS by the Ottawa Service. The healing effects of dogs are seen in many different situations and has proven to be helpful in early anxiety following a traumatic incident.

Post-traumatic stress is a common, normal, and often adaptive response to experiencing a traumatic or stressful event. Paramedics will often see an excessive amount of trauma in their work life. Although paramedics are trained to adapt to these situations they are human and eventually cumulative stress can cause emotional and mental damage. In a pro-active approach GCPS would like to enlist a service therapy dog to help with mental wellness and support after traumatic events. Having a therapy dog onsite to help calm and decompress after an event can help to decrease the fall out of the anxiety and response to the event. First responders often see more trauma in one month than civilians do in a lifetime.

Financial / Staffing / Legal / Information Technology

Consideration

The animal would be a donated dog selected by a local community partner. This opportunity greatly reduces the cost of the program. GCPS would house the animal with a host family within the Paramedic service and the animal would spend most of the day with a management/supervisor during a working day. The animal could then be

called upon to support a paramedic in need. With the service benefiting from the use of the therapy dog it is suggested that the host family receive financial support to aid with annual vaccinations and care. An annual budget of \$1,200 per year would be suggested. The service could also use the talents to support other Grey County first responders such as fire, police or mutual aid groups.

After an opinion from risk management the animal could be used in Long term care facilities or in the community paramedic role; the benefits of animal visits with seniors is already known to be positive. This would be discussed with LTC to see if there is any interest. A dog that has been professionally temperament tested, obtained the canine good citizen certification as well as having current up to date vaccinations has a greatly reduced liability. Responsible and well trained handlers are essential as well. A local service dog specialist will help train the handlers for Grey County at no cost.

Link to Strategic Goals / Priorities

GCPS is dedicated to caring for the community and now must focus on the care of staff as well. The mental health and proactive approach to caring for trauma in first responders is a key focus in both municipal and provincial government at this time. GCPS feels the benefit of a therapy animal would have a significant impact on the wellness of paramedics and thus reduce lost time from work. Taking measures to help reduce the impact of cumulative stress will outweigh the cost of the program in reduced mental health costs and lost time from work.

Grey County has been viewed as innovative and leaders in new and improved work programs and in supporting staff in improved mental health and wellness initiatives. A therapy animal within the first responder environment has proven beneficial in the military and with people with anxiety and PTSD. Using a therapy dog specially trained and adapted for the first responder to mitigate traumatic and cumulative stress is a new initiative that would support and help maintain an optimum care and comfort of first responders in need.

Sources:

http://www.cf4aass.org/uploads/1/8/3/2/18329873/psd_and_veterans_living_with_ptsd_-_gillett_march_23_2014_2.pdf

<http://dogtime.com/dog-health/general/20839-pet-therapy-and-human-mental-health-issues>

<http://psychcentral.com/lib/the-truth-about-animal-assisted-therapy/>

Respectfully submitted by,

Wendy Bieman
Quality Assurance Manager of Paramedic Services

Director Sign Off: *Mike Muir, Director of Paramedic Services*