

STRESS OVERLOAD

Police Services in Crisis Mode as Staffing Shortage Hits Hard

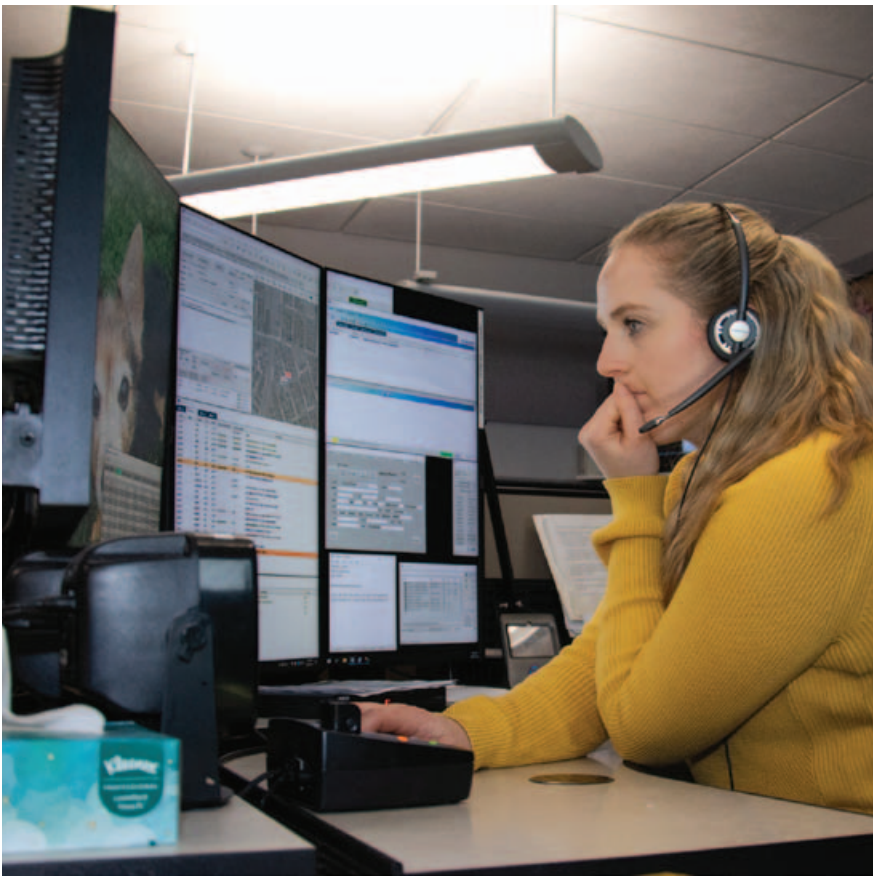
By Lauren Alpern

In Peterborough in 2022, showing up for shift means starting 20 to 30 calls behind. In Ottawa, the sought-after paid duty shifts like CFL games and concerts that used to get filled up in seconds are now being staffed by on-duty officers. In Owen Sound, dispatchers are working up to 70 hours a week.

These are specific examples in three Ontario cities, but choose almost any other city or town and you will find similar examples of how the province’s police services are suffering from a staffing crisis. Police officers are working longer shifts, rushing from call to call only to end their shift with a longer queue than they started with. 911 communicators are frequently unable to leave their desk to even use the facilities or eat, never mind to decompress after a difficult call. When emergency response is under this much strain, there is no operational capacity for things like community policing, outreach or relationship building. And there’s even less time for officers to take care of their own mental health and well-being.

Sworn and civilian members are exhausted both mentally and physically, which is only adding to the crisis.

Peterborough Police Association (PPA) President Jeff Chartier says that of his 220 or so members, including 140 sworn, about 20 are off on WSIB or long-term disability, most of whom come off the frontlines.



A member of the communications team in Thunder Bay.



Like all officers across the province, officers in London are doing their best while on shift.

“With only four platoons, you’re talking about an average of four people from each platoon who are off,” said Jeff, a sergeant with 33 years of service. “That reduces your numbers before you even look at vacation and training. That means we’re starting behind the eight ball every day. Add to that the fact that we’re constantly calling people in to meet our minimums and we’re routinely running 30 calls behind.”

With so many members off, that puts a lot of pressure on working members, who have seen a massive increase in workload between the staff shortage and the increased calls for service. Stress levels are high and it’s harder to get people to come into work.

“We’re starting behind the eight ball every day.”

“The continuous lack of staffing has taken a toll on people’s mental health. They use their time off to recharge their batteries and disconnect from work,” said Jeff. “People need more time to de-stress and spend time with family to be able to come back to work the next day. Family, friends and activities – these are important to help people deal with what they’ve had to deal with over the last 48 hours, so they’re ready to come back for the next 48.”

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Sgt. Maria Keen of the Ottawa Police Service is back with Ottawa's recruitment team and says things are very different now than they were when she did the job before.

Craig Ralph, a staff sergeant with the Peterborough Police Service, is definitely feeling the staffing crunch and has noticed a big change since he started in policing 23 years ago.

"There were certain days of the week, certain times in the early morning hours, when you'd have downtime to conduct investigations and do proactive policing. That has certainly diminished," said Craig, who works as a Peer Support Coordinator. "Officers are going from call to call now and there's really no break. Plus, there's a lot more violent crime and a lot more weapons calls and firearm offenses. That has a toll on officers' mental health as well."

Jeff, who has been the president of the PPA since 2014, commends his members giving all they have while they're on shift, but he recognizes that the tank is emptying and it's getting harder and harder to refuel with the current staffing conditions.

"They try to do the best they can, but they're being pulled in so many directions. There's always another call waiting. It's stressful and it's taxing," said Jeff. "Some officers go without lunches sometimes because of the call volume. Their resiliency to flu and colds goes down, which also impacts the numbers. There's a major ripple effect. I wish someone could wave a magic wand and get us back to full staffing."

While no magic wand is forthcoming, police services are doing what they can at a significantly slower pace. The Peterborough Police Services Board has agreed to increase the Service's staffing over time, but only after an incredible amount



of work, Jeff said, including a KPMG review on staffing levels that indicated a deficit of 11 officers, yet ignored the vital work of civilian staff.

"With budget commitments and restraints, the board is very conscious of the budget set aside by the primary funders as to how many people they can hire and what they can do to fill the staffing void. It's pretty much dependent on money and not the community's protection or need," said Jeff, who explained that with six currently at OPC with more seats for the January intake, that would make up close to the 11. "Still, we just can't get ahead of the game because people retire. The PPA was part of a committee, along with the Police Services Board, that was formed to address the current and future needs of the service and we determined that we actually need 49 more employees, the majority of whom are civilian."

In the meantime, those hires are not coming as easily as they used to. In Peterborough and in other Ontario cities, the applications are not as plentiful, nor are enough applicants qualified. Jeff said that Peterborough is no longer seeing the same number of experienced officers looking to come back home or move to a smaller city that they used to.

In Ottawa, Sergeant Maria Keen has been heavily involved in the Ottawa Police Service (OPS)'s recruitment efforts. Working as an outreach constable from 2005 to 2007 and then on the outreach recruiting team from 2018 to 2021, Maria was asked to come back on temporary assignment in May of 2022

because of the push on hiring.

"It's a running joke that I've probably hired three-quarters of the Ottawa Police Service," said Maria, who was one of the first racialized women to work in recruiting when she first started.

Now, with 30 years of experience under her belt and hearing all of the negative rhetoric about policing, Maria was a bit reluctant to try her hand at recruiting again. While the applications in Ottawa are coming, mainly thanks to plenty of proactiveness and some creative social media work, it's definitely not the same as it was when Maria first tried her hand at it almost 20 years ago.

"Nowadays, people aren't coming banging on our front door. Gone are the days where we sit back and just accept applications. That's why the OPS created an outreach team. We're competing with other agencies including the government," said Maria, who has also noticed another new challenge. "This generation will pack up and leave jobs or cities, and we have to adjust to that. We can't be particular with candidates and think that this is a 30-year job for them. The sooner we wrap our heads around that and accept it, the better it is."

As for Maria, when she returned to patrol in 2021 after working in recruitment for three years, she noticed how burnt out her platoon was because of the staffing crisis. She soon started to feel that burnout herself. Still, when she was asked to return to the outreach team, it wasn't an easy decision.

"When they asked me to come back to recruiting, it was a

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Sworn and civilian members across the province are exhausted, both physically and mentally.

really hard decision, because I knew I'd leave my platoon with another person short," said Maria. "My team told me to go because they knew we needed more people."

Interim Ottawa Police Association (OPA) President Brian Samuel, who has been on the OPA's Board of Directors since 2010, said that the board has warned the Police Service Board and every chief since 2011 of a looming staffing crisis, but the warnings fell on deaf ears. Now, with attrition and members off on leave, Brian says he believes hiring 300 officers would correct the problem, but that's not in the cards.

"The Service's strategy calls for 80 hires a year. This is 80 new hires a year on top of attrition, which averages roughly 50 per year through retirement and resignations. This translates into a total of 130 hires every year. We don't have the staffing

"Nowadays, people aren't coming banging on our front door. Gone are the days where we sit back and just accept applications."

at our training centre to train 130 people, nor do we have the staffing in our recruiting section to do what is required to thoroughly process potential recruits. This year alone, we've had a record number of resignations along with retirements. We've probably lost 80 that way. We had no new hires in 2019 and 2020 – the numbers just don't add up. Our cop-to-pop ratio is the lowest per capita in the country," said Brian, a staff sergeant with 29 years of service. "Ottawa has an allotment of 24 seats at OPC in each of the three classes every year. Based on our maximum available seats, that puts us at 72. We're promising 80 plus. OPS will have to rely on asking other police services for seats."

Since Ottawa amalgamated with Nepean, the city has increased in population by 350,000, yet the Service still hasn't increased in number. Like Jeff in Peterborough, Brian says his 1,957 members, 1,400 of whom are sworn, are exhausted, both physically and mentally.

"They feel there's not much more they can give, which has resulted in an atmosphere where you go to work, do your job and go home. It's affecting morale in a huge way. Officers are always coming forward and saying that. It's just take, take, take and push, push, push," said Brian. "The service continues to push them beyond what they're capable of doing. If you continue to push, there's going to be a breaking point. The ones who remain on the road are the ones who suffer."



Many uniform and civilian staff do not have time to take a lunch or restroom break.

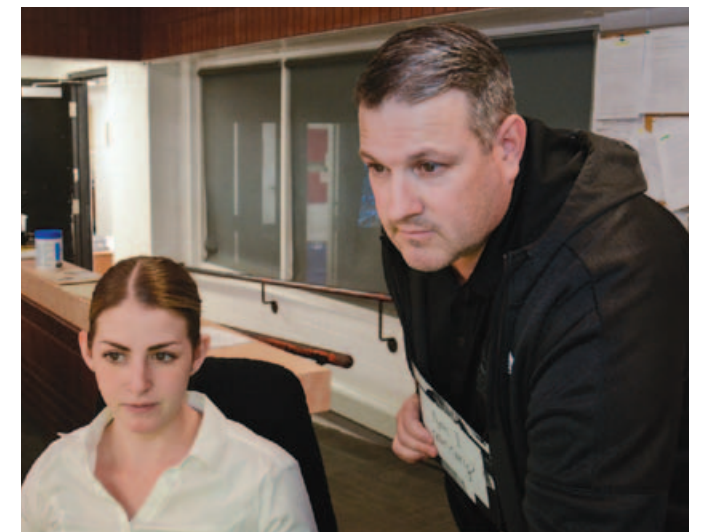
And it's not just the sworn members who are suffering. The OPS's communications section is in crisis mode right now.

"Our communications centre is in trouble. When you start having people resign, retire and leave, and you don't replace them, you start putting actors in place and you end up with people who aren't always in their full-time position," said Brian. "We're pushing for the Service to hire, and they say they're trying, but we haven't seen it yet. It's a difficult job and it's not for everybody. You can't just walk in, put on a headset and understand how to deal with the public. There's training, which is a process as well."

Amy Byers, Vice President of the Owen Sound Police Association and 911 communicator for the past 17 years, understands the burnout. The Owen Sound communications team has been short-staffed for almost three years. Filling the vacancies has proven difficult.

"It seems like we're always in reactive mode. We're trying to fill the vacancies, but that's taking away time. "We used to be more proactive to get ahead of the game," said Amy. "It doesn't feel like we've gotten to the point where we can just take a breath."

While Amy and her team work to ensure that emergency calls don't get put on hold – they are prioritized as they have always been – there might be a longer response time for calls. As a Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP), they are respon-



sible for transferring calls for ambulance, fire or police that aren't for them. And due to the staffing shortage around the province and even across the nation, the calls are in a longer queue. They are not allowed to disconnect those calls until they are answered and there's voice-to-voice contact.

When Amy first started the job in 2005, the communications centre answered the phone for two police departments and seven fire stations. Now, they dispatch for six police departments, 44 fire stations and all of the after-hours calls for Grey County Transportations. The number of staff has not increased accordingly.

"We used to be able to go an entire night where the phone would only ring a couple of times," said Amy. "Now it rings a couple of times a minute throughout the night."

Everyone is tired. There are serious mental and physical repercussions to members if this continues. And there are also the consequences to Ontario communities.

As Jeff said, "You're going to end up with communities with very poor policing practices as far as response times," he said. "Less officers on the street means an increase in violent crime and drug activity. Everything is going to increase as the officer levels decrease."