

Thursday, July 2, 2020

AN OPEN LETTER TO ONTARIO'S HEALTH PROFESSION REGULATORS

Attn: Deborah Adams, Registrar - College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO)

Lise Betteridge, Registrar and CEO - Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW)

Anne Coghlan, Executive Director & CEO, College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO)

Elinor Larney, Registrar, College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario (COTO)

Rick Morris, Registrar & Executive Director, College of Psychologists of Ontario (CPO)

Dr. Nancy Whitmore, Registrar & CEO, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO)

Re: The Dangers of Police Involvement in Mental Health Checks

We, the undersigned, are writing as members of the regulated health professions authorized to perform the controlled act of psychotherapy. We have watched with concern as our regulatory colleges have either failed to make public statements about the dangers of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, or have done so reluctantly and in private. These statements have highlighted deaths in the United States, while omitting the names of those who have died here in Canada. We are deeply disappointed in these statements. We do not fail to notice that five Canadians who have died during mental health checks since April of this year go unnamed and unacknowledged by our regulators. The silence of our regulatory colleges in this matter is excruciating. Meanwhile, other public bodies, our professional associations, and concerned members of our colleges,, have moved to name these systemic oppressions for what they are: a public health crisis that disproportionately affects Black and Indigenous people in Toronto and Ontario.

We call on you to uphold your mandate to protect the public and take immediate action to address this urgent, life-threatening situation as it relates to mental health professionals' duty to warn, to inform, or to intervene. Having conducted a comprehensive review of our respective Codes of Ethics, relevant legislation, and the relevant interpretations of legislation and ethical guidelines published by our regulatory colleges, we clearly see that the current norm in our practices of calling 911 is not enshrined in our ethical nor our legal obligations.

When we call 911 for an ambulance for a person in mental distress, it is the police who intervene and respond. This is how a 911 call for a "wellness check" can result in vulnerable people being killed by police, who arrive at the scene armed and trained to use force and violence. This approach is dangerous and inappropriate. We therefore make the following demands of you, in the name of justice, and the safety and security of the public, our patients, and our clients:

1. Immediately issue a public statement that:
 - a. acknowledges the undeniable fact that Black, Indigenous, and racialized people in our communities experience disproportionate amounts of violence at the hands of police;
 - b. acknowledges that police involvement in mental health or safety/wellness checks is known to be harmful and even deadly to Black, Indigenous, and racialized clients who are in mental health crisis;
 - c. immediately advises your members of the clear, indisputable evidence that involving police can and does lead to the harm and/or death of Black, Indigenous and racialized people during mental health checks;
 - d. directs members of your colleges to immediately cease acting on the present norm of calling 911 for mental health or safety checks. This should include a clarification for your members that they do not have any legal or ethical obligation to involve police;
 - e. acknowledges that other vulnerable groups, such as 2-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (2SLGBTQ) people, sick and disabled people, neurodiverse people, people engaged in sex work, migrant workers, refugees, undocumented people, homeless or street-involved people, people who use drugs, or anyone who may have previous harmful interactions with police, a history of trauma in psychiatric care, the child welfare system, or a history in the carceral system, are also subject to

disproportionate police violence; and that members should likewise engage in careful ethical reasoning to determine whether it is safe to involve police in these clients' lives;

- f. acknowledges that policing in Ontario is a public health crisis, and demands that police involvement in mental health calls stop and be replaced with an alternative, community-based mental health and mobile crisis response service, whose personnel are properly trained, trauma-informed, and competent in de-escalation and intervention during a mental health crisis to ensure risk of further harm is minimized.
2. In acknowledging all of the above, the regulatory colleges must issue a public advisement to the Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, the Premier of Ontario, and the Solicitor General that these are no longer matters of opinion, but are demonstrated facts, and that given that there are currently few alternatives to calling 911, the Colleges must further inform the Premier and Ministers that it is in the interest of public safety to immediately take steps to redirect funding from policing in the Province of Ontario to community-based health initiatives that can provide trauma-informed crisis intervention and mobile mental health supports that reduce harm and seek to prevent loss of life.

We, the undersigned, demand that these actions be undertaken within five days of receipt of this letter. Failure to do so will be considered a dereliction of your duty to protect the public and uphold the basic tenets of our professional ethics, human decency, and justice.

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Hon. Todd Smith, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services

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