

By: Curtis Rush Police Reporter, Published on Thu Apr 19 2012

## Citizens in hospital gowns seek end to police killing of mentally ill – Toronto Star

The Never Again Coalition calls for better officer training and consistent help from crisis teams.



*Wearing hospital gowns in memory of Michael Eligon, members of The Never Again! Coalition gather at police headquarters to remember those killed at the hands of police over the past 20 years.*

More than a dozen concerned citizens and activists made recommendations Thursday on how to prevent police shootings of the mentally ill. And the Toronto Police Services Board listened.

The board, which also heard dramatic personal stories from families who had experienced violent interactions with police, asked Police Chief Bill Blair and the mental health subcommittee to review the recommendations and report back.

Related: Inquest called into police shooting death of Michael Eligon

The citizens group proposed ways to counter what members said is ineffective police training and poor responses to people in a mental-health crisis — particularly failing to use calming “de-escalation” techniques.

Many of those who showed up to speak were people horrified by the police response to Michael Eligon, 29, who was killed by an officer's bullet on Feb. 3 after he left the psychiatric ward of Toronto East General and was found roaming nearby clad in a hospital gown and socks, carrying two pairs of scissors. (Doug Pritchard, a neighbourhood witness to the shooting, walks the same route Eligon took in a recently made video on vimeo.com, explaining the events that led up to Eligon's death.)

The province's Special Investigations Unit later ruled there was no evidence to charge the officer who shot Eligon.

Before the meeting, about two dozen activists gathered in symbolic hospital gowns outside police headquarters with a banner that read, "Never Again," the name of a new citizen coalition that wants never to see another mentally ill person killed by police.

Coalition members read out the names of mentally ill people killed by police in recent months.

Acting board chair Michael Thompson said he was impressed with the calibre of the group's recommendations and the "calm, civil and purposeful way" they made their points.

At times, there was loud applause after people spoke, but no displays of anger.

Thompson said there are high expectations of behaviour for police, who are often "asked to be social workers." He added that other police agencies face similar challenges.

"It's important to recognize this is an issue of great importance to everyone. ... We're not solving the problem today, but it is a work in progress. None of us wants to hear about another victim dying on the streets of Toronto. It is important to seize the moment and take decisive action."

Deputy Chief Mike Federico made a presentation showing that most interactions between police and people with mental illness are resolved peacefully. He said police go through scenario training that "echoes real life events," and that officers are trained to be listeners and attempt to calm down volatile situations.

Former mayor John Sewell, co-ordinator of the Toronto Police Accountability Coalition, challenged that position.

He called for training that moves away from a "control" model to one that focuses on "de-escalation" and urged that mobile crisis-intervention teams set up to deal with mentally ill people operate in all police divisions 24 hours a day. Currently, the teams operate in only 11 of the 17 police divisions, are available only part-time and are never the first responders.

The board heard from people who said they are afraid to call police about situations involving the mentally ill, fearing police will shoot to kill.

Anita Szigeti, of the Mental Health Legal Committee, an organization of lawyers, said the recent killings have become “a crisis in our city.”

Said Szigeti: “Many citizens are worried that Toronto will become known for the death of mental health patients. There are increasing levels of fear of clients who are afraid to contact police.”

Police Chief Bill Blair, talking to reporters after the meeting, admitted that there “are lessons to be learned” from the police response to Eligon. He added that some answers will come from the inquest that was recently called and a police internal review already underway.

“We want to do this right,” he said, calling the Eligon shooting “tragic.”

Blair said statistics on encounters with the mentally ill, about 17,000 incidents last year, prove that in most cases they end safely. However, he said he welcomes public discussion about police equipment and use of force when dealing with the mentally ill.

He also believes the expanded use of Tasers — not something included in the coalition’s recommendations — is “worth exploring.” Currently, only tactical officers and supervisors are permitted to use Tasers.

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