



Special Calgary police squad to target family violence

BY JASON VAN RASSEL, CALGARY HERALD DECEMBER 5, 2009

Calgary police are teaming up with social workers in a new squad designed to intervene with families struggling with domestic conflict before it tears them apart.

The recently formed domestic conflict response team has domestic violence and child welfare workers who can connect willing families with agencies and programs and follow up with them to ensure they're getting the support they need.

But for families that can't or won't put their troubles behind, the police are there to charge the offenders and protect the victims.

"The law works best as a velvet glove --not as a hammer," Calgary police Chief Rick Hanson said Friday.

In 2008, police fielded about 12,000 domestic calls, of which only 4,000 were criminal in nature. The remaining 8,000 are calls for help where no charges are laid --and these are the cases the new team will tackle, with the aim of ending family strife before it escalates to violence.

The unit is funded with \$1.5 million over three years from the provincial government and is made up of three police officers and caseworkers from Children and Youth Services and HomeFront, a coalition of Calgary agencies that provide support for families experiencing domestic violence.

Within three days of an initial visit from the police, the team will return to families deemed high risk or potentially chronic cases to offer them help. For instance, a household with an abusive alcoholic may need referrals to treatment programs; a family fighting over money may need debt relief. After the team makes those referrals, they will then get back in touch with the family to ensure they got the help they were seeking.

"Being able to get in there and give the family options means maybe we don't have to get involved if we can connect them to resources," said Margie Shelestynsky, a child welfare worker.

The goal is to prevent deaths that may be the result of domestic violence, such as the killings of Jason Louie, 13, and his sister Jane, 9. Their father, James Bing Jun Louie, has been charged with two counts of first-degree murder and faces an additional attempted murder charge in connection with an attack on his wife, Ying.

"The Louie homicides this past week have tragically reminded us that the social costs are incalculable," said Kevin McNichol, executive director of HomeFront.

In a separate case, Aset Magomadova was recently convicted of manslaughter for strangling her 14-year-old daughter, Aminat, with a scarf during a violent struggle in the family's home.

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The family had come to Calgary from Chechnya, and their experience during that country's civil war left Aminat troubled. She had been expelled from school for being violent and was in conflict with her mom.

Police, school officials and social workers were involved with the Magomadova family--but separately.

"The safety net was never quite completed in time," McNichol said. "The domestic conflict response team is designed to close that net."

James Louie, meanwhile, made a brief appearance in provincial court Friday morning. Provincial court judge Sean Dunnigan agreed to the Crown's request that Louie undergo two psychiatric assessments.

One test will measure whether Louie is fit to stand trial, said the accused's lawyer, Noel O'Brien, who agreed to the application. The other assessment will look at whether or not Louie was criminally responsible for his actions at the time of the killings.

Louie is scheduled to return to court Jan. 8.

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