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Chair

Mr. Daryl Kramp

Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC)): Welcome, colleagues, to meeting number five of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security.

You have a copy of the orders of the day. We'll be hearing from our witnesses and then going to future business, when we'll be having a report from our clerk as to the status of our witnesses, what would be available and what's not, and where we need to go with that. We will deal with that under future business, so we can get some clarity moving forward.

We also have a motion from Mr. Easter to deal with.

At this particular time, we will go directly to our first witness. I would certainly like to welcome Bob Rich, the chief constable from Abbotsford.

Welcome to the public safety committee, Bob. We look forward to your thoughts, and we know we will have some questions that you might be totally comfortable with. I'm hoping you have an opening statement you'd like to make to us.

Chief Constable Bob Rich (Chief Constable, Abbotsford Police Department): I do.

Thank you. I appreciate the invitation to appear before your committee, sir.

I would like to talk for a couple of minutes about what we are trying to accomplish in Abbotsford on the topic of police efficiencies. Just to give you a sense of what kind of department it is, so that my comments will make sense as I go forward, Abbotsford's is a municipal department of about 210 police officers, 300 employees in all. We police a city of 140,000 people in the Fraser Valley. It's a very large geographical area, an agricultural area.

In the last five years, from a community safety perspective, we have seen some great improvements. To give you a sense of it, in 2008 and 2009 we were the murder capital of Canada. We had had a surprising rise of gang violence in the Fraser Valley. In 2009 there were 11 murders, two of them involving very young people, and eight of those murders were gang- and organized-crime-related.

We've done a lot of things in those five years. In 2011 we had no murders; we're at two this year, one gang-related. Our crime rate since 2008 is down by 40%. We now have the lowest crime rate in the Fraser Valley, including all the jurisdictions around us.

But we cost more than the jurisdictions around us. We are funded well enough to have police officers enough to be proactive, and that has been a very key part of our success. For example, last year, although a small department, we executed more than 100 search warrants, going after organized crime and gang activity. But we're very aware that for a community such as ours, we're expensive. We're very aware of the cost drivers behind your committee's even meeting to discuss these kinds of issues.

Our focus in 2013 has been, besides fighting crime, on trying to figure out how we can become more efficient. In the spring of this year, we contracted with KPMG to do an efficiency study of the Abbotsford Police Department. KPMG came in and has been applying processes that they developed in the United Kingdom to have a look at what could be done to make us more efficient.

If you don't mind, what I'm going to do for five more minutes is simply describe what they found and what we think we're going to do about it. What I'm describing is a work very much in progress. We intend to implement a major part of their study next year and probably will contract with them to help us do so, but we are putting in place the foundation blocks to make it happen.

Here are their key findings about what was not as good as it could be in the Abbotsford Police Department, if we want it to be really efficient.

One is that Abbotsford typically sends a police officer to a call to resolve it, even though that's no longer the most effective and efficient way to respond to many calls. The image I want to put before you is that of the 1950s: if you got sick, you phoned the doctor, and he actually came to your house with his little leather medical bag and checked you out. He made a house call.

That's what police officers are doing for virtually every call, and it's an outdated and overly expensive way to respond to many calls for service.

They also found that we had a "clear the screen" mentality. What I mean by that is that the comm centre drives the deployment of resources. If somebody phoned and we created a call, then the driving force was to clear that screen and just get rid of calls. That's what was actually driving things. Instead of an intelligence-driven organization, we had become driven by a call load-clearing mentality.

Corresponding with that, they are saying we are not as intelligence-led as we like to believe we were. We are an organization with three crime analysts. We think we pay attention to what crime analysts are saying: we look at the maps every day; we do all that kind of work. They're saying, you're actually not that driven by crime intelligence; you are not being as agile as you could be, even though you're a small department. That's interesting information for us to receive, when we had a perception of ourselves as being very much intelligence-led.

● (1105)

In another finding that was hard to listen to but important to listen to, they said, you have some patrol officers who are working very hard, but you have a significant number of patrol officers who are not working that hard, and your performance management is not actually dealing with it. In other words, the difference between your top-performing police officers and your not-as-high-performing police officers is far too big. You need to bring up your poorer performers; you need to get more work from them in order to be efficient.

It's not a very sophisticated, complex statement, really, but almost a surprising one for us. We didn't realize the size of the gap between top performers and poor performers.

The last and main point they made is that our policies around how we will handle each kind of crime are not that clear. There is confusion, when a crime occurs, about whether it should be followed up by a detective or what unit it should go to for further work. We're mucking about, when it should be much clearer which crime we stop investigating and which one we go forward on.

So they proposed what they call a new policing model for us to implement. Here are five corresponding key points about that.

One is that we need to have the right resources for the right job. What they mean is that we should handle priority three and priority four calls in a new way. Every call that comes in to our call centre that we decide we will respond to, as opposed to telling people that we aren't going to be responding, is categorized as a one, two, three, or four priority call.

We're all used to this concept. Priority one is an emergency: somebody is breaking into my house. Priority four is: there's an abandoned bicycle on my front lawn; what do I do with it? So the calls run the full gamut, from things that are critical to things that are quite routine. I'm going to talk more about what we do about priority three and four calls in just a moment.

Among the other things they said were that we obviously needed clearer policies on workflow, which I understand, and that we needed to increase our supervision, with better performance management. I'm not going to spend much time on that, but I'll quickly mention that we have introduced a patrol activity report that measures the workload of constables. I'm now meeting every month with the staff sergeants who run all of patrol. We are teaching performance management skills and bringing in coaches for them to increase their level of performance management. So off to one side, we are working on the issue they identified.

They said we should focus on a better quality of customer service, whereby we get back to people on a better basis, and that we need to be intel-led on a daily basis.

Here is what we propose to do. I will only talk for another couple of minutes, but quickly, here is what we are going to implement next year—the significant chunk.

We are introducing a new section to the Abbotsford Police Department. We will call it the operations control branch. Like our other branches or sections, it will be headed by an inspector. They will have the comm centre as part of their branch, but the primary thing they are going to do that is different from an efficiencies perspective is take the 37% of our calls—just over one-third of our calls—that are priority threes and fours and handle them in a new and different way.

We are no longer going to send a police car routinely to those calls. They may attend that call, by appointment, after they have taken all the information they can by phone; or we may simply take the call over the phone; or we may have the complainant, if we need to, attend the police station themselves for an appointment with a police officer. Everything will be done by appointment, rather than have somebody wait for an available police officer to show up, maybe for a number of hours.

Those calls will be handled by a new team, as part of that new branch. That team may have police officers in it—it will have some police officers—but some might be tier two community safety officers and some might simply be civilians. For a department our size, it's estimated that we'll need between 10 and 16 people working in this unit that handles one-third of the calls.

● (1110)

This team will also have the capacity, we are told, to do follow-up on routine crimes. A crime such as a theft with a suspect won't get assigned to a detective and would be assigned to this unit to do the follow-up. Apparently, that's about three to four calls for us a day, and they will have the capacity to do the follow-up on those kinds of calls.

The work this new branch takes off the patrol branch is designed to allow us to become more proactive again, and to increase our ability for patrol officers to respond more quickly to the priority ones and twos, but also to have more time to reduce crime in our community. We've said we want to get to one-half the crime we had in 2008, and to do that we still have about 10% more to go.

KPMG believes that if we implement this, we will have police officers tied up reacting to calls with about one-third of their time, leaving them two-thirds of their time available to be involved in proactive solutions. This branch will also have the crime analysis unit, where we'll take all our crime analysts and have them in one place.

This branch will be responsible for directing our resources on a daily basis, for using the proactive resources we have available in patrol in other parts of our police department, from our bike squad, to our drug squad, and to our crime reduction unit, which goes after property criminals. They will be able to direct all of those resources by using intelligence on a daily basis and trying to make our organization driven more by one central brain and more nimble.

It's yet to be seen—

The Chair: Mr. Rich, you are running a little over your time, sir. I know there's going to be a lot of room for explanations during the Qs and As. I wonder if you could just wrap up your presentation in a very short while. The committee would certainly appreciate it.

C/Cst Bob Rich: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

That was the end of my presentation. All I was going to say was that what I'm pitching to you has yet to be seen, because we haven't done this yet. We'll see if it actually works.

The Chair: We're certainly looking forward to the results of your...I guess for lack of a better word we'll call it an experiment, moving forward, but that's progress and that's what brings results.

I certainly thank you on behalf of the committee for your presentation today, and we thank you for taking the time to appear before the committee.

At this point, we're going to open the floor to a seven-minute round of questioning from the members, followed by five minutes of questioning for the other members.

We will go directly at this time to the parliamentary secretary, Roxanne James, for the first round of seven minutes, please.

Ms. Roxanne James (Scarborough Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd first like to thank our witness for appearing before this committee.

My father was a police officer here in metro Toronto. I actually have two sisters who worked for the police as well; one just retired this year from a division in Toronto.

I would first like to thank you for appearing, and also congratulate you on reducing the crime rate in your particular area. This is a good news story for sure.

I just wanted to touch briefly on this. You were talking about performance issues and being able to monitor the performance of individual police officers or people on your force. KPMG indicated that there was a large gap between the highest performers and the lowest performers.

When we talk about performance, are we talking about under-utilization of resources or are we talking about individuals who are just not up to speed with what everybody else is doing? I'm wondering if you could expand on that so I can get an idea of exactly what you mean by low performers versus the high-performance officers.

•(1115)

C/Cst Bob Rich: When KPMG made the comment, it referred to quantitative measures, to how hard somebody is working as opposed to how well somebody is working. We are looking at both factors when it comes to performance management. KPMG said, "You have officers who are just doing the minimum and you need to get more from them."

Ms. Roxanne James: When they're just doing the minimum, are they being pulled away from what they should be doing? Is there too much court time? Is it absenteeism? I'm just trying to understand

how they can't be pulling their own weight. I'm trying to get a specific example.

C/Cst Bob Rich: An officer who is not working as hard as others might be somebody who answers the radio and takes the calls they are given. So they are doing a good job of reacting when they are asked to do things, but in fact in an organization such as ours, which does so much proactive work, members who are performing well show tremendous personal initiative. They take on various crime problems. For example, an officer will work up a search warrant or will go and deal with a problem premise. That kind of proactive work isn't necessarily assigned to that person; they are out there digging and finding it. That's what a top performer does. We need to ensure that all 80 patrol officers are performing in that way, and KPMG is saying they are not.

Ms. Roxanne James: Okay, thank you.

You mentioned that your particular police unit or department actually runs a bit of a higher budget than maybe others across Canada do. We've heard from other witnesses that wages or salaries actually make up on average between 70% and 90% of the total budget. In your opening remarks, you talked about police efficiencies and trying to find better use of individuals' time. I'm just wondering if those are also cost efficiencies that are going to be recognized by moving on the recommendations KPMG has offered to you, or we are just talking about being able to do more with the resources you already have?

C/Cst Bob Rich: There are two things.

One is that for a new policing unit, instead of simply staffing it with police officers, we will look at staffing it with persons who are not as expensive as police officers, so we'll have a mixed team. There would be cost savings there.

The other thing is that what we are doing and what we have committed to our community is that as our community is growing, we are not growing. We are, on a per capita basis, reducing the number of police officers serving citizens in Abbotsford as we become efficient.

This year our city council will likely reduce our strength by four police officers and one civilian. That has yet to be determined, but it's being considered. As we go forward, our hope is that as the city of Abbotsford grows—and it is growing—we will be able to serve it well without growing.

Ms. Roxanne James: Thank you. I apologize if you did mention the different levels of expertise you will be assigning for different priorities. I didn't hear you say that it would be cost-efficient as well. I just wanted to make sure that was on the record.

You talked about how the same police officer will respond in the same way, and you mentioned doctors who seem to make health house calls, and you spoke quite a bit about prioritizing the different levels of calls between one, two, three, and four. For example, in Toronto, someone can call 911 if there's an emergency, or they may call a non-essential police telephone line if they just want to report something, as you said, such as a bicycle that's been abandoned on the street. Do you have that sort of set-up as well in your area, that you can call different numbers, or would it all come into the same call centre and then be distributed outwards from there?

•(1120)

C/Cst Bob Rich: You can phone a non-emergency number. It is being handled by the same call centre. We're actually the only police force in North America that has two-way texting as well. You can also text our police force and we will text you back and have a conversation that way as well. So there are a few ways to communicate with us.

Ms. Roxanne James: You're open to everything there.

I had an opportunity to read your bio before coming into committee. You have many decades of experience. You're certainly someone we're happy to have on this committee because you have a wide range of knowledge.

I'm wondering if you can answer this simple question with a yes or no, or if you have time, you can elaborate. Do you think things are taking longer for police officers to accomplish today than they did, say, 10 or 20 years ago? Are there administrative burdens being placed on police officers that...? I'll give you an example. Previous witnesses have said—and we have this on record—that for a simple break and enter, it actually takes 58% more time to process the paperwork and everything else that goes with that than it did maybe 10 or 20 years ago. A DUI takes 250% more time to process today than it did a number of years ago.

Do you agree with that, and what do you think is the reason for that?

The Chair: Just a brief response, Mr. Rich, on this one.

C/Cst Bob Rich: Yes, I completely agree.

It has to do with the technologies we employ, and it has to do with a more complex response that society wants from police and a more detailed response for court processes.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We certainly appreciate your response.

Mr. Garrison, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Thank you very much.

Thank you for being with us today, Chief Constable Rich.

From what you've presented today, what's new here?

These things may be new to Abbotsford, but I know that you came from the Vancouver Police Department, and the emphasis on efficiency while you were there—as a deputy, I believe—sounds very much like what you're doing in Abbotsford. In other words, Vancouver looked at threes and fours about 10 years ago. They stopped sending officers to all of those, hired crime analysts, and put an emphasis on intelligence-led policing.

In the experiment you're doing, what's new to policing as a whole, rather than just new to Abbotsford?

C/Cst Bob Rich: That's a good question.

Vancouver responds to break and enters in the way you describe. I would say that Vancouver has not gone as wholesale as we're about to do, in relation to priorities three and four. That's not completely fair because in the last little while, Vancouver has hired 40 community safety officers as an efficiency and are responding to

more of those calls that way. They are moving towards that, but I haven't been a part of that.

Maybe it's the size of what this is, for a small department, relative to what Vancouver was doing with their break and enters and a few other kinds of calls, so all priorities three and four. My understanding of Vancouver is that when I left, it wasn't all threes and fours; it was a portion thereof, so that's one thing.

We have tried to be intelligence-led, as well as Vancouver is trying to be intelligence-led. KPMG is saying, "You're not really doing that. You think you are, by having your meetings and discussions about various crime types, but you do not truly have a brain that is directing police officers on a daily basis to do different things based on what's actually going on." They're saying, "You think you're doing it, but we don't think you are."

What they see as intelligence-led is something different from what we have achieved so far. It's yet to be discovered. But to have somebody take all your police resources, on a daily basis, and redeploy them based on what's going on is probably more similar to what you would see in New York than has been seen at least in the cities I've been around.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Okay. It's very interesting to me that you've had a 40% decrease in the overall crime rate. If policing has anything to do with that, you must have been doing something right.

As part of this efficiency exercise, was there any analysis of how or why that crime rate dropped by 40%? Is it community demographics? I know that Abbotsford is becoming an increasingly middle-class, commuter kind of community. Is it the change in demographics or was it what you're doing as policing that caused that change?

•(1125)

C/Cst Bob Rich: Well, we have over doubled the drop in crime in the rest of B.C. during this timeframe. I would suggest that no change in demographics would account for something like that.

I am a student of Bratton from New York. I believe a police force can make a community safe.

We came in and said that we would make Abbotsford the safest city in B.C. We haven't achieved that yet, but it is a goal we are driving towards.

Abbotsford didn't have CompStat when I came, but it's something we brought.

We have done the things I think you need to do to drive crime down. I believe a police force can make a community safe. B.C. and other western provinces have double the crime rate of Ontario, for example. We have always had much higher crime rates, and I don't think there is any excuse or reason for that. I think a police force can drive crime down to the kind of rates you have in Ontario.

I believe we have done the right things to drive crime down. The list of the things we've done is very long, but we have done things that actually reduce crime. We have taken the chronic offenders and arrested them. In property crime, we have gone after gangsters in a very big way to reduce the violence we were getting from organized crime.

My belief is that there are things you can do to drive down crime in a community. It's not just about demographics or social problems.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I'm not trying to take credit away from that, but my question is that since you were doing something obviously right, and now you're doing this big reform, how are you going to relate those? How do you not throw out the baby with the bathwater here in the focus on costs?

C/Cst Bob Rich: Right. Well, police managers always have to manage cost along with our primary objective, which is to keep the community safe. The two of them are always the intention.

Our belief is that if we create this branch and do this right, we will actually increase the amount of proactive time that the people who are not in this branch have to drive crime down further. That's certainly what KPMG is saying to us, that if you do this, you will have even more abilities to drive crime down.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I have one last question, and it's with regard to calls for service. We've heard a lot from other police departments about what we would think of as non-police work, dealing with mental health and addiction problems, one of the primary drivers of calls for service.

Do you find the same thing in Abbotsford?

C/Cst Bob Rich: Absolutely. It's huge. The night before last, we had officers tied up with seven apprehensions under the Mental Health Act. It basically ate almost all our resources for the entire night.

That happens on a frequent basis. It is its own separate problem to be addressed, and it is certainly not something I'm...

We could go on for a long time on that one, for sure.

Mr. Randall Garrison: In terms of the mental health and addiction calls—I was a former police board member in a municipality in British Columbia—are you still having the problem of not being able to get someone to take responsibility at the hospitals for those who need to be seen by doctors?

C/Cst Bob Rich: Yes. Our hospital and several other hospitals in B.C. struggle with how many hours it takes before they take them off our hands, absolutely.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Norlock, please.

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank the witness for appearing today.

For me there's a bit of déjà vu in a lot of what you've had to say. The reason I say déjà vu is that I've been with police forces who've gone through some similar things, but one of the things you didn't say, and that we used to not say, was this: What does the customer

think about all this? In other words, what do the people you respond to think about all this?

I think you'll agree with me that in the police community we look at solve rates and we look at the number of charges in accident zones. We think that if we solve more crime, the average person who's receiving the service is happy. But that's not always the case.

I'm mentioning this because one of the things we like to do is to have efficiencies. You say, well, we won't respond to some calls, but I'll give you a little example of how customers are not happy—and they pay the freight, right? When somebody wakes up in the morning and sees that their car is not there, sees that their car has been stolen, they will call the police. This particular police force asked, "Why are we sending a police officer to report a stolen car out of somebody's driveway? Why would we send a police officer to a residence to verify that indeed there is no car in the driveway, that it's gone?" But this is what we found out. The person says, "I have never called the police for service before. I pay \$3,000 a year in property taxes, and the very day I need to have a police officer come, you don't send somebody to my door."

This is just a small example.

How do you square that circle, make the customer happy, and then keep them satisfied that your police service is actually doing what it should do?

In other words, I'm looking at community policing. I didn't hear you mention, through any of the questioning, how you relate to your community or your community policing model, which most police forces in Canada, at least eight or nine years ago, were completely devoted to.

• (1130)

C/Cst Bob Rich: We did a survey last year.... Now, you need to understand this is a community that was seeing a gang crisis in front of them. They were seeing gangsters shot on the street. So for them to see the turnaround in relation to that.... We did a survey last year and our approval rating was extremely high, well over 90%. What was interesting, though—and it really responds to what you said—was that it was slightly lower amongst those who had had contact with us in the preceding year. In other words, people are frequently not happy once they have contact with the police. A lot of times that is because of how long they had to wait for the officer to show up, or because of some of those kinds of issues, or because we didn't solve their crime for them.

KPMG says that if we do this right, we will increase customer service, because people will not be waiting for a police officer. They will be responded to by phone, and we will make an appointment to go see them or we will ask them to come see us, and they will have contact with a police officer at the station. But I believe that some of what you say will be true. I would love to have a doctor come to my house when I'm sick, but he or she doesn't do that unless there's a real critical situation going on.

So there is a balance to be found between customer service and efficient policing, and we must try to strike that in order to handle taxpayer dollars well.

Mr. Rick Norlock: Thank you very much. That's what I needed to hear, because that's what was actually done. You do have to train your people on how to respond to the customer, how to show empathy, and so on, and then explain why you're doing what you're doing. Generally that's accepted.

I'd like to go back to some of the questions Mr. Garrison had with regard to mental health and addiction. Just for your edification, and you may already be aware of this, we did see a unit—I believe it was in Calgary with Chief Hanson—in which they had one mentally ill gentleman who alone cost the police department and their taxpayers about a million dollars a year. It was socially disruptive and a whole lot of other things, and they went about solving that. I suspect very strongly that you're aware of that case, and hopefully it will form part of our report on how we deal with mentally ill people.

I'd like to refer quickly to this association with what is referred to as the “hub” principle, which involves utilizing other community resources and having the police meet with them to discuss particular case management. So it moves from the police perspective—although they're always somewhat involved—over to a social agency that is perhaps better equipped to handle anti-social behaviour. I'm wondering if you have considered that concept or looked at it as a way to reduce your costs and/or make yourself more efficient. I would suggest both of those. Have you contemplated that particular program or one like it?

• (1135)

C/Cst Bob Rich: Abbotsford is trying to respond to this issue. I don't think we're as far down this road as some other agencies in B. C. are. We have a mental health officer, a police officer who works full-time on trying to resolve these issues. Her job, for example, is to take a story like the one Chief Hanson provided, about someone who is using a lot of our resources, and meet with all the other social agencies and discuss that case to try to find a resolution for that person so that they are no longer consuming our resources. That has been very successful in relation to a handful of people who were creating scores of calls for the police. We are also finding, though, that there is just an unreal number of people who are suicidal, who are mentally ill, who have to be apprehended. The problem is, we're talking about different people almost every night who we're having to deal with. The number of people who are struggling with mental health issues and who we get involved with is somewhat overwhelming.

Other police departments in B.C. have done very well with—

The Chair: Mr. Rich, thank you. We just exhausted our time for that line of questioning. I imagine the issue of mental health will definitely be picked up by other questioners at some point.

Now the time goes to Mr. Easter, please, for seven minutes.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Rich. I thought you had a really great presentation.

Just to finish on the mental health issue first, I'll let you finish your response in that regard, but has having a mental health officer on staff made a big difference in terms of the cost of dealing with people with mental health problems and the cost to the police force? Do you work together to get others involved to deal with those issues and

basically get these people out of being an ongoing cost to the police department?

C/Cst Bob Rich: The answer is yes. It has been successful with the chronic users of police resources who have mental health issues. I think it is quite successful. Other police agencies in B.C. are using assertive community teams, the “ACT teams”, as they call them, in working with the community. I think those have probably had more success than we've had in dealing with that cohort of people using police resources. They've been more organized than we have.

Nevertheless, if we have as many untreated people in our communities as we have, it's going to continue to be a significant drain on policing. I don't think any of these things have addressed this group of people who live in our society and who are failing to get by.

In British Columbia, we have reduced the number of beds for mentally ill people so significantly that we have literally hundreds of people who are not doing well in the community. As a province, that lack of resources being put into handling people who have serious mental health issues has created a reality in which police have become the default mental health workers. Chief Chu and Mayor Roberston in Vancouver have declared it a mental health crisis emergency.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I haven't been on this committee that long, and maybe the committee had previous evidence, but I think that's an area that certainly needs to be looked at: the lack of beds across the country for folks with mental health issues, to basically take them away from being a problem for police departments and others within the community.

Is the KPMG study you discussed—and I congratulate you on that work in progress—privileged information to the department or is it available to the committee?

C/Cst Bob Rich: So far.... I was actually asking that question yesterday to try to figure out when I was going to get myself in trouble—

Voices: Oh, oh!

C/Cst Bob Rich: It's not a released document yet because it is a work in progress with a private company. I certainly would not want to withhold from you information that would be helpful to your work, so I would like to find a way to get at least something to you, if that's something that interests you.

• (1140)

Hon. Wayne Easter: The work of the committee is to look at the economics of policing. In my review of all the work that has been done by the committee previously, there's not actually a lot of material with economic data in it. Anything in that regard I think would be certainly helpful.

We can talk about that as a committee and I guess raise the question, Mr. Chair, if we want some further information from Abbotsford in that regard if it can be made available.

On reducing crime in your own area, I'm looking at the bigger picture as I sit here. Yes, you reduced it. You went after the chronic crime and you reduced the problems with gangs. Has that in effect made these gangs say that things are too tough in Abbotsford so they'll move to the next area? Has there been some of that happening?

C/Cst Bob Rich: Anecdotally, I believe the answer is yes.

Hon. Wayne Easter: So some areas could go up because one area is doing a better job. We have to look at the issue of policing in its whole context, Canada-wide.

I want to come back to Mr. Norlock's point on what do the customers say. That's something, actually, strangely enough, that we get quite a number of calls on in our MP's office. I'm from Prince Edward Island, and people call the RCMP in our case. They don't show up for three hours, or they don't show up at all.

In fact, we had a case the other night. They don't steal whole cars in P.E.I. now. Somebody pulled into a driveway and stole two doors off a new car, if you can imagine that, and the police didn't show up for a while.

I think your analogy with a doctor is a good one. We don't send a doctor to everyone's home. How do you handle that, and how do we explain to the public that it is highly costly to have a police officer go to the door for a fairly minor crime when you could get the information over the phone? How do you intend to work on that?

C/Cst Bob Rich: Part of it is going to require an education for the public. In this plan that has yet to be done, the belief is that this citizen in the past would have waited for somebody. In P.E.I. they'd be waiting for the officer to come and respond to this call about the stolen doors. In the new model in Abbotsford, the plan would be that after the call taker took that call, within a very few number of minutes that citizen would receive a call back from a police officer, as opposed to a civilian, who would say, "We are looking into your crime and we are doing the following things. A police officer isn't going to come and see you until six o'clock tonight, when you come back from work. So go ahead with your day. We've already taken your information. We are already looking for those doors."

What KPMG is telling us, and I believe they're right, is that this citizen will feel better about that than if they waited three hours for the police officer to come. They'll feel better having talked to a police officer, to know their concern has been taken seriously, and that at some point, at an appointment time, they will actually meet a police officer. KPMG says, look, when you phone people back and tell them what's going on directly, most citizens respond extremely well to that approach to handling their situation.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rich.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We have now completed our first round of questioning. In this first hour we have time for a couple more in the second round. I believe we have Madame Doré Lefebvre, and then Mr. Payne.

[Translation]

Ms. Doré Lefebvre, you have the floor.

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Rich, thank you for taking part in our hearing today to discuss your situation in Abbotsford. What you had to say was extremely interesting.

Several of my colleagues around the table spoke to you about mental health. You talked about the difficulty of handling individuals with mental health issues. It's interesting that you talked about that aspect.

During the past weeks or months, several witnesses spoke to us about mental health issues and how the community and police services manage that aspect. My colleagues went to several Canadian cities and observed that this was a recurring problem. It is interesting to hear your point of view and to have you raise this issue with our committee.

Several police services in the country and elsewhere in the world work with various community organizations and the health services in their region. How do things work in Abbotsford? Do you work in partnership with the various stakeholders from community services? You stated that civilians work with you at this time to answer certain calls. Do these civilians come from community organizations, or from the health field?

• (1145)

[English]

C/Cst Bob Rich: No, not in the area of mental health. We are working with people who are part of the health unit in our city, so we are working with people outside of our police department in this area. Our mental health officer's job is to work with a committee of people who discuss the difficult cases and look for resolutions for these people. We have not hired a mental health worker specifically in the Abbotsford Police Department.

The department I came from, Vancouver, has a police officer and a mental health worker working together in a police car almost 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Because of the far more significant issue that Vancouver faces, they have taken that very significant step.

[Translation]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre: Excellent.

Civilians will be able to do follow-up with police services and take certain calls. You talked about calls that are given a priority ranking from 1 to 4. Who are we talking about exactly? Are these people hand-picked, do they come from certain specific areas? I was also wondering what type of training the civilians who will be working with you will receive.

[English]

C/Cst Bob Rich: The people we expect to do this work will be a mixed team. There will be some police officers and some communications operators. We hire people off the street, as you say, who have gone through specific testing with us, and we teach them how to answer 911. We also teach them how to dispatch. And now we will also be teaching some of those people how to respond to these kinds of calls, for example, to enter all the basic information you would need on a break and enter and then pass it on to a police officer to complete the investigative part of the process.

There will be a mix of people we have trained ourselves. We hope there will be some community safety officers who have received some police training, but they are not trained to the full extent of police officers and are not as expensive to hire, bluntly, as police officers. There will also be some full police officers on that team who are very experienced and who can provide their expertise to the whole team.

[Translation]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre: I don't know the Abbotsford, B.C., region very well. I am from eastern Quebec. So we are from opposite ends of the country.

Are street gangs a problem in Abbotsford? If so, how do you manage that situation?

[English]

C/Cst Bob Rich: Our gangs are not like street gangs, in the sense that they don't stand on the corner. Because Abbotsford for a period of time allowed a lot of marijuana grow operations to occur—all through the valley there were many grow operations for marijuana—the young gangs made a tremendous amount of money doing that and got into the world of importing cocaine and weapons and became very violent in the valley.

We have managed that by doing a lot of education in the schools about joining gangs. I have been to every high school and every middle school in my community to speak to kids about gangs. We have done a tremendous number of videos, for example, about even how to parent your kids so they don't end up in gangs.

On the enforcement side, we are a very small police department, but we have created a gang squad. We have gone after gangs in a very aggressive way, as far as arresting them. We probably arrest 40 members of gangs per year, which is a lot for a very small community. So by a combination of—

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Rich.

We have exhausted our time on that line of questioning. As a matter of fact, we are substantially over the time, but that's fine.

Now for the last question, please, Mr. Payne.

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Chief Rich, for coming and for your very interesting presentation.

I want to follow up a bit on the mental health issue. We have seen other communities where they have people on standby; I don't know if that happens in Abbotsford. You did talk about one evening where

I think you said you had almost your whole police force managing seven mental health cases.

Do the B.C. health services have somebody available on standby? Are they 24 hours a day, or is it just from 9 to 5?

C/Cst Bob Rich: No. The hospital is a very robust, large hospital in Abbotsford. They have psychiatric nurses and doctors 24/7. But this is the same problem that other police jurisdictions face. When you get to the hospital with a person you've apprehended, that is not a crisis for the hospital. That person is in the custody of two capable police officers, so the hospital, as they triage cases, can move on to other things. They don't need to make that case a priority, which I understand, but it creates a problem for us because it's using resources.

Just quickly, because this story brings it out quite a bit, one of the people they apprehended that night had ingested pesticides. In fact, his body began to exude fumes, to the point where they had to declare they had a crisis in the hospital. They had to shut down the entire emergency area of the hospital. We had to send many of those people to other hospitals.

These are real crises for the hospitals as well. I get that this is not easy for them to handle either. Handling mental health issues in the emergency area of a hospital is not an efficient place for them either.

Mr. LaVar Payne: If you're a community officer or a mental health officer, are there any issues around the privacy aspects? We've heard that from some of the communities, but those issues have been resolved just by the police force and the other organizations insisting that it's going to happen, so make sure that all legal aspects have been completed.... I'm just wondering how that sits with your organization.

C/Cst Bob Rich: The fact that you have a police officer meeting informally with people is probably the single best resolution to that problem. What's odd is that the computer systems that exist across Canada for police sometimes have more mental health information on some people than the health systems do, because they are discrete and separate, and we are able to communicate with each other.

Mr. LaVar Payne: I have just a few more questions.

In terms of your priority one and priority two, what is your response time, and how does that compare with other police organizations across the country?

C/Cst Bob Rich: Abbotsford is 140 square miles, unfortunately—sorry, but I don't do kilometres—so it's a large community, and our response times are in the area of 11 minutes, unfortunately. I would wish them to be in the area of seven minutes, but part of that simply is dealing with a large geographical area.

Mr. LaVar Payne: Chief Rich, you also talked about holding the line with your officers versus the population increase. How does your officer ratio compare with those of other communities across the country? Do you have any numbers on that?

•(1155)

C/Cst Bob Rich: We are at one police officer for 628 citizens right now. That is somewhat in the middle in British Columbia. If you were in a Mountie jurisdiction in British Columbia, you would have perhaps a slightly higher ratio. If you were in Vancouver, it would be one officer to 500, for example. It depends on which community you're comparing us to.

Mr. LaVar Payne: How much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have another minute.

Mr. LaVar Payne: Thank you.

You did talk about having two separate numbers for calls. I'm assuming that you have your 911 number, plus one where you can report other incidents. How is that communicated to the community? Are there some difficulties in terms of transferring those issues from one section to another?

C/Cst Bob Rich: Yes, it's always been an issue for police that people use 911 when they shouldn't and sometimes use a non-emergency line when they should be using 911.

It's on our website. We communicate it a lot through social media. We talk with the community around this, with the odd story from time to time about when you should phone 911 and when you should use our non-emergency line. We have very proactive community newspapers that will print those kinds of stories for us.

We're doing relatively well in that, but it's always an area of confusion. You'll have people who phone 911 and ask you what the correct time is. It has always been a struggle. Some people will abuse these things.

The Chair: Your time is exhausted.

The chair has one brief question that he would like to introduce at this particular point.

Obviously, police officers in uniform or full staff have accountability mechanisms in place for their reporting. I'm just wondering about the accountability mechanisms you have in place for the civilians who you employ and/or the community safety officers. What level of accountability structure would you have for them, and is it any different from that for your uniformed officers?

C/Cst Bob Rich: One of the things to understand about accountability for police officers who are out on the street on patrol

is that they have tremendous autonomy. They are out on the road by themselves with nobody watching. In a sense, the community is watching, but they are out there working on their own for the most part.

The accountability systems you have for your civilians involve supervision that is actually physically proximate. You are able to see what they're doing. We have performance appraisals, we have the supervisors who are watching the work of the people who are working inside our buildings, and in a relative sense, that is simple compared to the issues you have in trying to ensure accountability for people who have tremendous autonomy.

The Chair: Mr. Rich, our time, of course, has now come to a close.

The chair, on behalf of this entire committee, would certainly like to thank you for taking your time and giving us the benefit of your extensive knowledge, the history involved with policing, and the protection, of course, for the public's safety. Thank you again for coming here. Thank you for taking the time to video conference today, and certainly I can assure you your comments will be taken under serious consideration by this committee.

Have yourself a good day, sir.

C/Cst Bob Rich: Thank you for your work.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Okay, colleagues, at this particular time we will go to future business, so we will break for a moment while we go in camera.

Hon. Wayne Easter: [*Inaudible—Editor*]...in camera to debate motions. This is a new policy that's evolved over the last four years. It's a policy of secrecy that I just can't understand and entirely disagree with. The public should know what we do in motions, who votes which way, and why.

The Chair: I'll respond to that Mr. Easter.

I couldn't agree with you more. I have no challenge with not going in camera, but in this particular case the motion certainly applies to the calling of witnesses, and the calling of witnesses, of course, is an issue that is predominately the issue of future business. That's why the chair has declared, for this particular motion, that this be an issue of future business.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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