

Police to overhaul services for sexual assault victims

By Brock Weir

A review of sexual assault cases previously classified as 'unfounded' has led the York Regional Police to institute an action plan to meet victims' needs.

The recommendations, including improved and updated communications methods with victims and online tools to encourage people to come forward, follow a review of all 'unfounded' cases of sexual assault between 2010 and 2016.

According to a report approved by the York Region Police Services Board last week, 3,029 cases of sexual assault were investigated within that window of time and 29 per cent (890 in all) were classified as 'unfounded.'

The review, however, found that 232 of these 890 'unfounded' cases should have been classified differently and 12 of these 232 warranted additional review.

While just one of these 12 cases remains open as the victim determines if they are prepared to revisit the case, the review has promoted York Regional Police to come forward with an action plan on how to do better.

Ultimately, the review identified two primary reasons contributing to the number of cases coded as 'unfounded,' reads the report. First, relying on the code of 'unfounded' vs. 'founded ? not cleared' when a victim provides a credible report of crime, but there is an absence of evidence to support criminal charges, the case should be coded as 'founded ? not cleared' versus 'unfounded.' This more accurately classifies the results of the investigation and stresses that further investigation will ensue should new information be presented or discovered.

The second involves reports from a third party. As a victim-centric organization, York Regional Police is one of the few police services in Ontario which currently accepts sexual assault reports from third parties. However, these cases are generally more difficult to substantiate as the victims are usually reluctant to disclose information relating to the alleged offences.

The review determined that the allegations of sexual assaults reported to York Regional Police were properly and compassionately investigated; and that the victims were believed and treated with respect.

That being said, the action plan includes establishing a Sexual Assault Advisory Committee with community partners and agencies; training and education for officers on investigative techniques and strategies when interviewing and interacting with victims with mental health issues or disabilities; providing more online resources to raise awareness, provide key information, and community resources to victims of sexual assault; and providing victims the opportunity to report sexual assaults online.

This online reporting tool is expected to be completed and in place by the end of the first quarter of 2018.

We identified an opportunity to enhance our communication with victims of sexual assaults who may not be ready to speak with police at the time of the initial report, say the YRP. For those victims that may not be comfortable speaking about their experience with a uniformed frontline police officer, York Regional Police is launching an online reporting tool to report sexual assaults, enabling direct reporting to a qualified sexual assault investigator in the Special Victims Unit. It provides one point of contact for the victim.

While the Police stress this online tool is not intended for use in emergency situations, they say the types of sexual assaults that can be reported online include historical sexual assaults where the offence occurred at least one year prior, non-emergencies where there is not a current danger to the victim or other members of the public, sexual assaults with no potential for lost or damaged evidence, and cases reported to probation and parole officers.

To support this tool, and enhance investigations into cold case sexual assaults, the Chief of Police has made a request to the York Regional Police Services Board for additional investigators, to work within the Special Victims Unit, as part of his 2018 Budget submission, the report concludes. The additional investigators will enhance our capacity and capability to explore new technologies and investigative opportunities that did not exist at the time of the incident but may become available through advancements in technology and/or by reconnecting with victims and witnesses related to historic open investigations, commonly referred to as cold cases. The Special Victims Unit currently have identified 200 cold cases. An example of a cold case, includes a historical report where the victim was not prepared to disclose or continue with a police investigation but after some time has passed, is prepared to proceed.