

Mounties work on Manitoba police shortage

by Ryan Siegmund



A critical shortage of officers in Manitoba has forced the RCMP to take a hard look at how it can best use its limited resources in the province.

The internal examination, dubbed 'D' Direction, addresses a wide array of issues arising from the shortage and provides a framework for 'D' Division to satisfy current and future policing needs. Strategies to ensure that there is money to pay for current and future staff are also included in the five year plan.

After reviewing the Provincial Police Services Agreement (PPSA), the RCMP realized it needed to do something about detachments experiencing very high criminal case loads per member. The numbers were through the roof, 'D' Direction project manager Sgt. Allen Williamson acknowledges; Manitoba's provincial average is about 118 cases per member and it's more than 250 in some areas, compared to the national average of about 42.

"At the time we initiated the study, there were no new positions available to us — we were static," says Williamson. "In fact, we were fighting to maintain funding to keep the whole contract funded from the province of Manitoba."

Before 'D' Direction was finalized this past July, the province announced it would pay for 28 more officers. Some will help establish the Sex Offender Registry and High Risk Offender Unit; others will beef up staffing in rural detachments or be used in other strategies developed by the project. The new money will have a huge impact on officer well-being, according to RCMP Assistant Commissioner Darrell Madilland.

Officers are concerned about the amount of hours they're expected to work, sometimes without claiming overtime, says Conservative



Justice Critic, Vic Toews. Long hours make mistakes more likely, he says, especially in a high pressure and demanding job like policing. He also worries about lone officers doing routine patrol checks in the early morning hours.

The restructuring plan will create a new 50 member strong traffic unit — a noted soft spot in Manitoba. Members will work in teams and the redesigned Traffic Services Program will focus on meeting the new national Road Safety Vision (RSV) 2010.

"Gone are the days of the lonely highway traffic patrol guy going out on his own," says Williamson. "We can no longer utilize our resources that way. The resources will be targeted and strategically deployed."

'D' Direction's objectives will be worked on incrementally over the next year and Williamson hints it's going to take a long time to fill vacancies, hence the five year plan. Until it's firmly in place, the RCMP will use available resources where it deems them to be needed the most.

As a short term measure, the force is looking at bringing in retired officers to fill the holes left by members going on paternity leave or off recovering from injuries — these members are currently not being replaced, municipalities complain.

"We don't back (fill) for those vacancies because, first of all, we don't have a pool of resources that we can backfill from," says Williamson. "Secondly, those members have a right to expect their job is going to be there

when they return."

Williamson says recently retired members would be a big help because they're already trained and experienced, can re-qualify for firearms and would be paid on a per hour basis, filling gaps when things get busy.

Chief Supt. Bill Robinson spearheaded 'D' Direction and initiated what the RCMP describes as a new era of partnership between Manitoba Justice and the Mounties. Aboriginal, government and community stakeholders all played a role in the process.

Municipal issues

Staffing shortages have been so severe some municipalities have hired private bylaw officers to enforce the Highway Traffic Act. The 1,000 tickets issued by one service were later declared invalid and thrown out. The initiative also got a black-eye because of a Taser incident.

Despite those setbacks, private bylaw officers are again expected to roam the highways as soon as their roles are clearly defined.

Policing issues are different in just about every community, says Ron Bell, president of the Association of Manitoba Municipalities (AMM). He says some feel they don't have enough officers while others feel the police they do have are focusing on the wrong problems. The RCMP and government officials have been working together in an effort to move available resources into area hot spots and reduce policing costs.

Under the PPSA, municipalities with more than 5,000 people are required to pay 70 per cent of the cost of contract policing but some feel they have no control over these costs. The per capita cost of policing in 2002 in The Pas, for example, was \$219.55, yet it received just \$131.82 per person. However, some detachments will receive additional funding under the PPSA, which won't impact municipal budgets.

Dealing with a difficult situation

No detachments will be closed under the 'D' Direction and the 28 new positions are just a start; the RCMP calculates it will need an additional 51 new members in Manitoba over the next six years.

"Policing here is the same as policing anywhere — we are all getting hit by the same double whammy," Williamson says. "We are getting a heavy dose of attrition, coupled with growth. The attrition alone is enough but we're also trying to get caught up with the ones going off on pension... Every municipality is trying to hire more police officers and it's creating vacancy problems for everybody."

Priority areas will be designated as new resources become available, he says. Also high on the list is realigning consolidated detachment boundaries and dealing with infrastructure issues in some municipalities.

"We are into a new partnership and new focus on providing front line service to the detachments. We are working to get out of the critical stage and we have made a first step."

Training Alberta under one roof

EDMONTON — A new training academy for the province of Alberta will house all police recruits from across the province and serve all local police services.

Solicitor General Harvey Cenaiko says the province is trying to ensure recruits receive the same quality of instruction no matter where they serve in the province.

"We're going to compile the highest standards of policing I believe in Canada," he said. "It's going to make it more difficult for those recruits, but we're going to receive a much better candidate that will definitely understand their role serving the public."

The academy will be the training centre for all peace officers, from prison guards and special constables to conservation and wildlife officers. RCMP recruits will continue to train in Regina.

The site will likely be able to prepare up to 400 police recruits and 1,000 peace officers annually, as well as provide professional development for experienced members.

Many communities are interested in hosting the facility, which is expected to cost the government

tens of millions of dollars. Cenaiko's ministry is expected to issue a request for communities and corporations to bid for the opportunity. The government is also considering making this a public-private partnership, letting private businesses help fund and build the facility.

Cenaiko also plans to work with police chiefs to develop a standardized curriculum for two-year programs at the 17 Alberta colleges which offer law enforcement. These programs will serve as a vital precursor to the academy sessions, he says.

The proposal for a central training centre in Alberta came in part from a 2002 government report on policing. All provinces except Manitoba and Ontario have central training centres.

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