



VANCOUVER POLICE DEPARTMENT

REPORT TO THE VANCOUVER POLICE BOARD

REPORT DATE: March 27, 2021
COMMITTEE MEETING DATE: April 15, 2021
BOARD REPORT # 2104C02

Regular

TO: **Vancouver Police Board Service and Policy Complaint Review Committee**

FROM: Damian Searwar, Staff Sergeant 1663, Youth Services Section (Mental Health)

SUBJECT: Service and Policy Complaint #2020-028 Experiences and questions re Car 87/88

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Vancouver Police Board (VPB) Service and Policy Complaint Review Committee (Committee) conclude its review of the complaint based on the information outlined in this report.

SUMMARY:

On December 23 and 24, 2020, the complainant called 911 multiple times regarding her adult son who is diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. She stated that her son had not slept for three days, had not taken his medication and had been decompensating as demonstrated by periods of physical and verbal violence. In both incidents, her initial request was for Car 87/88 with an "officer in plain clothes." On both days, Car 87/88 was unable to attend and VPD uniformed members responded instead.

On December 31, 2020, the complainant filed a complaint with the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner (OPCC) in relation to the above-mentioned incidents. In her complaint, she questioned if Car 87/88 was unavailable for two days due to inadequate funding or insufficient resources. She also questioned why 911 operators do not have access to the schedule for Car 87/88. Several days prior to her complaint, she called the non-emergency line, but was unable to receive any answers to these questions.

The VPD reviewed these incidents and it was apparent there were gaps relating to the understanding of the role of Car 87/88 and a lack of consistency in communication. These gaps are currently being addressed. Outside the scope of the VPD, there were gaps identified in relation to Vancouver Coastal Health resources and E-COMM policies and procedures. The VPD is working with its partners to address these challenges.

The VPD recommends that the Committee conclude its review of the complaint based on the information outlined in this report.

BACKGROUND:

The two separate incidents are outlined in the information below.

December 23, 2020

The complainant phoned the Southeast Mental Health Team and was told that her son's psychiatrist and case manager were on vacation and would not return for several days. Since they were unable to help, the complainant phoned 911 for assistance.

At approximately 3:30 pm, the complainant called 911 and reported that her son was "downstairs screaming" and that she was upstairs. The complainant stated that her son had schizoaffective disorder and had been decompensating over the previous few days. The complainant had discovered that her son had smashed a framed photo of himself but reported that he was not in possession of weapons and had not physically assaulted her.

The complainant requested Car 87 and reported that she and her son were the only people home. She provided the following additional information:

- The complainant had already hidden knives and had unlocked the front door in case she needed to leave the house.
- The complainant's son was not known to carry or use weapons, and was trained in martial arts.
- Her son had procured a sword when he was eighteen years old. This sword was taken from him when he was arrested for carrying the sword outside.
- Her son had not been taking any medication.
- Her son had not slept in three days except for "a couple hours this morning" after the complainant brought him some sleep aids.
- The complainant believed that her son would react well to police but believed that psychiatry was "... the root of all evil".

The complainant requested plainclothes officers if possible, as she believed that uniformed police would agitate her son. She stated that she would remain locked in her room and would call 911 if her son's behaviour escalated.

E-Comm coded the call as a 'Check Wellbeing'. At approximately 3:55 pm, the VPD afternoon shift NCO acknowledged the pending incident and requested that a unit attend. At approximately 4:40 pm, a unit with two uniformed members attended the complainant's residence. They reported the following:

- The complainant's son was calm when they arrived.
- He stated that he did not want to hurt himself or others.
- He did not want to speak with any mental health professionals.
- He agreed to follow-up with his doctor in the morning.
- The complainant had hoped for Car 87 to attend, but they were not available.
- The complainant was advised to call police if her son's behaviour deteriorated or if she felt threatened.
- The complainant's son could not be apprehended under the *Mental Health Act*, as members did not believe that he met the threshold at the time.

The incident was cleared and a report was submitted.

Car 87 (dayshift) was unable to attend due to workload and was without a Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) nurse for the entire shift. Car 88 (afternoon shift) did have a VCH nurse, but could not attend due to workload and higher priority incidents.

It does not appear that the reasons for the non-attendance of Car 87/88 and for the attendance of uniformed members (after plain clothes ones were requested) were ever provided to the complainant other than to say they were not available.

December 24, 2020

At approximately 5:45 am, the complainant called 911 and reported that she had been hiding from her son for two days in her bedroom. She further stated that her son had been talking to himself and was moving items out of rooms in the house. She reiterated the fact that her son suffered from schizoaffective disorder.

The complainant requested Car 87 and provided the following additional information:

- There were no drugs or alcohol involved, no injuries and no weapons.
- The complainant had been locked in her room all day, and she did not "...feel too safe."
- The complainant had not eaten all day and had run downstairs to get some food while her son was in the shower. When she did so, she noticed items in the house had been moved around.
- There had been "...nothing physical" between the complainant and her son.
- Her son had been calm yesterday when police attended.
- Four years ago when members attended, they had to break through his bedroom door as he had gone out the bedroom window and onto the roof.

The complainant only wanted Car 87 to attend and did not want police members. She also requested plainclothes members.

E-Comm coded the call as a 'Check Wellbeing'. At approximately 6 am, the Patrol supervisor determined that the call could be held for Car 87 as long as the complainant felt safe and was able to wait. At approximately 6:05 am, the complainant indicated that she felt safe waiting for Car 87 to begin their shift and that she did not want police members to attend unless Car 87 was available. She mentioned that she had managed to grab some food and was in her room with the door locked.

At approximately 8:15 am, the complainant called 911 and was "...anxious and waiting...hoping for Car 87 to attend." There was no change in her son's behaviour and the complainant was still safe in her room.

The VPD member assigned to Car 87 advised the E-Comm dispatcher that he did not have a VCH "outreach nurse" that day and was unable to do any assessments, but that he would enquire with the VCH "office nurse." The dispatcher stated that the VPD members from the previous file did not believe there was enough to apprehend the complainant's son.

Just before 9:00 am, the Patrol supervisor sent a message to the E-Comm dispatcher inquiring if Car 87 would be taking the call. The dispatcher mentioned that Car 87 was without an outreach nurse, but that he was checking with the office nurse. The Patrol supervisor mentioned that two members should attend given the history of the complainant's son with police. The dispatcher mentioned that she would send two members, but would wait on the reply from Car 87. Car 87 was unaware that the response to this ongoing incident was dependent on the information from the office nurse.

At 9:00 am, the complainant called the non-emergency line to determine an estimated time of arrival for Car 87. She was not told that Car 87 would not be attending since there was no nurse available for that shift. The patrol NCO stated that Car 87 would “review and assess” and patrol members were to attend given the complainant’s son history with police.

At 9:45 am, the complainant called 911 and reported that her son had left the residence and had been muttering, laughing and saying something about “psychiatry.” A few minutes later, the complainant called 911 and reported that her son had returned and was walking in the laneway. At 10:03 am, she called again and reported that her son was back in the residence.

At 10:50, the complainant again called 911 and reported that her son was “banging down the doors” and that she was locked inside her bedroom. Police attended and while on scene, they received information from Car 87 that a Form 21 had been issued that day for the complainant’s son. Car 87 had just received this information from the Southeast Mental Health Team. At approximately 12:15 pm, the complainant’s son was apprehended under the provisions of the Mental Health Act.

As with the previous day, Car 87 was unable to attend due to workload and was without a VCH nurse for the entire shift. The incident was concluded prior to the start of the shift for Car 88 that afternoon.

DISCUSSION:

Description of Car 87/88

Car 87/88 refers to a dayshift unit (Car 87) with duty hours 0700 to 1815 hours. Car 88 is an afternoon unit with duty hours 1200 to 2315 hours. Both cars are available 7 days a week on a 4 days on, 4 days off rotation that is aligned with patrol shifts. Each unit is a partnership between VPD and VCH that involves a plain-clothes VPD member and a VCH “outreach” nurse in an unmarked police vehicle. The overall purpose of Car 87/88 is to provide on-site assessments and intervention for individuals in mental health and substance use crisis. The nurse and the VPD member work as a team in assessing, managing, and deciding the most appropriate action in the best interest of the patient and the community.

Based on resources with VCH, Car 87 (dayshift) is not always guaranteed an outreach nurse as the nurse is needed in the office to coordinate and prioritize the incidents for the day. Car 88 (afternoon) will generally always have an outreach nurse and an office nurse. Recent improvements in resources at VCH has allowed for both an outreach and office nurse on dayshift, but this is not a certainty. On both dates involved in this complaint, Car 87 was without an outreach nurse.

Although a portion of the mandate for Car 87/88 involves assisting patrol members with “in progress” calls, the unit is not typically used for critical incidents that require an immediate police response. A member of the public may call and request Car 87/88, but it is unlikely that the unit will be able to attend immediately. Furthermore, incidents such as this one would first be the responsibility of patrol and not Car 87/88.

It is important to note that statistics recently collected indicate that Car 87/88 receives over 200 requests for service per month. These requests come from community mental health teams, the public, frontline VPD members and external partners. At the beginning of each day, the office nurse reviews the requests, prioritizes them and creates a list for the unit. The shift is spent working through the list and dealing with other priorities as they arise.

Prior to July 2020, there was only one car deployed daily. Due to demand for the service, a second car was added and the name was changed to Car 87/88. However, the increased resources are still unable to meet the demand. Currently, the VPD is engaged in talks to further increase this service. Also, it is important to note that Car 87/88 is only one of the mental health services offered in partnership with VCH. VPD provides personnel resources for the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Program and the Assertive Outreach Teams (AOT).

ONGOING INITIATIVES AND SOLUTIONS

The VPD remains committed to working with community partners to enhance safety and to improve service. Part of this commitment involves weekly discussions with VCH to continually analyze data as it relates to Car 87/88 and to identify area for improvement of service delivery. The VPD and VCH signed a Letter of Understanding in October 2011 and committed “to work together to improve the quality of life for their mutual clients who suffer from mental illness and problematic substance use and addiction.” The VPD is also involved in weekly, monthly and quarterly communications with its mental health partners including VCH, E-Comm and EHS.

Having reviewed this matter, it is clear that there could have been better information communicated to the complainant in relation to the role and availability of Car 87/88.

In July 2020, the description of Car 87/88 including duty hours, mandate and contact information was updated internally. The VPD Mental Health Unit (MHU) will send a reminder to Patrol supervisors regarding the location of this updated information. Furthermore, MHU Management will communicate a reminder to Patrol Management. In the future, these reminders between MHU and Patrol will be sent at regular intervals to cover the changeover in personnel.

On August 5, 2020, the VPD sent an email to E-Comm Management to remind E-Comm staff of the process to obtain information from VCH and Car 87. Given the incidents in this complaint, this information will be recirculated as a reminder to all E-Comm staff.

Over the last three years, the VPD is involved in approximately 4750 mental health apprehensions per year. Given the demand for Car 87/88 (over 200 requests per month), the VPD is in talks to potentially increase the resources of this service.

On March 30, 2021, the VPD contacted the complainant by telephone. The complainant was provided with an explanation of the role of Car 87/88 and the reasons for their absence during these incidents. The VPD also answered questions from the complainant during the 45-minute conversation. The complainant was thankful and expressed her continued support for the VPD and for Car 87/88. She indicated that she had written to a number of organizations (including VCH) requesting an increase in resources for Car 87/88 and that she would also be writing to Vancouver City Council.

CONCLUSION:

The complaint related to these incidents could have been avoided with consistent communication and with proper understanding of the role and purpose of Car 87/88. The communication and understanding gaps are in the process of being resolved through ongoing initiatives within the VPD and with its partners (VCH and E-Comm).

As such the VPD recommends that the Committee conclude its review of the complaint based on the information outlined in this report.

Author: S/Sgt. Damian Searwar Telephone 604-717-2767 Date: March 31st, 2021

Submitting Executive Member:

Superintendent Fiona Wilson Date: April 6, 2021