



VANCOUVER POLICE DEPARTMENT

REPORT TO THE VANCOUVER POLICE BOARD

REPORT DATE: January 10, 2022
COMMITTEE MEETING DATE: January 20, 2022
BOARD REPORT # 2201C02

TO: Vancouver Police Board Service and Policy Complaint Review Committee
FROM: Astrid Bonter, Sergeant 2374, Sex Crimes Unit
SUBJECT: Service or Policy Complaint #2021-18 Re: Difficulties Reporting Sexual Assault

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT the Vancouver Police Board Service and Policy Complaint Review Committee (Committee) conclude its review of the complaint based on the information outlined in the report, and given the action(s) taken by the VPD in response to the complaint.

SUMMARY:

On October 7, 2021, the complainant called the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) non-emergency line multiple times in order to report a sexual assault. When unable to speak with a call taker, the complainant attended VPD headquarters at 2120 Cambie Street and spoke with Public Service Unit (PSU) staff who directed them to the priority non-emergency telephone line located in the lobby. The complainant used the phone and priority number provided by PSU staff. They waited on hold for approximately six minutes and did not make contact with a call taker. The complainant returned to PSU staff, expressed frustration, and then left the building.

On October 8, 2021, the complainant made a registered complaint with the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner (OPCC) in regard to the difficulties faced while attempting to report a historic sexual assault. The Committee has formed a Service or Policy Complaint Subcommittee that reviewed the complaint and noted a history of similar complaints relating to PSU 'front counter' service. An investigation was requested by the Subcommittee with recommendations to consider improvements to PSU policy. It was further recommended that an investigation include communication and collaboration with the complainant.

As requested, the VPD completed an investigation into this complaint. This investigation determined that no evidence was lost as a result of the 31 hour time delay from the complainant's first attempt to report. The complainant advised they were very pleased with the assistance received from the VPD once they were able to report the sexual assault.

The VPD finds that given the sexual assault occurred eight days earlier, the complainant was correct in directing their call to the non-emergency line and that had they connected with an E-Comm operator, current VPD policies would have ensured they received timely police assistance.

The VPD's 9-1-1 and non-emergency calls for service are contracted to E-Comm which is a third party service provider. Lengthy waits for non-emergency service are currently under review by E-Comm. The VPD has proactively implemented strategies that positively impact non-emergency wait times, including enhanced on-line reporting and a priority non-emergency telephone line located at the PSU reception area.

This complaint has been discussed with VPD civilian professional managers responsible for the supervision of PSU staff. As a result of these conversations, all persons reporting non-emergent sexual assaults, missing persons, domestic violence, or any persons requiring special assistance will be afforded the service of non-emergency call placement by PSU staff.

BACKGROUND:

On September 30, 2021 the complainant was sexually assaulted in Vancouver and later disclosed the sexual assault to a Coquitlam RCMP sergeant who was known to them. For jurisdictional reasons, this Sergeant recommended that the complainant report the event to the VPD.

On October 7, 2021 the complainant recalled making 8-10 calls to the VPD non-emergency line without being able to report. They recalled being placed on hold for approximately 6 hours throughout the course of the day. The complainant then attended 2120 Cambie Street to try and report the incident. According to the complainant, staff at the PSU spoke with them and directed them to use the phone in the lobby to call non-emergency. When the complainant advised that they had tried a number of times already, the PSU staff told them they could press the green button on the phone and that it might be faster. The complainant reported that they tried that phone; however, they were unable to get through so they went back to PSU staff to explain that a serious sexual assault had occurred and that they couldn't keep waiting to report it.

The following day, the complainant made a registered complaint to the OPCC outlining their attempts to report and their concern that evidence could be lost due to the delay. As a result, the VPD Duty Officer was notified of the difficulty in reporting and directed a unit to contact the complainant and initiate an investigation.

DISCUSSION:

As stated above, non-emergency and emergency 9-1-1 call response is a service that is provided to the VPD by E-Comm, which is a third-party service provider. The VPD understands that E-Comm has acknowledged lengthy wait times for both emergency and non-emergency calls and this matter is currently under review. The issue is not unique to the VPD, as it is affecting police agencies and other emergency services across the province. The delays experienced by the complainant in this instance are not acceptable to the VPD and not consistent with E-Comm's service delivery standard.

In light of the fact that non-emergency wait times are already being addressed by E-Comm and police managers, this report will discuss the following:

- The complainant's use of non-emergency versus 9-1-1 emergency;

- Current strategies employed by VPD to positively impact non-emergency wait times; and
- The effectiveness of PSU Policies, as they relate to persons reporting non-emergent sexual assaults.

The complainant's use of non-emergency versus 9-1-1 emergency to report.

As per E-Comm, a 9-1-1 emergency call is defined as a crime in progress or an event that causes immediate risk to someone's health, safety, or property. Consistent with this definition, the VPD directs complainants to call 9-1-1 when lives are in danger or a crime is in progress.

In the matter under review, the complainant was making efforts to report a sexual assault that occurred eight days prior to their first call to police. While this event is serious in nature and while perishable evidence may have to be considered, the event does not constitute a 9-1-1 emergency call by definition.

This matter was discussed with the complainant. The complainant agrees with this finding and advised that they also determined the matter to be a non-emergency report.

Current strategies employed by VPD to positively impact non-emergency wait times.

As previously indicated, the VPD is aware of the difficulties that exist with reporting on the non-emergency line. In order to mitigate long wait times, the VPD has taken proactive steps such as expanding online reporting options for certain crime types. Online reporting is not available for person offences such as sexual assaults; however, the expansion of online reporting for more property offences should assist with reduction of wait times for non-emergency service.

The VPD has also implemented a priority non-emergency courtesy phone and/or contact number at the 2120 Cambie Street PSU. This line bypasses the non-emergency queue and places the caller next in line for service.

The effectiveness of PSU Policies, as they relate to persons reporting non-emergent sexual assaults.

At the time of complaint, matters requiring police attendance (those extending beyond on-line reporting parameters or simple property crime) were managed by PSU staff using the following methods:

- Refer the complainant to a courtesy phone with a priority non-emergency E-Comm line or provide complainant with the priority non-emergency number to use at their leisure;
- If the complainant is in distress or incapable of using non-emergency phone or number, place a call to non-emergency on behalf of the complainant;
- If the complainant is dissatisfied with service or other extenuating circumstances arise, escalate the call for service to an on-duty police supervisor.

In the case under review, PSU staff were consulted regarding their dealings with the complainant. PSU staff advised that when the complainant reported back to the counter and emphasized they were trying to report a "serious sexual assault" they (PSU staff) attempted to discuss with the complainant about alternatives; however, the complainant left in frustration before anything further could be done.

The VPD understands the frustration felt by the complainant and is committed to reducing barriers to reporting sexual assaults. In light of this, the PSU has now amended their policy to ensure that PSU staff call the priority non-emergency number (which bypasses the non-emergency queue) on behalf of sexual assault complainants. Once the call is answered, PSU staff may forward the call to the courtesy lobby phone if the complainant wishes to provide clarifying information or speak for themselves. This same policy is extended to include people reporting domestic violence, missing persons, and to any person who requires special assistance.

While priority non-emergency wait times are the same for PSU staff as the public using the dedicated priority non-emergency line, this newly developed policy will ensure that complainants receive non-emergency service, such as appointments to meet police, before departing the police lobby. In this instance, the complainant specifically notes that she would have been satisfied if she were able to make an appointment to meet police.

The VPD communicated with the complainant at various points throughout the investigation into this complaint. The complainant consistently conveyed a high degree of satisfaction with the service they received from the VPD since registering their complaint.

CONCLUSION:

The VPD finds that the complainant rightly directed their call to the non-emergency line. While the complainant did wait on hold for an extended period of time, this matter is being addressed by E-Comm. It is noted that the VPD has implemented strategies to address lengthy wait times, including a priority non-emergency number/line at VPD headquarters and online reporting.

With respect to the complainant's reception at the PSU, the VPD has amended the PSU policy to afford special attention to persons reporting sexual assaults (amongst other types of complaints) in an effort to reduce barriers to reporting.

In conclusion, it is recommended that the Committee conclude its review of the complaint based on the information outlined in the report, and given the action(s) taken by the VPD in response to the complaint.

Author: Sergeant Astrid Bonter

Date: January 10, 2022

Submitting Executive Member:

Deputy Chief Fiona Wilson

Date: January 10, 2022