

## PAO Greatly Concerned with OACP Resolutions Surrounding WSIB and Mental Health Support

July 16, 2021 / Toronto, ON – The continued health and safety of Ontario’s police personnel is of utmost importance to the Police Association of Ontario (PAO). When a member gets sick or injured – whether physically or mentally – they need to know that their police association and police service are there to support them.

The Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police (OACP) recently released a list of resolutions related to various policing matters. The PAO is greatly concerned with two of the resolutions: One that proposes changes to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) system itself, and another that proposes amendments to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act (WSIA) Relating to *Bill 163, Supporting Ontario’s First Responders Act (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder), 2016*.

It is the view of the PAO that the OACP’s resolutions, if acted upon, would do significantly more harm than good to the mental health and wellness of Ontario’s police personnel.

“Ontario’s police officers and civilian police service employees are steadfast in their everyday efforts to uphold public safety in their communities. Though their roles often expose them to very traumatic incidents and subject matter, they remain dedicated and professional in the execution of their duties,” said PAO President Mark Baxter.

Despite this, the OACP, which represents all police chiefs across Ontario, has suggested through their resolutions that the women and men who take on these challenging and admirable jobs don’t deserve the full benefit of workers compensation after they have experienced workplace trauma leading to work-related illness or injury. “The idea that the income replacement benefit should be reduced to incentivize members who are off work with medically-diagnosed illnesses or injuries to return more expeditiously is ludicrous and repulsive,” continued Baxter. “We don’t ask someone to remove a cast from a broken leg before it’s healed, why would we do the same for an injury that is not physically ‘visible?’ How is it better for the community to have a police officer who is suffering from a diagnosed mental illness forced back to work because they can’t afford to take the time off to seek proper treatment and get well?”

The OACP’s proposals undo years of work to break down the stigma that exists around mental health injuries and illness, and they perpetuate the incredulous idea that people with mental illness should just ‘suck it up’ and return to work. If these resolutions are acted upon, it will be up to every Police Chief in Ontario to explain to both their membership and the community why they feel local sworn and civilian personnel aren’t worth properly supporting during a significant and often sensitive time of need.

The OACP has used their social media platforms and other opportunities to talk-the-talk on the importance of the policing profession having access to mental health-related supports, yet they

have consistently opposed provincial legislative changes that would make it easier for front-line members to access benefits and treatment options. Additionally, Ontario's Police Chiefs have placed little priority on implementing internal systems in police services that would help address and manage the root causes of Operational Stress Injuries (OSIs) in their members, such as exposure to trauma or burnout, to help avoid the accumulation of these issues that can often happen over time.

"Every police service employee in Ontario deserves to know whether their senior management – Chief, Deputy Chiefs, and more – will be supportive of their efforts to get well if they find themselves in the much-too-high percentage of first responders who are at significant risk of suffering from OSIs, or if they will simply be focused on the cost and "burden" of having another member off on leave," said Baxter. The PAO and local police associations across the province strongly believe that proper investment in comprehensive mental health support programs for police service personnel would increase their ability to get healthy and back to serving their community. "Our members don't want to be, or stay, off of work – they got into this profession because they want to make a difference," Baxter continued.

The PAO will continue to fiercely advocate for the health and wellness of all sworn and civilian police personnel across Ontario. They run towards danger when others are running away. They take calls from people on their absolute worst days and try to talk them through it until help arrives. "The least we can do is ensure our members know that support and assistance is unquestionably available if and when they need help themselves," concluded President Baxter.