



Psychiatric Patient Advocate Office

Bureau de l'intervention en faveur des patients des établissements psychiatriques

July 19, 2007

Hon. Monte Kwinter
Minister
Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services
18th Floor, George Drew Building
25 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, ON M7A 1Y6

Dear Minister Kwinter:

RE: Police Use of Tasers

The Psychiatric Patient Advocate Office (PPAO) would like to voice our concerns about the significant sums of money being spent by police services on tasers, as well as the disproportionate number of psychiatric consumer-survivors who are tasered. We understand that policing is a municipal issue but we believe your Ministry must provide leadership in setting standards on behalf of the people of Ontario and in the public interest.

While we understand that jury recommendations at two recent inquests supported greater accessibility to tasers by front line police officers, we are concerned that tasers are becoming a substitute for appropriate police training. Further, although tasers are considered to be a “non-lethal” use of force, the reality is, according to information received by the PPAO, that people can and do die after being tasered by police. We will be developing a position paper on the use of tasers in the near future. A copy will be sent to you for your review and comments.

We are shocked by statistics found in the 2006 report from the Toronto Police Services’ Special Weapons Team of the Emergency Task Force. The report shows that in the 156 instances where tasers were deployed, the subject was perceived to be in crisis or said to have a mental disorder in 147 cases. Thus, it appears as if psychiatric consumer-survivors are singled out for taser use.

It is our understanding that police services across the province are requesting substantial sums of money to purchase tasers. This fact, coupled with the statistics, suggests that the money is in effect *de facto* mental health funding. We believe the money would be better spent on further training for front line officers about mental health issues, such as the *Mental Health Act* and non-violent crisis intervention and de-escalation techniques with respect to individuals with a mental illness. Police forces may want to consider having mental health workers available to assist in diffusing high risk and volatile situations, resulting in better and more positive outcomes for all involved.

We are also concerned about the growing use of tasers by police services within mental health care facilities. It is often traumatic for the other patients who witness the deployment of a taser to subdue a co-patient and the resulting injury that often occurs. We believe that tasers should not be used in health care facilities to diffuse high risk situations as it potentially undermines patients' feelings of safety and security and their sense that the hospital is a safe place for them to receive their care and treatment

We are hopeful that you will consult with consumer-survivors and other mental health and addiction stakeholders regarding the use of tasers. Further, additional research should be conducted into the risk posed by tasers. Should you have any questions or wish to discuss this matter further, please contact me at (416) 327-7004.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Simpson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "David" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Simpson".

David Simpson
Acting Director

c.c. William Blair, President, Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police
Murray Chitra, Chair, Ontario Civilian Commission on Police Services
Hon. George Smitherman, Minister of Health and Long-Term Care