Advancing the Mission to “Serve and Protect”

Practitioner Profile: Carol Vipari, PhD

“Serve and protect.” The police officers that psychologist Carol Vipari, PhD, works with at the Toronto Police Service (TPS) are so committed to that mission it’s sometimes hard to get them to focus on their own well-being.

Take those working in the service’s child exploitation unit. “Often these officers are so dedicated to their jobs and so interested in saving children that they won’t take breaks,” she says, explaining that the officers are exposed to an endless stream of horrific images of abuse and exploitation. “They’ll work through lunch. They work long hours. They take work home.” And that’s not good for them in the long run, says Vipari.

Helping these officers manage the demands of their work is just one of Vipari’s many tasks as the first-ever corporate psychologist for Canada’s largest municipal police service. Her mandate is to enhance the psychological health and resilience of the service’s 8,000 uniformed officers and civilian staff so that they can perform at their best.

Promoting Resilience


The skills she learned there have served her well in this new setting. “Working at the hospital gave me an understanding of how to connect with individuals who are reluctant participants in both the assessment and treatment process,” she says.

Police officers can also be hesitant to seek help, Vipari says.

“Police officers aren’t accustomed to thinking of themselves as needing help; they’re there to help others,” she explains. “There’s a macho tough-guy image that officers take on with the badge and a mentality that an officer should just ‘suck it up.’”

Now that she has established trust and credibility, Vipari is busy with a variety of efforts designed to keep her colleagues psychologically healthy. She works hand in hand with the service’s second psychologist, who was hired last year.

Focusing on Prevention

Responding when an officer is hurt is only a small part of what Vipari does, although she is happy to help out the team that assists officers after a traumatic incident if called upon. “Our emphasis is more on prevention,” she says.

As a result, Vipari might spend her day screening new constable candidates or officers seeking transfer to the TPS emergency task force (or SWAT team). Vipari uses psychometric testing and structured interviews to ensure that candidates are well suited for the jobs they’re after. Her goal is not just to rule out those who aren’t a good fit but to find individuals with the qualities that will make them effective officers – emotional control, tolerance of diversity, capacity to form relationships and good coping skills.

On another day, Vipari might be checking in with officers in high-risk positions, such as the emergency task force or...
officers returning from military leave. Vipari and her fellow psychologist plan to expand that program to include undercover officers in the coming year. “Their work puts them at great risk physically and psychologically, because they don’t have the safety nets that are available to other officers, who have a team member close by ready to help them out,” she explains.

Or Vipari might find herself consulting with supervisors who need her professional advice. In one case, a supervisor put on display a photo depicting an incident where a police officer had been killed. Intended to serve as a warning about the realities of the job, the photo upset some officers. In response to the supervisor’s request for advice, Vipari helped her understand the reactions and reconsider how to accomplish her goal.

Sometimes officers or civilian staff need additional support. While Vipari doesn’t provide ongoing psychotherapy, she is available when officers or staff are facing a crisis – whether it’s job stress, a serious illness in the family, marital difficulties or suicidal feelings.

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“Sometimes all somebody needs is an opportunity to talk about what they are going through,” says Vipari. She’ll reassure colleagues they’re experiencing normal reactions to their circumstances and offer coping strategies. If necessary, she’ll steer them to the TPS’ employee assistance program, which can provide referrals to therapists in the community who can provide longer-term support.

2009 APA PSYCHOLOGICALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE AWARD WINNER

The Toronto Police Service (TPS) is “a large and expanding police service with a real priority on health and wellness,” explains corporate psychologist Carol Vipari, PhD, of the TPS.

And it’s not just Vipari who has noticed that commitment to the psychological well-being of Canada’s largest municipal police service: Earlier this year, the Toronto Police Service won a Best Practices Honor from the American Psychological Association (APA). Part of APA’s Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program, these honors recognize especially innovative programs or policies.

At the Toronto Police Service, this means a mentoring program that helps officers through the stressful interview process they must undergo to be promoted. To prepare candidates, mentors offer detailed information about what to expect, provide sample questions and reassure candidates that their anxiety is normal. The program also helps interviewers, who undergo mandatory training on how to be objective, ensure consistency and avoid bias and discrimination.

Employees have enthusiastically embraced the program. And the Toronto Police Service’s prediction that the program will reduce turnover has proven true: In 2008, the service’s separation rate was just five percent – with retirement accounting for nearly two-thirds of that figure.

For more information about APA’s Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards program, visit www.phwa.org.

Keeping the Trust

One function Vipari doesn’t perform is fitness-for-duty evaluations, something many police psychologists do. “It has to do with clarity of role,” she says, explaining that the TPS has other advisors who perform such evaluations. Her role is to provide psychological support, which would be impossible to provide without trusting, open relationships.

“I want police officers to know that when they come to me or participate in one of my psychological support or health promotion programs, they can be open with me and share what’s going on in their lives,” says Vipari. “I can’t be useful to police officers who won’t tell me things because they think I’m going to trigger an alert that will get their gun and badge taken away.”

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