

More progress needed for relations between local police, Indigenous people: Advocates

While relationship is largely positive, there's still work to do in Niagara, they say

NEWS 05:00 AM by [Richard Hutton](#) Fort Erie Post



Wendy Sturgeon, executive director of Native Women Inc.'s Niagara chapter, says more work needs to be done to improve the relationship between the police service and the local Indigenous community.
- Richard Hutton/Torstar

Pandemic or not, Wendy Sturgeon thinks it's high time to take a hard look at the relationship between police and Indigenous people in Canada.

Sturgeon is the executive director of the Fort Erie-based Niagara chapter of Native Women Inc. When she sees incidents like one that happened recently in New Brunswick, it angers her.

The incidents that have been the focus of that anger are the recent deaths of Chantele Moore and, Rodney Levi, two members of the Indigenous community who died during an interaction with police.

Moore was shot and killed by police on June 4 in Edmundston, while the local police department was conducting a wellness check. Police said Moore was armed with a

knife and was making threats. She died at the scene despite efforts to resuscitate her. Eight days later in Miramichi, Levi was shot and killed by RCMP officers outside the home of a pastor friend. Police said Levi was armed with two knives and threatened police. Both shootings are being investigated by Quebec's police watchdog, Bureau des enquetes independantes, as New Brunswick does not have its own civilian investigation agency.

"When you go and do a wellness check, there's no way a trained officer would get knifed," Sturgeon said. "She was probably thinking they were coming to get her."

She labelled both deaths as "outrageous."

Fortunately, Sturgeon said, nothing like this has happened in Niagara, but by no means is this region perfect. And with June being National Indigenous Peoples Month, now is the time, even as the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, continues to be a cloud over public health, to begin to work toward improving the relationship between the Indigenous community and local law enforcement.

"I think the NRP is trying to be open," Sturgeon said. "During the past few years they've been doing some work with new hires, getting them out to meet the Indigenous community."

She added that under Chief Bryan McCulloch's watch, a diversity and inclusion committee, the Chief of Police -Community Inclusion Council, has been struck.

"I like Chief McCulloch; we've had a lot of talks."

But more than talking needs to be done, Sturgeon said.

She said that another committee -- the Assault Cases Review Committee -- has only met once.

"There's been a lot done at the planning level, the management level. The problem is, it's OK to strike a committee, but let's get down to doing the work.

"(Niagara Regional) police created a liaison position," Sturgeon said. "There used to be two officers, but there's only one now. That was a good help to bridge the divide a little bit."

That liaison officer is Sgt. Tammy Morden, who, like Sturgeon, thinks relations with the Indigenous community are moving in a positive direction.

"We're having generally positive relationships (with the Indigenous and Black and LGBTQ communities)," Morden said.

The idea of the council is to forge partnerships within the community.

“It’s about bringing everybody together,” she said. “We want everybody to feel like they belong at the table.”

But Sturgeon said there are many things for police or any agency dealing with Indigenous people that need to be understood. Trauma is something Indigenous people have been living with virtually since the arrival of Europeans more than four hundred years ago. It’s something that has continued.

“Maybe they were scooped in the 60s. Maybe they’re a residential school survivor,” Sturgeon said, adding that often times, the sight of a police officer can be a trigger.

“It hasn’t been that long since the last school closed in 1996.”

Kelsey Darnay, meanwhile, knows a lot about what Indigenous people face in the justice system. She is the Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre’s Indigenous criminal court worker. Her job is to help Indigenous people navigate the court system and serve as an advocate.



“It’s not as bad (in Niagara) as in some situations,” she said before pausing to add: “No one has been killed.”

That doesn’t mean there haven’t been problems.

“We’ve often had people come in pretty beat up,” she said. “You ask them who did it and they say the cops. They’re so casual about it and they don’t tell anyone.”

That being said, Darnay added that is not something that happens all the time.

What she is concerned about most for the people she works with is the fact that, once they are “in the system,” it often leads to more trouble.

“As soon as you get that initial charge, it’s very hard,” she said. “I have a lot of repeat clients.”

Part of the issue are things such as addiction and mental health issues as well as homelessness that may impede her clients.

“They’re not making it to court dates,” she said.

Morden, meanwhile, understands that, as with other groups such as the Black and LGBTQ communities, police need training and they are receiving it at the Ontario Police College. Additionally, new recruits are taken to meet representatives of those groups, including a visit to the native centre in Fort Erie.

“It’s direct interaction,” she said. “Officers can see we have a diverse community.”

Additionally, the Indigenous Peoples Court in St. Catharines, which operates at the same time as the Ontario Court of Justice at the Robert K. Welch Courthouse, was created in the wake of recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation report that was released in December 2015.

“It follows the idea of self-government,” Morden said, adding that it is respectful of Indigenous tradition utilizing practices such as a smudge ceremony.

Sturgeon, meanwhile, said that not only the police, but the general public need to become more familiar with Indigenous history and how it can lead to distrust. Circling back to the RCMP, she said the force is a successor to the former Northwest Mounted Police, whose mandate was primarily to keep settlers safe from Indigenous people.

The act that created the force actually contained the words “to keep the unruly savages under control,” Sturgeon said. “Up until 1974, it had police could shoot to kill any Indigenous person.”

But she is relieved to see progress — as slow as she feels it is — being made. But more needs to be done, she said.

“All legislation, policies and regulations must be scrutinized and addressed with (an Indigenous) view in mind — First People’s, First Priority. There can no longer be anything done without our consent, knowledge and involvement; nothing about us, without us,” she said. “We need to bring it to the top of the pile.”

STORY BEHIND THE STORY

With incidents of Indigenous people dying during interactions with police in New Brunswick, reporter Richard Hutton wanted to put his finger of the pulse of the relationship between the Niagara Regional Police and the Indigenous community in not only Fort Erie, but Niagara as a whole.

CORRECTION (June 25, 2020) -- Story has been updated to correct the name of a committee that has only met once to the Assault Cases Review Committee.



by [Richard Hutton](#)

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