In Brief

Why a Fredericton first-responder's struggle with PTSD should alarm us

By MATT MOSHER and TRACY GLYNN

Fredericton - Jeff Mack, a firefighter for 26 years, says one call a decade ago in Fredericton left him with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and a drinking problem.

"My PTSD was a result of cumulative traumatic calls with the fire department," says Mack.

Mack and his partner responded to a dangerous structure fire in the winter of 2003. Mack was shocked and unconscious while fighting the fire. He was forced to leave his partner in the burning building to get help. The two survived, but Mack was stopped sweating after that fire. He left angry all the time and lost interest in almost everything. He was afraid to go back to work and he developed a drinking problem.

Mack attended a debriefing session after the incident. One month after the fire, Mack was diagnosed with PTSD and chronic alcoholism. Three years after the fires that altered his life, he was told that if he continued drinking like he was, he would have three months to live.

According to a 2014 study by the American Psychological Association, firefighters are at high risk for PTSD. Mack's story is featured on the A&E show, Intervention.

Glenn Sullivan, President of the Fredericton Fire Fighters Association, argues that the social stigma associated with PTSD needs to be addressed. "Firefighters have kept it a hidden problem is disempowering but more resources are needed to avoid and treat PTSD in New Brunswick."

Services in New Brunswick are not up to par with others across Canada. Firefighters in New Brunswick experience PTSD symptoms a tougher time linking it to their work and accessing any support from bodies such as WorkSafe NB, according to the union president. WorkSafe NB does not support the cost of PTSD assessment and treatment.

In some provinces, they have a prescriptive PTSD coverage for first responders. That's not the case in New Brunswick," says Sullivan. "The issue lies in the treatment facilities for substance abuse and the funding for it. The problem, I believe it is that there is widespread acknowledgement of PTSD and medical need for funding for a program to address substance abuse, that's where it fails apart.

First responders across Canada—firefighters, paramedics, police officers, soldiers and corrections officers—committed suicide in a six month span from April to September of this year, according to Tina Constant Memorial Trust.

First Nations oppose development of pipeline on unceded territory

(continued from page 1) ...sense, rather than by being "forced into" this decision, they feel that the First Nations are being asked to make another Reston-type confrontation may happen. Anti-fracking movements are already being organized in Reston on Mi'kmak territory on October 17, 2013 resulting in four police vehicles being burnt and 40 arrests.

"There are many people ready to demonstrate...we are watching what is happening in the Maritimes. For the pipeline also pass through Mi'kmaq territory. Anti-fracking movements, a native studies professor at St. Thomas. University from Toledo, believes that First Nations have the authority to impede development on land in the province. The treaties signed in the 18th century in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia are not. The native people and the British. "The treaties were not land surrender," says Nicholas. "In fact they did not speak about land at all."

A Supreme Court of Canada ruling in the Tulita" in First Nations in B.C. that Aboriginal title is protected by the Canadian constitution, governments cannot deal with, or interfere with the Tulita in First Nations' use of the lands and resources without their consent. As a result, the provinces of British Columbia will no longer be able to impose taxes on the Mi'kmaq people for exploration on those lands. Nicholas believes that the Tulita" in Mi'kmaq struggles are comparable because both nations never surrendered their land. "It is not a toxic issue, this is a Mi'kmaq issue," says Nicholas.

Responding to a statement by the Assembly of First Nations Chief of New Brunswick on the pipeline issue in early November, Nicholas writes in a letter published in the Toronto Star on November 12, "The Mi'kmaq people, including not only Indian Act Chiefs and Councils, but also the Mi'kmaq Grand Council, need to get together to stake their claim to the land."

Anthony David Peter-Paul is a journalist at St. Thomas University in Fredericton.

Jeff Mack, a Fredericton firefighter who suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), has brought awareness to the problem of PTSD in first responders. Photo courtesy of Jeff Mack.

The Ontario-based foundation launched a suicide awareness campaign called “You Are Not Alone” in September. The foundation aims to provide first responder organizations with resources and peer support. The campaign has been successful in garnering nationwide media attention on the suicide crisis and its link to stressful work environments and PTSD.

Too few resources and higher-than-average stress levels are cutting the fire service have contributed to stress in the workplace, according to Sullivan. "PTSD is cumulative in nature and organizational changes at the workplace have an impact on stress levels. I have seen this in young firefighters who have really become frustrated in the decisions made at City Hall without truly realizing the impact on safety.

"It adds a great deal of stress knowing that you don't have the resources to do your job effectively. It's one thing to cut back on personnel at city hall, but when you are dealing with people's lives it's entirely different."

Although Sullivan admits that there has been a significant change towards the view of mental illness within fire departments during the last 18 years, he still believes there is much more improvement needed. "Organizational behavior, in the context of psychology, is often ignored in the public sector. When all that is talked about is 'cleaning up' the organization the thing to find out is 'doing business' as usual is not working anymore."

Mack has been in recovery since 2008 after receiving four months of treatment in B.C.

Sullivan admits he would like to think that Mac's story is an uncommon one with Fredericton firefighters but he knows one of first responders who recently retired with PTSD and another who has just filed for Workers' Compensation. Many have taken time off to deal with stress and other mental illnesses.

Matt Moshier is a social work student at St. Thomas University and Tracy Glynn is an editor at the NB Media Co-op.

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