

OUR VIEW

Province should heed Justice Tulloch

Ontario's police watchdog needs more teeth.

The Special Investigations Unit is a civilian agency that was established to maintain public confidence in Ontario's police forces by providing independent investigations into serious injury, death or sexual assault allegation involving police.

The unit is intended to provide transparency and accountability.

Yet both seem to be lacking, raising questions about the efficacy of the provincial oversight unit.

The onus is on individual police forces to notify the unit if there is a serious injury, death or sexual assault allegation. The SIU cannot invoke their mandate until they are contacted by police. It's a system built on self-reporting.

Self-reporting is only effective if there are incentives to co-operate. Currently, if police don't call in the unit, there are no real consequences. That concern was brought to the fore when neither Durham nor Toronto called SIU after an alleged assault by an off-duty Toronto officer in Durham. It was only months later SIU was notified by the complainant's lawyer.

There can be no accountability if there is no reporting, and there is arguably insufficient motivation to report if there are no real penalties. The SIU becomes little more than a toothless watchdog if it cannot invoke its mandate.

Meanwhile, when the unit is called in, the public is only made aware of about a quarter of the investigations. The SIU isn't required to report to the public and only does so as a matter of policy, citing lack of resources for its dearth of public notifications.

It's difficult to claim transparency and build trust and confidence in policing if information is being withheld, regardless of the rationale. Justice needs to be seen to be done, and police forces must be held publicly accountable if there is to be any faith in the system. To do otherwise is to nullify the express purpose of the provincial unit and sow the seeds of doubt and suspicion.

These problems, and many more, are addressed in Justice Michael Tulloch's review of the SIU. His report includes 129 recommendations to improve police oversight in Ontario. This includes a recommendation the law require the unit to report to the public on every investigation and more precise requirements regarding notifying SIU.

Former SIU director Ian Scott says if Tulloch's recommendations are implemented it would make the Ontario unit the most transparent and accountable in the world. That's a goal worth striving to achieve.

With the recommendations already on the table, we just need the political will to make our system truly accountable, transparent and independent.

CANADIANS GIVE THANKS...



LETTERS & COMMENTARY

One pat can undo dog's training

Many blind and partially sighted Canadians still find themselves in challenging and frustrating situations when trying to access public spaces such as cabs, B&Bs, restaurants and shopping establishments.

In all of Canada's 13 jurisdictions, human rights legislation prohibits discriminating against a person with a disability working with a service animal.

Discrimination includes denial of access to any premises to which the public would normally have access. In Ontario, there are three pieces of legislation (The Blind Person's Rights Act, Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act and the

Letters to the Editor



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Ontario Human Rights Code) to protect guide dog users. Unfortunately, this is not well known.

Guide dogs are highly-trained animals that help provide mobility, safety and increased independence for people with sight loss.

They assist their handlers in navigating obstacles typically found on most daily routes, includ-

ing curbs, steps and crowds, helping to give them the confidence to pursue education, careers and activities in their communities.

Guide dogs are not pets. Guide dogs do serious work.

As part of September's National Guide Dog Month, CNIB celebrated guide dogs by raising awareness about the rights of guide dog users when accessing public spaces and sharing some simple-to-follow guide dog etiquette tips.

If you see a guide dog in harness, please avoid talking to or interacting with the guide dog.

Please do not pet, feed or otherwise distract a working guide dog.

A well-intentioned pat can undo months of training. And, you should only

pet a guide dog when it is not in harness after you've received permission from the handler to do so. If you own a pet dog, please keep it on a leash and under control when you're out and about in the community.

When approaching a guide dog team with your dog, clearly introduce yourself to the person and say, "I'm passing on your left and I have a dog with me."

To learn more, visit cnibguidedogs.ca.

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