



**IN THE MATTER OF THE DEATH OF A MAN
IN AN INCIDENT INVOLVING MEMBERS OF THE RCMP
IN WILLIAMS LAKE, BRITISH COLUMBIA
ON JULY 10, 2022**

**DECISION OF THE CHIEF CIVILIAN DIRECTOR
OF THE INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATIONS OFFICE**

Chief Civilian Director:

Jessica Berglund

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INTRODUCTION

On July 10, 2022, officers with the Williams Lake RCMP responded to a call regarding a man (the Affected Person, or “AP”) who was reported to be suicidal, intoxicated, and in possession of a firearm with other family members inside the home. Two family members left the home safely shortly after police arrived, and a third family member was later determined to be inside the home. After initially not wanting to leave, the third family member also exited safely a few hours later.

Due to the report of a loaded firearm, the Emergency Response Team (“ERT”) was called to attend. Police attempted to initiate conversation with the AP using various methods during the incident, but those attempts were unsuccessful.

The AP was subsequently found deceased in the home from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

The Independent Investigations Office (“IIO”) was notified and commenced an investigation. The narrative that follows is based on evidence collected and analyzed during the investigation, including the following:

- statements of three civilian witnesses;
- statements of 19 witness police officers;
- police Computer-Aided Dispatch (“CAD”) and Police Records Information Management Environment (“PRIME”) records;
- audio recordings of police radio transmissions;
- scene examination and exhibits;
- video recordings from a police robot;
- drone video footage;
- cellular video footage;
- forensic firearm examination; and
- autopsy and toxicology reports.

NARRATIVE

At 3:42 a.m. on July 10, 2022, a family member, Civilian Witness 1 (“CW1”), called 911 to report that a man (the AP) was suicidal at the family’s home in Williams Lake. Another family member, Civilian Witness 2 (“CW2”), took over the call and added that the AP was intoxicated, had a loaded rifle, and had said, “I’m done.”

Initially, police were told that CW1 and CW2 were the only people in the home with the AP. Both were asked to leave the home by the 911 call taker at the request of Witness Officer 1 ("WO1"). While enroute to the scene, WO1 broadcast over police radio,

So I think this will be the plan. We'll just contain the residence for now, get all the family members out by phone, and then we'll try and call in inside and try and talk him out of the residence.

At 3:50 a.m., both CW1 and CW2 left the home safely and made their way to WO1, who had just arrived at the home.

WO1 was joined by Witness Officer 2 ("WO2") and Witness Officer 3 ("WO3"), and they took up positions near the home to contain the scene. WO1 told IIO investigators that he decided to wait and contain instead of attempting to contact the AP right away because he didn't feel he had the skills or training to safely de-escalate the situation. At 3:57 a.m. WO1 requested that crisis negotiators be called. Four on-duty officers in Williams Lake also began to evacuate nearby homes.

When interviewed by IIO investigators, WO1 explained his approach to the call and said his risk assessment was

...about as high as it can go. I mean obviously I am thinking worst case scenario like I said I don't know what his intentions are. Maybe he just wants to end his own life, maybe he's just seeking help and wants to talk to us to get him some professional help or something like that, maybe he wants to start shooting neighbours, I have no idea. Which is the reason behind the hard body armour and the carbine and taking cover and not presenting myself as an opportunity.

There are differing accounts of when the family members and officers spoke. CW2 says no officers spoke to either family member when they came out of the house, and that they stood on the curb for some time without being spoken to at all. WO1 told IIO investigators that he spoke to the two family members right after they exited the home and was told that the AP had been going through a rough time in his life, had pointed the rifle at his own head at one point, and had said if police were called, he would kill himself. Part of this conversation was captured in recorded radio transmissions between 3:53 a.m. and 3:54 a.m. WO2 said that he arrived at the scene shortly after WO1's arrival and while WO1 was speaking to CW1 and CW2.

CW2 attempted to re-enter the home shortly before 5:00 a.m. as she said she was frustrated by the lack of communication from police. She was stopped by an officer. WO1 explained his rationale for not allowing CW1 and CW2 to re-enter the home, saying:

It could turn potentially into a hostage situation... I have no idea what [the AP's] intentions are. If [CW1 or CW2] went back in there maybe [they] could have talked him down or something like that, but I mean, [they were] already in there with him and he still apparently had the gun to his head. So, my line of thinking was if [they hadn't] talked him down yet I don't think it's going to happen. His intentions may have changed from the time [they] called to whenever [they] tried to get back inside.

CW1 and CW2 left the scene and went to the RCMP detachment.

Between 5:11 a.m. and 5:26 a.m., two crisis negotiators, working remotely, began taking steps to lock down phone numbers associated with the AP, so that the phones associated with those numbers would only connect with the crisis negotiators. Crisis negotiators also began taking steps to learn of any factors that may have prompted the AP into crisis, however they were unable to identify any beyond what had already been provided by family members.

At 5:31 a.m., the lockdown process had been completed, and crisis negotiators began phoning the AP on the two phone numbers. Shortly after that, from 5:40 a.m. onwards, officers on scene began to call out to the AP using the loudspeaker of a police vehicle and, later, a remotely operated speaker. As police believed at this point that the AP was alone in the home, Witness Officer 4 ("WO4") said the strategy was not to take any action that could provoke an escalation of the situation, but rather to continue trying to get the AP to talk to them and encourage him to leave the home peacefully without a weapon. WO4 confirmed this strategy by phone with the ERT.

All police efforts to speak to the AP were unsuccessful. The AP had CW2's cell phone and the negotiators called it but did not reach the AP. The second number belonged to the AP's cell phone, which was later found to be in his truck outside the home.

WO4 stated that his risk assessment was high due to the presence of a loaded firearm which the AP was reported to have pointed at his head and reports that the AP had made statements that implied he was suicidal. In a recorded interview with police at 5:40 a.m. obtained during the IIO investigation, CW2 said she did not believe the police response was warranted and commented that "this feels unnecessary now" as she believed the prior interactions were related to his intoxication. She also believed that the AP had slept for a few hours and would be fine.

At 5:54 a.m., based on the lack of success in establishing contact with the AP, and WO4's ongoing risk assessment (the AP's possession of a loaded rifle and his stated intention to self-harm) WO4 requested the attendance of the ERT. The ERT travelled from the Prince George area and began to arrive, along with crisis negotiators, at 8:17 a.m. The ERT took over callouts to the AP, additional evacuations, and containment of the area.

Crisis negotiators continued their attempts to contact the AP during this period using the phone numbers they had for him.

At 8:39 a.m., officers saw the face of another person who was not the AP at a window of the house and became concerned that someone else was inside the home. CW2 subsequently confirmed that a third family member, Civilian Witness 3 (“CW3”), a child, was inside the home with the AP. CW2 had initially believed that CW3 was at another person’s home for the night. Police requested that CW2 ask CW3 to come out of the home, and CW2 told police by phone that CW3 didn’t want to leave and was not in danger.

Witness Officer 6 (“WO6”) explained to investigators that the presence of CW3 in the home required a re-evaluation of the situation by police. When interviewed by IIO investigators, WO6 said:

Why haven't we heard from this person [the AP]? Have they committed suicide, or are they watching us from a different position, hiding, and potentially have a firearm, which we have had happen with our team before. So maintains high [risk assessment]. Once the confirmation that [CW3 was] in there, that changes for me a bit, because now my concern is if his mindset is not great right now, is that a risk towards her? Unfortunately, we've all seen news stories where parents or people have committed suicide but taken family members with them. And that's a concern, has he done that? Obviously, seeing [CW3], knowing that [they were] in there, I didn't believe that he had committed suicide at that point. Because if he did at that point, because if he did with a firearm, it's likely [CW3] would have heard, and it would have forced [them] to leave or check that out. But [CW3] seemed pretty relaxed, just on [their] phone. I didn't believe [they were] a hostage in the file, I didn't believe [they were] there against [their] will. But I was worried that maybe [they] didn't know the full situation, what had occurred prior to the information we had, or his status. So once [CW3] left, again, risk assessment still high because he does have a firearm in there, but it just drops down a little bit because now I'm not worried about this second party we might have to go in and protect. It allows us to treat it as our barricade, just keep our members outside at a distance, and again, try and communicate.

Officers remained outside the home for several hours, while crisis negotiators continued to attempt establishing contact, without success, using the phone numbers they had, as well as conducting callouts using an amplified speaker. At 10:30 a.m., while using a drone, police observed CW3 and determined that CW3 was not a hostage, or at risk of harm. However, the incident had evolved into a “double person barricade.” Officers then developed a plan to begin a progression of tactics with the intention of having the AP and CW3 exit the home upon arrival of the Tactical Armoured Vehicle (“TAV”). WO6 explained the logic of progressing tactics to IIO investigators, saying:

And to me, it was a logical step based on the amount of time put in trying to communicate, and the lack of communication, right? We just don't know the status, but we still have... this person to apprehend, and deal with their safety. The more time we allow them to think, and think, and think, might lead them to make their decision [to commit suicide]. So, if we can interrupt that loop early, and force them out, and take them into custody, that's the ideal circumstance.

At 10:42 a.m., the TAV arrived, operated by Witness Officer 7 ("WO7"). WO7 explained the TAV is used as cover for police in situations involving armed subjects as it is designed to withstand bullets and is mobile. WO7 prepared the TAV and moved it into position for the progression of tactics to begin. De-escalation progression is a standard approach taken when a person is barricaded with a weapon, and involves specific steps taken in order, each in hopes that stage will result in a peaceful resolution. If it does not, the next step is attempted. These steps include containing the area, attempting to communicate with the person, making noise to ensure the person knows police are present (e.g., use of devices to make noise), using gas to make staying inside uncomfortable and encourage the person to exit, using technology to see what the person is doing inside, and lastly, having police physically enter the dwelling.

Between 11:06 a.m. and 11:17 a.m., police used distraction devices to prompt the AP and CW3 to safely exit the home. Although the AP did not exit, CW3 chose to exit once "window breakers" were deployed. A "window breaker" is when police use or shoot an object to break a window. CW3 described the "window breakers" as "bangs." CW3 later told another person (Civilian Witness 4, or "CW4") that:

[The AP] told [them] he loved [them] very much and [CW3] took a couple of steps down the stairs and then [they] said [they] heard a huge bang upstairs where they were. And [CW3] said they had either threw [sic] a gas bomb through the window or [the AP] shot the gun.

After they exited the home, CW3 was briefly interviewed by Witness Officer 5 ("WO5"), who learned that the AP had told CW3 that he loved them, and they could leave if they wanted. WO5 also learned the firearm was likely in the same room as the AP. Based on this conversation, WO5 did not believe the AP was willing to leave the home voluntarily and updated that over the radio.

WO5 said that after several hours of attempting to speak to the AP without receiving any response from him, police decided to move on to other tactics. WO5 explained the timing of the progression towards using CS gas (commonly referred to as tear gas) as follows:

I didn't believe we were going to be able to negotiate with him. So very early on, and again, if [CW3] hadn't been there... we'd probably have moved towards gas a lot sooner. But we typically don't like to gas... [when there are young people present]. And, so that I guess delayed a little bit of our progression to de-escalate the situation with getting him off balance and stuff. But yeah, once he was looking out the windows, and he still wasn't engaging, I'm like "these attempts are a waste of time, I don't believe we're going to get him to negotiate" so we have to do something else.

WO6, who is the north district ERT chemical lead, further explained that CS gas:

...often induces a level of panic, people don't understand what is happening, your breathing is restricted, it hurts, it's uncomfortable, your eyes are irritated. So even people who have been quite motivated are now motivated to get out to fresh air. So, we usually use it to kind of dislodge and disorient someone and create separation. Where we've had success with that too, where if there are firearms involved, and they're not in their hand, they're often not motivated to get it once they experience CS gas, they just rush outside, and they often come out unarmed. So, in this case, just through a lack of communication, 'cause it had gone on for, since nine o'clock we got there. I believe it was around noon when the chemical munitions had gone inside. A few hours of [the negotiators] trying to get in touch, trying to get the throw phone in there, the loud hailer, all that. And just zero attempt on his end to communicate with us. The decision to put the gas in there was made.

When questioned why they did not try to involve family in the negotiations, crisis negotiators and other officers involved said that other parties, such as family or friends, are generally not invited to attempt to speak to persons in crisis. This is to avoid the possibility of unintentionally triggering a negative reaction by the person in crisis as police officers do not have an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of a distressed person's relationships. Witness Officer 8 ("WO8"), who is a crisis negotiator, explained:

If you don't know if that person's a trigger, and you don't know what their motives are, and you're in the heat of the moment and you interject with somebody who quite possibly could be the problem, and you've vetted the best way you can, but, if there is something you don't know or you weren't told the full story, then that's potentially, that's extremely dangerous, right? I do understand the point of view from a loved one as well, but without that type of knowledge, to know whether a person is a [positive or negative influence], or not being able to control the narrative, right... If you put that person in contact with the affected person that's there, and, maybe that's all they wanted to hear was this person's voice, and they say "Listen, I've got something, here listen to this" and they kill themselves in front of them, or they're waiting to say goodbye, and then

they do it, right? Those are things we take into consideration too, and those things are extremely dangerous, to have a third party.

While officers began preparing the CS gas, they also unsuccessfully attempted to deliver a “throw phone” to the AP at 11:44 a.m. (a “throw phone” is a durable phone intended to be delivered to a person or into a home). At 11:49 a.m., police put CS gas into the home in another attempt to get the AP to exit. At 12:06 p.m., as there was no response to the CS gas, police considered using different methods to verify the AP’s location and wellbeing.

At 12:10 p.m., police flew a drone into the home to confirm where the AP was, but the drone malfunctioned. Finally, at 12:28 p.m., a robot equipped to record video successfully entered the home and located the AP, who was deceased.

Forensic examination of the scene identified the AP’s cause of death to be a single self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, and this was confirmed during an autopsy. The gun belonging to the AP was the one used in the incident. Toxicology results showed a mild level of alcohol intoxication at the time the AP died.

In total, there were twenty-five police officers deployed to the incident, which lasted over eight hours.

ANALYSIS

The Independent Investigations Office of British Columbia is mandated to investigate any incident that occurs in the province in which an Affected Person (“AP”) has died or suffered serious physical harm and there appears to be a connection to the actions (or sometimes inaction) of police. The aim is to provide assurance to the public that when the investigation is complete, they can trust the IIO’s conclusions, because the investigation was conducted by an independent, unbiased, civilian-led agency.

In most cases, those conclusions are presented in a public report such as this one, which completes the IIO’s mandate by explaining to the public what happened in the incident and how the Affected Person came to suffer harm. Such reports are intended to enhance public confidence in the police and in the justice system through a transparent and impartial evaluation of the incident and the police role in it.

In a smaller number of cases, the evidence gathered may give the Chief Civilian Director (“CCD”) reasonable grounds to believe that an officer has committed an offence in connection with the incident. In such a case, the *Police Act* gives the CCD authority to refer the file to Crown counsel for consideration of charges.

Officers were acting lawfully, in execution of their duties, when they responded to CW1 and CW2's call that the AP was suicidal and armed. Police officers have a general duty to preserve the peace and protect life, and they were required to attend at the AP's home to try to save the AP's life and prevent anyone else from getting hurt.

Officers had received information that the AP was intoxicated, in possession of a loaded weapon and had said that he was "done." When they arrived, there were two family members inside the home. Although that situation may not have felt dangerous to the family members that knew and loved the AP, it posed a significant risk in the eyes of police officers. From an officer's perspective, they needed to make all possible efforts to prevent the AP from harming himself or anyone else. This included anyone inside the home, as well as anyone who happened to be outside the home and who could be hit if the AP, either intentionally or unintentionally, shot the firearm.

Over the course of several hours, police officers attempted to get the AP to speak to them and used several tactics to get him to exit the home. The AP did not respond to any communications, which further raised police concerns. Several hours into the incident, police learned that CW3 was inside the home, and their risk assessment became even more elevated out of concern for CW3's safety.

The tactics that the officers used to get the AP to leave his home aligned with police training for this type of situation. It was extremely unfortunate that the AP's phone was in his truck, and that attempts to communicate using CW2's phone were unsuccessful.

Based on the presence of a firearm, it is understandable that police were concerned that the AP may have been a threat to officers, and they needed to ensure that they did not enter the home when the AP was armed with a gun and provoke a stand-off. The officers did not personally know the AP, were not fully aware of his intentions, and were acting based on their training and history of encountering other similar situations. The officers needed to proceed cautiously, and it was open to them, as part of the progression in tactics, to use CS gas to assess the AP's responsiveness after communication failed.

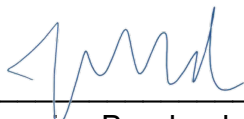
In determining whether to refer this matter for consideration of charges, this case must be based on what the officers knew at the time they dealt with the AP, and the information that they had. A police officer is not held to a legal standard of perfection when making assessments about a person's mental health, and what action to take. To constitute a criminal offence such as criminal negligence causing death, officers must have shown a wanton and reckless disregard for the life of the AP, which is assessed on whether their actions were a marked and substantial departure from the appropriate standard of care in the circumstances. The IIO's mandate is to assess whether the officers' actions were criminal, and they were not in this case. Instead, this is a tragic situation where a man who was loved by his family and his community took his own life.

This incident raises bigger questions about the approach that police officers take when engaging with a person suffering from a mental health crisis, especially a person from an Indigenous community. Although there is certainly a risk in cases where an individual is in possession of a loaded gun, it should be considered that a heavy police presence, including a full ERT deployment with police in military equipment, armoured vehicles and issuance of commands may escalate someone in a mental health crisis. It is very unfortunate that the crisis negotiators' attempts to communicate with the AP were unsuccessful.

I met with family members of the AP, as well as representatives from the Indigenous community, on October 9, 2024, to discuss findings from the investigation. During that meeting, significant concerns were raised by participants with respect to ongoing discrimination against Indigenous people by the Williams Lake RCMP, and that the police response to this incident was more forceful and severe than if the AP had been non-Indigenous.

This investigation did not reveal any evidence that racism influenced the involved officers' approach to this incident. While the IIO's mandate does not include examining systemic issues in policing, it is important to acknowledge that Indigenous communities in Canada have long faced systemic discrimination by police - a reality documented in numerous studies and recognized in both government and RCMP reports.¹ This discrimination manifests in practices such as racial profiling, disproportionate arrest and incarceration rates, and excessive use of force against Indigenous Peoples. As calls for accountability and reforms continue, addressing systemic discrimination against Indigenous Peoples remains crucial in advancing reconciliation efforts and ensuring fair and equitable treatment under the law.

Though this incident does not meet the standard for referral to Crown Counsel, I will be referring this file to the RCMP and the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for their review to assess whether changes to policy or training are necessary with respect to how police officers respond to similar incidents involving Indigenous people and communities in the future.



Jessica Berglund
Chief Civilian Director

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¹[Address systemic racism, State of the Criminal Justice System Dashboard, Overrepresentation of Indigenous People in the Canadian Criminal Justice System: Causes and Responses.](#)