



**IN THE MATTER OF THE POLICE RESPONSE TO
A MISSING WOMAN LATER FOUND DECEASED IN
VANDERHOOF, BRITISH COLUMBIA
ON NOVEMBER 5, 2023**

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

Chief Civilian Director:

Jessica Berglund

IIO File Number:

2023-343

Date of Release:

November 26, 2025

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The following report contains details that may be distressing to some readers. **If you are in crisis, help is available:**

- Call 310-6789 to be connected to the crisis centre nearest you (no area code required)
- Support Line – Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls: 1-844-413-6649
- Crisis Services Canada: crisisservicescanada.ca
- British Columbia: crisislines.bc.ca
- Vancouver and surrounding areas: crisiscentre.bc.ca
- Vancouver Island: vicrisis.ca
- VictimLinkBC: 1-800-563-0808

Introduction

On December 4, 2023, the IIO received a notification from a Civilian Witness (“CW1”) asking that an investigation be conducted into the RCMP’s response to a wellness check conducted on October 11, 2023. CW1 voiced a concern that police officers may not have taken appropriate steps to locate the Affected Person when she went missing prior to her death.

The narrative that follows is based on evidence collected and analyzed during the investigation, including the following:

- statements of eight civilian witnesses;
- statement of one Witness Officer;
- Police Computer-Aided Dispatch (“CAD”);
- Police Records Information Management Environment (“PRIME”) records;
- BC Provincial Policing Standards;
- RCMP policies;
- reports from the deployed Search and Rescue team;
- consultation with two experts in police service dog deployment; and
- autopsy report.

No individual officer was designated as a Subject Officer in this investigation.

Narrative

On December 4, 2023, Civilian Witness 1 (“CW1”) contacted the IIO to request an investigation into the response of the Vanderhoof RCMP related to a wellness check that was conducted on October 11, 2023. CW1 was concerned that efforts by police to locate the Affected Person (“AP”) prior to her death were inadequate. The AP was an Indigenous woman, and she was found deceased on November 5, 2023.

Concerns about the AP’s welfare began on October 11, 2023. At 2:00 a.m., Civilian Witness 2 (“CW2”), who was in the same home but upstairs from the AP, heard the AP smash something and leave the home. At approximately 8:00 a.m., when CW2 went downstairs, they found the AP’s phone smashed, and the AP was not there. CW2 was concerned for the AP’s wellbeing so they engaged members of the First Nations community to begin a search to find the AP.

CW1 was in a city approximately 100 kilometres from where the AP lived when she received information that the AP had gone missing and was concerned about the AP’s wellbeing as the AP was visiting family members in a community the AP was not familiar with. CW1 tried to contact the AP by phone and received no response. At 10:30 a.m., CW1 called the Vanderhoof RCMP to request they check on the wellbeing of the AP.

Witness Officer 1 (“WO1”) and Witness Officer 2 (“WO2”) attended the residence mentioned by CW1 at 10:47 a.m. and spoke with the occupant who advised that they had not seen the AP since the previous day. The occupant suggested that the AP was at a different address with her family members. Shortly after, WO1 and WO2 attended the second address and were advised that community members were searching the area for the AP. Officers attempted to examine the content of the AP’s cellphone for clues to her whereabouts by removing the SIM card and placing it in other cellphones present to search for recent texts and calls. This was unsuccessful.

At the home where the AP had been staying, officers arrested a person for breaching their court conditions to not be present there. Upon returning to the detachment, they discussed the check well-being call with Witness Officer 3 (“WO3”) and started a missing persons investigation.

That afternoon, at 1:34 p.m., WO3 contacted Search and Rescue operations. WO3 also sent out several notifications to officers located in other areas of British Columbia to check places that the AP frequented in attempts to find her.

At 2:27 p.m., WO1 checked with dispatch whether an RCMP Air Services helicopter and/or a Police Service Dog (PSD) were available. Police officers were advised that a

helicopter was unavailable due to mechanical issues. Witness Officer 4 (“WO4”) was told by the police dog handler that, due to the number of people in the area involved in the search mission, any scent trail for a dog would be compromised. It was reported that this conflicting human scent would have made any tracking by the dog impossible.

WO4 contacted an available drone operator in Prince George. Witness Officer 5 (“WO5”) attended with a drone, which uses infrared technology to identify heat sources. The drone search was conducted over a one-kilometre radius from the home. WO5 did not locate the AP or her possessions by using the drone.

At 3:30 p.m., WO1 called the Search and Rescue (“SAR”) manager and asked to upgrade to a full SAR call-out. SAR advised WO1 that the SAR helicopter was not available, but a team would be arriving that afternoon, and the helicopter would attend the next day.

At 5:09 p.m., WO1 conducted a search of CW2’s home to try to find anything that would assist in locating the AP. CW2 was also interviewed by police.

Throughout that afternoon, other police officers searched in various locations throughout the province, including Prince George and Fraser Lake. Officers knocked on doors and tried to locate places where the AP may have gone.

The RCMP also put out a media release asking members of the public for information.

The search for the AP continued from October 12 to October 14, 2023 with the following steps taken:

- a SAR helicopter attended to search for the AP. WO2 and Witness Officer 6 (“WO6”) assisted the SAR pilot with helicopter patrols of the area by looking for the AP;
- social media was utilized;
- police officers followed up on tips received from members of the public, including by attending homes and locations where the AP was reported to be by others; and
- police officers followed up on tips of where lost clothing and other items were located to determine whether they belonged to the AP.

On October 15, 2023, SAR suspended their search for the AP but left “search tasks” for the community members to complete before their return the following weekend.

Between October 16, 2023 and October 19, 2023, police officers received different tips from members of the public about where the AP had allegedly been seen. They followed up on tips received from across Canada and the United States, which included attending

places where the AP was reported to be, and engaging with police in different jurisdictions to gather evidence.

Police officers also took the following steps:

- interviewed multiple people that they believed may have had information about the location of the AP;
- canvassed for video or CCTV from all the homes near where the AP went missing, and collected relevant video;
- attended banks to see if the AP's bank accounts were being used;
- followed up with different government institutions to see if they had contact with the AP;
- attended hospitals in different cities to try to locate the AP;
- searched locations where the AP could be; and
- handed out missing person pamphlets.

On October 21, 2023, SAR returned to continue performing searches to find the AP. After finding some clothing in the search area, police officers brought in the RCMP helicopter to perform an aerial search. Unfortunately, the AP was not found.

From October 22, 2023 to November 4, 2023, the search continued, and officers:

- followed up on various tips from members of the public where the AP was allegedly seen;
- interviewed more people to try to determine where the AP might be;
- combed through CCTV footage to try to see if the AP was identifiable on any of the videos, using video enhancements in some instances;
- contacted health authorities to see if the AP had been in contact with any hospitals;
- conducted a forensic analysis of the AP's broken phone;
- contacted social media platforms in an attempt to retrieve the AP's messages prior to her disappearance; and
- sent exhibits to forensic laboratories for analysis.

On November 5, 2023, Civilian Witness 3 ("CW3") was searching an area when he found some personal items with the AP's name on them. He messaged CW1, who advised the RCMP.

Police officers attended with Witness Officer 7 ("WO7") and his police dog at 6:30 p.m. on November 5, 2023. WO7 spoke with CW3 and started a search near the area where the AP's belongings were found. Approximately 15 minutes later, the AP was found

deceased in the thick bush. Her body was found approximately 700 metres from where she first went missing.

An autopsy was performed on November 10, 2023. No lethal trauma was identified that would suggest foul play. The AP had scrapes on her face and limbs. The AP had a small amount of methamphetamine in her system. Further details related to the cause of death were received by the IIO in an autopsy report on June 24, 2024. At that time, the pathologist concluded that the AP died from hypothermia, explaining that the use of methamphetamine “may have resulted in an altered mental status, increasing the AP’s inability to remove herself from the cold environment.”

CW1 has expressed concern regarding the steps taken to find the AP, or lack thereof. CW1 said that if police officers had acted more quickly, the AP’s life may have been saved. There were concerns expressed by CW1 and the community that the AP’s disappearance was not taken seriously and that appropriate investigative steps were not done at all or with any urgency. It was alleged that housing checks were not done.

Another concern expressed was that the police service dog should have been used earlier in the investigation, and when the AP first went missing. IIO investigators engaged two experts in police dog deployment and handling to determine whether the deployment of a dog would have assisted in finding the AP sooner. The experts were advised that the AP had gone missing in the middle of the night, that there was no known direction of travel, and that there were 20-30 persons out searching on All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs, or quads) and on foot for the AP in the hours prior.

The first expert explained how the RCMP uses dogs to track. He stated, “We do not use methods or styles such as “showing” a dog something with odour to go to a source and ignore all others. The dog will go down-wind to the freshest, most recent human odour (person or article) that is reaching their nose in that moment.”

The expert explained that the introduction of new people into a dog track route will distract the dog, and they will focus on the freshest scent. The expert continued that although all the people out searching is helpful, they can also compromise the ability of the dog to track because the dog focuses on the freshest scent. The expert said, “A very general grid organized search with human eyes would be much more effective until any sort of start point or last known location is isolated.”

A second opinion was sought from an expert outside of the RCMP, who confirmed that the appropriate time to use a dog is immediately after a person goes missing, because

there will be more scent contamination as time progresses. The second expert noted that since the community had been conducting searches for six hours prior:

. . . it significantly reduced if not obliterated any potential success for a police dog. Any track that was left by the missing person would have deteriorated with time. Significant cross-tracks by searchers would result in no effective starting point to work from...the dog would be of very minimal use.

Analysis

The Independent Investigations Office of British Columbia is mandated to investigate any incident that occurs in the province in which an Affected Person 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 as a whole 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.

This investigation involved the tragic death of an Indigenous woman who was deeply cared for by her family and friends. Her death has left the community with unresolved questions about whether the RCMP members could have done more to find her prior to her death. They are also left with questions about how she died and whether foul play was involved, which sits outside the mandate of the IIO, as the IIO investigation focuses on the actions of police.

There are *BC Provincial Policing Standards* that apply to missing persons investigations in British Columbia. These are standards that all British Columbia police officers must follow under British Columbia's *Police Act*. They require missing person investigations to be "prioritized and undertaken at a high standard appropriate to identified risks."

The AP's disappearance was high-risk. She was an Indigenous woman who went missing in an area where so many others have tragically disappeared. Her disappearance was extremely concerning. The AP was vulnerable, and she needed to be located quickly.

Although officers engaged in the search to find the AP when she went missing, the question became whether they could have done more or acted sooner.

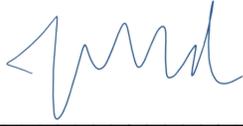
The decision not to deploy a police dog is understandably an issue that some have criticized. The experts that the IIO consulted stated that the use of a dog had minimal potential to locate the AP due to the time delay in notification and the amount of foot and vehicle traffic through the area during the elapsed time. This is not to fault the search efforts that were undertaken in hope of locating the AP without the need for outside assistance. These efforts were extensive and commendable.

Despite the low chance of success in deploying a police dog for search purposes, this was still available for the RCMP and would have provided another visible presence and option for the Search Coordinator. Experts have explained the decision not to use a police dog, but the question as to whether the AP would have been located in the same area, less than 700 metres from her last known location, or what condition she may have been in had a dog been called on October 11, 2023, remains unanswered. There are times when standard police practice may not be enough and, in my view, when a vulnerable, Indigenous woman goes missing in this province, exceptional efforts are warranted. Such efforts are aligned with recommendations from various reports, including the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.¹

However, the IIO's mandate requires me to focus on whether there is any criminal culpability attached to officers' actions or inactions. For criminal culpability to be found, the RCMP would have had to show a wanton and reckless disregard for the AP's life. The RCMP followed the policing standards in the province which apply to these types of investigations. The evidence shows both the community and police took many steps to find the AP, even though all of those steps may not have been communicated to the family and community. Tragically, all of the efforts were not enough to locate the AP in time.

Accordingly, as the Chief Civilian Director of the IIO, I do not consider that an officer may have committed an offence under any enactment and therefore the matter will not be referred to Crown counsel for consideration of charges.

¹ <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/>



Jessica Berglund
Chief Civilian Director

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