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Const. Shannon Donnelly (left) of Huronia West OPP, Collingwood hospital mental health worker Alice Afram and Const. Karen Viragh of Collingwood OPP are the mental health response team.

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OPP invests in training for its officers

JOHN EDWARDS

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It's been seven years since Aron Firman died after a Collingwood OPP officer used a stun gun to subdue him.

And a day doesn't go by that his father, Marcus, doesn't think of him.

Aron was diagnosed with schizophrenia and, shortly after his son's death, Marcus called on the province to create crisis-intervention teams consisting of mental-health workers and police working together to better deal with individuals with mental illness.

"(A) serious mental-health condition will affect one in five of us in this province. How can that not be taken seriously?" he said. "It wasn't in the past, and I think there is an overall recognition that was the case. It needs specific training. It needs a different approach. It needs empathy and understanding."

Firman's vision has come to fruition, as the Collingwood and Huronia West OPP detachments now partner with Collingwood General and Marine Hospital and the South Georgian Bay Community Health Centre on a mental-health response team.

Mental-health worker Alice Afram has been paired with Const. Shannon Donnelly from Huronia West and Const. Karen Viragh of Collingwood. The team responds to calls when officers believe an



John Edwards/Metroland

Collingwood hospital mental health worker Alice Afram and Const. Shannon Donnelly will respond to police calls to assist those in mental health crisis.

individual is suffering a mental-health crisis.

"We are trying proactive measures to try and prevent any type of mental-health crisis or any type of crisis in the community," Afram said. "We're trying to get there before a crisis does escalate."

She said the officers are in plain clothes, which is designed to "decriminal-

ize" the situation, and they assist at the scene and after the incident.

"We are also navigators for the mental-health system in the area," said Afram. "Those individuals who have fallen through the cracks, we're trying to pick them up and get them connected and to ensure they stay connected."

"We're also here listen-

ing to people's concerns and advocating for change."

The Ontario Provincial Police developed a mental-health strategy in 2016 after an audit of the department by the Ontario ombudsman.

"Our mental-health strategy initiated out of an assessment being done of our organization on how

we're contributing, not only to the mental health of our members, but what are we doing with the challenges we face in the community," said OPP commissioner Vince Hawkes.

He said the organization has invested in training for its officers, representing a departure from how the OPP has dealt with individuals ex-

periencing a mental-health crisis in the past.

"There are a number of things that have evolved in policing over the number of years," he said. "What has been the success rate of dealing with individuals in mental-health crisis? We found, just looking at our own data, a lot of these folks that are having a difficult time were being arrested and taken to jail. And we realize that's not the solution."

Heather Klein Gebinck is executive director of the South Georgian Bay Community Health Centre, one of the partners on the mental-health response team. She said community collaboration allows police to continue to focus on security and safety, but still connect individuals suffering from mental-health issues to the services they need.

"It's a shift in identifying that mental illness plays a significant role in why often people end up in the criminal system," she said. "One of the goals is to really wrap the services around them to try and avoid them getting involved in the justice system."

"When you blend the support for health and well-being with the security of the OPP, I think that combination is what blends it together as opposed to working in silos."

Marcus said he wishes Aron's death will lead to others being saved.

"That's what we can hope for."

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