

RISK IT OUT: Chronic understaffing a longstanding challenge at Vernon RCMP detachment

By Charlotte Helston



*An officer blocks off a section of Pottery Road in Vernon following a shooting incident April 14, 2016. (FILE PHOTO)
(CHARLOTTE HELSTON /InfoTel Multimedia)*

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VERNON - Chronic understaffing isn't a new problem for Vernon RCMP detachment — it has plagued the department for years, and it's not the only detachment facing the dilemma.

Back in 2013, former Supt. Reg Burgess said the North Okanagan detachment, which includes Vernon and outlying communities, consistently faced 15 to 20 long term absences at any given time for the past several years. At the time, Burgess, who retired in 2015, said the detachment was operating with between 19 and 27 resources unable to perform duties at any given time.

"This high percentage of non-operational resources often puts us short of the minimal resource levels in any of our areas resulting in excessive overtime, insufficient vacation time, compounded fatigue and stress which in turn contribute in part to our medical absences. Shortages affect sufficient developmental training time for members. They also significantly reduce our ability to conduct proactive policing such as undercover operations and high visibility random patrols," Burgess said in a report to Vernon councillors.

Sources say those same issues continue to impact the detachment today, with chronic understaffing leaving some watches running short of the minimum manpower needed for officer safety. At

times, watches are as low as three officers in the City of Vernon due to difficulty filling shifts, sources say, forcing remaining officers to 'risk it out' when they go on shift.

It should be noted that accounting for RCMP staffing positions is complicated and the language is important. Resources are reported in many different ways. (If you have questions, ask them in the comments below the story.)

Staffing levels within the RCMP are known to fluctuate significantly for various reasons, but what's largely causing the issue is members off duty due to illness, suspension, injury or parental leave which the RCMP often doesn't backfill like municipal police forces do. Police reports to the city between 2012 and today show the number of established positions — within the City of Vernon specifically — have changed little, ranging from 50 to 56, but only 47 to 50 officers actually on the ground. The difference is how many officers are unavailable for duty — on average approximately eight members.



*Supt. Reg Burgess retired in March 2015.
(CHARLOTTE HELSTON /InfoTel Multimedia)*

'HIGH IMPACT ON OVERALL OPERATIONS'

In 2013, Burgess told council the strain wasn't just coming from the 15 to 20 long term absences. He said additional officers — four at the time in the North Okanagan at large — were at work, but

on restricted duty status. An additional four to seven short term absences also negatively impacted resource levels, he said.

The number of officers off duty changes constantly, at times on a weekly or even daily basis. Near the end of summer 2013, Burgess said incoming transfers and returns to duty from parental leave in the next few months would help achieve staffing levels required to meet budget obligations, operational needs and "provide relief required to maintain officer wellness."

Despite the optimism, there was still a significant strain on resources six months later. In December 2013, Burgess said "ongoing issues caused by long and short term medical absences and compounded by the delay of incoming transfers is having a negative impact on our operational capacity."

He said 12 to 16 soft vacancies were due to medical issues, plus an average of seven to eight officers on restricted duty status.

"Most of these officers are reporting to work in light duty capacity but there is still a high impact on overall operations requiring significant use of overtime to maintain minimal roadable resource," Burgess said.

In spring 2014, Burgess still had eight to ten members on administrative or medical status within the City of Vernon and said it was "making it difficult to consistently maintain 48 operational members within 56 positions."

At times, the detachment appears to have had a full complement of officers. Between October to December of 2014, Burgess said all 101 established positions in the greater Vernon detachment were occupied.

Since 2015, it appears the RCMP stopped fully and clearly reporting the number of members on leaves.

RCMP HAS 'LOST A LOT OF TRACTION'

In addition to leaves, simply getting officers is another challenge. In 2013, the City of Vernon cut its available funding to 48 officers from 50, because the detachment was proving unable to maintain 50 positions. A city official said at the time there was a lot of pressure on Depot, Canada's RCMP academy, to train and fill vacant positions across the country. That remains true today.

In Kamloops, for example, the city authorizes funding for 130 officers, but the detachment is only billing for 120. Supt. Brad Mueller said the detachment has not yet seen the full arrival of ten new positions approved by the city in May 2015. In Vernon, where the city upped funding back to 50 positions in January 2016, the detachment has only routinely been billing for 48.

According to Statistics Canada, while overall police strength in Canada increased from 1999 to 2010, it declined for four consecutive years from 2011 to 2015.

Dr. Robert Gordon, a criminology professor at Simon Fraser University and a former policeman, says recruiting is a huge problem facing RCMP detachments across Canada.

"A lot of that has to do with changed perspectives on the RCMP," Gordon says. "It used to be one of Canada's icons along with Tim Hortons and hockey. It's lost a lot of traction over the last 20 years," Gordon says.

He says independent, non-RCMP police forces typically have better success with recruitment, in part because they don't transfer officers across the country, as the RCMP does.

This year, the RCMP loosened its requirements for entry into its police academy, Depot, in part to help fill the gap left by hundreds of retiring police officers.

Recent news reports chronicle issues of understaffing and excessive use of overtime across the country. In Saskatchewan, the Minister of Justice is exploring understaffing issues caused by vacancies.

VERNON DETACHMENT TODAY



*Supt. Jim McNamara
(CHARLOTTE HELSTON /InfoTel Multimedia)*

Supt. Jim McNamara says the city's share of the North Okanagan detachment presently has "57 officers in 56 established positions," however due to illness, injuries and administrative leave, it is billing for 48 operational officers — nine less than its established positions.

McNamara has said he does not believe chronic under staffing is leaving police officers, or the public, in danger. He said the detachment can re-deploy resources throughout its five detachment areas, as needed.

However, it appears those detachments are experiencing similar staffing pressures.

Because municipalities over 5,000 people have to pay for their own police services, both Spallumcheen and Coldstream budget a certain amount for officers in their areas. A report from the Ministry of Justice on police resources in 2014, the last year available, indicates Coldstream has an authorized strength of seven positions, and Spallumcheen three, roughly the same as today. Police reports on the first nine months of 2016 show the detachment only billed Coldstream for five to six positions, and Spallumcheen between one and 2.4.

Other detachments in the area are covered by the province. According to figures from 2014, the province authorizes six positions in Armstrong, eight in Enderby and three in Falkland. It also authorizes nine in Vernon, for a total of 36 positions in the five detachments, also roughly the same as today. To date in 2016, the detachment's bill to the province has ranged from 27 to 30 positions.

McNamara also said shift schedules and resources have been adjusted to re-deploy general duty officers to peak policing hours "with the intent of increasing service levels to the public by decreasing response time to priority calls and by increasing time available to our officers for proactive policing."

Vernon Mayor Akbal Mund recently affirmed his confidence in the RCMP.

Despite McNamara's and Mund's assurances, sources with knowledge of the situation say the frontline officers remain understaffed.

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\$1B RCMP overtime bill proof of 'exhausted and depressed' members, retirees say

More than 90 per cent of RCMP members work overtime, internal reports show

By Brett Ruskin, [CBC News](#) Posted: Dec 08, 2016 5:00 AM ET Last Updated: Dec 08, 2016 6:23 AM ET

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) has paid its members more than \$1 billion of overtime since 2009, according to documents obtained by CBC News.

Recent retirees from the force say the costs confirm anecdotes that many officers are stressed, overworked and depressed.

"The rank and file — especially the patrol guys and girls — are burnt out," said Derek Snow, a recently retired RCMP member with 29 years of policing experience.

"You want to do a good job and you want to do extra," Snow said, who lives in Shediac, N.B. "But there's only so much anybody can take."

'Unlimited overtime'

Between April 2009 and June 2015, the RCMP paid \$1.01 billion in overtime, according to documents obtained via access to information requests.

- 2009: \$153,000,000
- 2010: \$170,000,000
- 2011: \$166,000,000
- 2012: \$145,000,000
- 2013: \$170,418,985
- 2014: \$189,806,887
- 2015: \$21,497,546 (Q1 only; April to June)
- **TOTAL: \$1,015,723,418**

"There's unlimited overtime," Snow said. "You notice a lot of the members would start working overtime. A lot of overtime.

"And then they'd get burnt out."

'You're putting members' health at risk ... and the public is at risk as well. - Terry McKee, MPPAC

Terry McKee advocates for RCMP members and acts as a spokesperson for the Mounted Police Professional Association of Canada (MPPAC).

He says the money spent on overtime should instead be used to hire more officers.

"You're putting members' health at risk because they're always being called to supplement for shifts that are not staffed properly," McKee said, who is based in Moncton.

"If you've got exhausted members trying to protect and serve, you've got an issue with them being alert and effective," he said.

"And the public is at risk as well."

90 per cent of members worked overtime

Internal reports obtained by CBC News reveal how overtime is managed across the force.

"Over 90 per cent of regular members received EDP [extra duty pay] compensation during the fiscal year 2014/15," said a report on RCMP work-life balance completed in May 2016.

- [RCMP decides not to outfit officers with body-worn cameras](#)
- [Mounties offer apology and \\$100M compensation for harassment, sexual abuse against female members](#)

"Relief units are not available to all small units in all divisions," the report says.

"As a result, demands on members at these units increase significantly."

The report also confirms a sentiment shared by many members — a presumed duty to work long hours when the need arises, such as when a shift is short-staffed because someone is absent.

While overtime is voluntary, "some members may feel obligated to work overtime" in order to provide support for colleagues on shift, the report says.

'You're tired. That just goes with the job.'

Snow recounts the time when he first realized the extent of his stress.

"I went to a call and it was someone hiding a runaway upstairs and they lied to us," he said. "I kind of lost it a little bit, verbally, and I went back to my car and I sat there and had to shake my head."

"That's not who I am, but that's how things bubble to the surface and then you get angry," Snow said.

"You're tired. That just goes with the job."

CBC News requested an interview with the RCMP's chief human resources officer, or any member of the senior executive committee. A media relations officer declined the offer.

The RCMP also declined to provide a written statement to address or explain the overtime costs.

Contained within the documents obtained by CBC News is the RCMP's response to the work-life balance report.

"Human Resources and Corporate Management will benefit from the content of this report and are committed to providing the enhancements needed to improve operational management and oversight. We will also address the concerns outlined in this report, many of which have already been actioned," wrote Dan Dubeau, chief human resources officer.

Snow said he didn't see any attempts to reduce or manage overtime when he left the force earlier this year.

"I'm surprised it's not more," he said.

- [**RCMP racked up \\$900,000 in overtime during undercover anti-terrorism operation**](#)

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