

Launching Well: The Formative Years of a Police/Social Service Unit

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The Family Consultant and Victim Services unit of the London, Ontario, Police Service continues to be of interest to police and social agencies, world wide. It acts as a crisis intervention service and bridges the work of police and social agencies. The unit serves as a model, a focus of research, and a source of advice. Since its 1970 inception, in three ways it has been unique: its formal design which fully integrates social workers with police officers; its documented, multi-faceted effectiveness; and its theoretical and operational sophistication.

The Family Consultant unit (“... and Victim Services” was a title adopted in 1995, after the formative period studied here) grew from a foundation which was both innovative and instructive. This article will propose an explanation for its success which rests essentially on the particular qualities of its six founders. Five of these founders participated in extensive recorded interviews in 2000. (Dr. Willard Reitz moved from the area in year four and was unavailable.) The narrators are: retired Police Chief Walter Johnson, Project Director (currently Director of Family Court Services) Peter Jaffe, initial consultants social worker James Rae and nurse Rosemary Broemling (both recently retired) and consultant from year six, Larry Costello. In addition, Lisa Heslop, current Coordinator of the unit, provided helpful suggestions and valuable information on tape. Their cooperation and excellent recall resulted in nine hours of taped conversation with researcher Jaclyn Hamilton. This oral history material is considered here in conjunction with several research reports and scholarly publications, all of which are included in the final References. The documents and narrations lead to our conclusion that the six founders were endowed with rare degrees of certain personal qualities which enabled them to overcome

significant obstacles and were therefore critical to the success of the undertaking.

The particular personal qualities which emerged from this study were:

- ◆ professional stature,
- ◆ extensive knowledge,
- ◆ unusual expertise or skills,
- ◆ a particular set of attitudes, and
- ◆ a genuine responsiveness or flexibility.

To a lesser extent, the project's success depended on the 1970's social context in which the first men and women worked. It was an era of change in family patterns, women's roles and community services, including policing. These factors will receive careful consideration in a subsequent study. During this brief summary of the foundation stage, the focus will be on the responses to potential obstacles faced by the founders. These included

- ◆ funding
- ◆ justification (initial and ongoing)
- ◆ acceptance
- ◆ staffing and
- ◆ administration

From the narrations by the founders concerning their own experiences and those of their colleagues, as well as research materials which document the eventual solutions to problems, it will become clear that the founders' ways of overcoming potential difficulties were rooted in their individual qualities. As more than one narrator said, "I was in the right place at the right time." Although they were speaking of the serendipitous ways in which they became involved with the Family Consultant unit, this examination suggests that the emphasis should be on the personal pronoun "I". These particular individuals were the key to the foundational success. Others with different characteristics would have witnessed the early demise shared by many similar projects.

Foundation stage one - from need to action

The Family Consultant unit was “invented” over an experimental six-year period. Ideas were sketched in 1970 and a staff functioned by 1973. The unit moved from experimental to established status when it became an integral part of the police department budget in 1976. Once fully established and recognized, the unit hosted a large conference for Canadian professionals in 1983. One key speaker was founder Police Chief Walter Johnson, recently retired in June of that year. The conference was the work of a fully functioning service, and its date is taken here to be the end of the “beginning.” (Subsequently, the unit has evolved into its current form by the addition of a few key policy and structural changes, developments worth investigating in yet another project.)

The unit’s origin rested in a perception by Police Chief Walter Johnson. In his own words, “We were studying more the deployment of the force....[and noticed] the need for better coordination and something to be done for the spousal abuse and something to be done for children...[and] help with the family conflict situations that we were encountering.” (Interview of 13 January 2000) Johnson, a native of London, joined the police in 1945 and rose through the ranks to the position of Chief where he served from 1971 to 1983. Johnson’s outstanding professional competence was demonstrated in a number of ways, from the acquisition of personal radio communication equipment for his officers to the establishment of a then-unique 911 system in London. He stayed abreast of policing operations elsewhere and monitored the work of his officers, noticing how their time was spent and how their training was used. In the course of this scrutiny, he recognized and then sought a solution for a new, widespread and growing problem. Johnson modestly sees this fruitful work as merely part of the job: “As Deputy Chief, I was the guy that was called upon to do a lot of the public speaking.” Johnson’s attitude was realistic and open: there is a police problem here which needs to be addressed. Who will help?

After making many forays in the community, in 1970 Chief Johnson received a telephone call from Professor Willard Reitz of the University of Western Ontario’s Clinical Psychology Training program, in response to one address. Johnson recalled:

I was invited again in 1970 to speak to the United Community Services luncheon and ... a few days later, I get this phone call [from Dr. Reitz.] I almost begged him to come down and see me. He said, “Oh, I’d like to, I’d like to.” So he came down, probably the next day, and I think I locked

the door and I wasn't going to let him go until I had some kind of a commitment out of him! So, I laid out to him what I thought the problems in the community were and he was nodding and saying "Yes," ...but there were no examples for us to follow.... We went on -- we were there after 5:30 I know -- so finally he left with a handshake and an assurance he'd get back to me, which he did in a short period of time.

Reitz, who relocated in 1974 and was unavailable for an interview, brought high professional academic standing as Director of Clinical Psychology Training at the University of Western Ontario. His interest in Johnson's speech was rooted in his specialization in Crisis Intervention Theory and his familiarity with attempts in more than a dozen U.S. cities to provide police with tools for family crisis calls. Between them, with professionalism, knowledge and skill, Johnson and Reitz together constructed the awareness and the pilot project that would lead to the Family Consultant unit.

Although Reitz did not narrate his involvement, his summary report of 1974 reveals extensive expertise. (Willard Reitz, "Evaluation of Police Family Crisis Training and Consultation," *Canada's Mental Health*, May-June, 1974, Vol XXII, No. 3.) Reitz examined the American attempts at police education and felt something different was needed. He proposed a unique crisis intervention training program for selected London police officers in 1972, along with the designation of two social workers in 1973 who would accompany police officers to calls upon request. Committed to research, his design lent itself to the production of quantifiable results. For example, control groups, publicity management and feedback devices were carefully built in. The demonstrated success of these two pilot projects in 1972-73 was due to Reitz's professional knowledge and practical clinical expertise. His enthusiasm and discerning approach won the cooperation of police officers and social workers, as well as the attention of policy makers and funding agencies.

Johnson and Reitz managed to deal with a difficulty which closes down many projects – the need for funding. As a first step, Reitz employed his academic stature and professional knowledge to obtain support money for two years from both the Donner-Canadian Foundation and the Richard and Jean Ivey Fund. Chief Johnson's respect in the community enabled him to obtain other support. He recalled, "The car dealers from London [Association of Franchised Automobile Dealers] were providing a car on a monthly basis. I think they rotated." Johnson also won the willing cooperation of administrative staff and many officers who trained in the pilot project.

The initial family consultants' competence and commitment to their work and cooperation with all participants bred commitment in return. Chief Johnson described the police response:

I don't think there's ever been a negative comment about the family consultants. I think it's been a positive thing all the way through. It's something that has saved the uniformed officers a great amount of time....[They] respond to the call and call in the consultant. When things cool down, ... the policeman backs off and the consultant takes it from there to determine the contact with other social agencies....

The pilot project generated practical and financial support. With Stage one nearing completion in late 1973, Johnson and Reitz persuaded the Office of the Solicitor General of Canada to extend research funding which lasted until 1979. Their professional recommendation, based on the reports documenting the effectiveness of the consultants, justified this additional sponsorship.

Second foundation stage: gaining acceptance

As Reitz left for work elsewhere, his academic colleague at Western, Dr. Peter Jaffe, moved into the Project Director's position with the Family Consultant project and became one of the founders. This young scholar brought energy and an expertise born of personal participation as a Family Consultant in the project's first summer. Jaffe remembered vividly (interview of 24 March 2000):

You would have to establish rapport quickly and assess the situation quickly.... Someone is suicidal and you have to be [sure] before you leave them and decide, are you taking them to the hospital or do you feel they are going to be safe for the night?...[or when] dealing with children and a woman [victim of assault], having to decide with her whether or not she's going to a shelter for the night or she's in a safe place or staying in the apartment....

As Project Director, Jaffe perused relevant scholarly publications and designed research and data gathering procedures over the next formative years. These paid dividends in increasing support because they could substantiate the anecdotal results. As he worked, Jaffe said he "felt everybody was watching us. It ... meant that people were interested in the results, so we could document things and talk about it. It felt like it was a living, breathing experiment that people cared about and were committed to."

Chief Johnson continued to speak and act to support the project among his force, at City Hall, in the community and at policing conferences and professional meetings. His thorough knowledge of it and confidence in the research results demonstrating its effectiveness raised the project's profile. The *London Free Press* and several television stations wrote features and did programs on the new Family Consultant unit. As public awareness and appreciation appeared, political support increased. Mayor Jane Bigelow and several city Councilors and Controllers responded to Chief Johnson's forthright inquiries and requests for financial support. He related, "One city committee member wasn't giving it the amount of support I thought he should...and I said, "Well, tell you what I'll do. Get this [project funding item] through and ... in six months, we'll come back and report to you what the progress is. I brought it up six months later and ... he became one of the biggest boosters." By these means, the founders garnered official acceptance and the Family Consultant unit became fully integrated into the police department budget in 1976. No longer would it rest on the shaky foundation of short term grant "roulette." Chief Johnson continued to define the unit as a police necessity until his retirement in 1983 and subsequent chiefs have maintained his policy. Their acceptance rests essentially on the unit's clear record in family crisis interventions of saving police officers' time and reducing the number of repeat calls to police.

Obstacles of initial justification, design and funding were overcome because of the acceptance of the project by decision makers. This acceptance was due to the professional stature and knowledge, in conjunction with the expansive attitudes, of founders Reitz, Jaffe, and Johnson. These "policy level" founders managed to overcome another significant obstacle when they made the right staffing decisions. In particular, Johnson and Reitz's personal flexibility and discernment enabled them to hire very special persons as their first consultants.

The Route to Success: Hiring the Right Consultants

Family Consultant Rosemary Broemling interview of 8 March 2000:

[After many years of nursing work] I enrolled at Western and ... did a variety of courses ... with a major in sociology. Through a friend who was a social worker [I] heard. I pursued it further. Jim [Rae] and Will [Willard Reitz] interviewed me and I was hired...That's how it all started – quite by chance.

Family Consultant James Rae interview of 25 January 2000:

I walked in I sat down, and I said, "Hi. I'm Jim Rae," and I told him [Reitz] what I can do, what I thought I can do, what I wouldn't do, how much money I want, and gave him three references. He says, "Thank you very much," shook my hand. The meeting ... must have been ten minutes long. That night he phoned me. I think I was what he was looking for.

The full acceptance of the innovative Family Consultant unit by the working police officers and by the extensive array of London, Ontario, social service agency workers had to be won personally by James Rae and Rosemary Broemling, the founding consultants of the unit. Rae was a Londoner with long experience at London Psychiatric Hospital as a medical attendant. He initiated the Western Ontario Therapeutic Community Hostels which helped to re-integrate mentally ill persons and counseled their families. Broemling grew up in rural Alberta, became a nurse there and worked in diverse posts, including one in the Northwest Territories. These two worked with the other early consultants including Bill Lewis, Elaine Robertson and, from 1979 for twenty years, Larry Costello. Rae and Broemling worked as family consultants for 22 and 27 years respectively. In fact, they needed only the first five years to establish networks at the Agency level. More than 60 community agencies appear on the list of referrals included in Jaffe and Thompson's 1979 research report. Rae said, "Children's Aid, I think, probably knew right away that we were a big help to them" because the unit quickly saved them over \$60,000. Family consultants saw thousands of cases: couples in conflict, youth with antisocial or basic welfare problems, elderly isolated people, people with psychiatric problems, the homeless. Rae remembered the ready response: "The city agencies bent over backwards [to act quickly on our referrals.] Part of that was our selling job. Part of that was the uniqueness of what we were trying to do." Their well publicized research findings gave early concrete evidence that the unit was effective.

More importantly, their particular personal qualities earned them the trust and cooperation of their colleagues. This was not easy. Family consultant Larry Costello in an interview on 13 January 2000 spoke of his experience with police: "[Officers] are a different breed. Most of them don't trust Santa Claus and they take awhile to ... trust you....It's kind of intimidating when you walk into [police headquarters] and you start working with these guys." Jaffe articulated the early view of the social worker, explaining, "I think when we started years ago ... there was more a sense of defensiveness, you know, "Who are you guys and why are you

doing this. You know this probably really doesn't fit into our agency." Because of their expertise and understanding and cooperative attitudes, Rae and Broemling were an asset to officers on calls. Rae recounted,

We were bridges. If a police officer took somebody under the Mental Health Act to the hospital, only 40 per cent of the time would they be admitted. If a family consultant and the policeman took them, it was 80 per cent of the time. Why? Because we could talk to that system and explain what the police do, explain what we saw, what we witnessed, why they were arrested, what powers they had.

By their respectful and practical cooperation with social agency workers, they became valued colleagues. Chief Johnson was clear about this:

I think the people we had working in the family consultant program made it that way [positively received] because of their nature and their ability to cooperate and communicate with people. Rosemary and Jim made it fly in every way I wanted it to.... They are a part of and not apart from the force.

The strength which was developed in the foundation years was due in part to the wholehearted approach of the first consultants. The remarkably long service of these consultants testifies to their attitude of commitment. All of them freely acknowledged the dedication of their fellow consultants. Rae cautioned,

Don't forget, there was only three of us. We were working seven days a week and we were working two shifts. For the first three years of this program, I thought I was married to Rosemary 'cause I never saw anybody [else.] I'd go home, sleep, come back to work. I'd go to meetings, ... we were caught up with agencies, ... we had to be seen by the police [onsite.]

Their choice of terms and voice inflections during the interviews confirmed their loyalty to the unit and convictions about its great worth. Broemling recounted how she relished the opportunities to explain their work to other communities. She made several trips across Canada for this purpose. They saw their careers as a "privilege" and their experiences with clients as deeply meaningful.

In addition to an approach typified by commitment and cooperation, the consultants required healthy attitudes toward stress. In an era before therapies to assist professionals under stress, one's attitude was one's main defense against frustration or burnout. Both Rae and Broemling recalled the ever-present pressures, depicting several differing types. Broemling mentioned "the going into the unknown; you never knew for sure what you

were going to walk into.” Also, “there are times when it is just sheer frustration, and the shifts [shift work] are hard.” Although both founding consultants mentioned an awareness that domestic disputes, which formed approximately one third of their calls, could be physically dangerous for officers or themselves, it was not physical danger that taxed them most. Rather, they had to handle their own emotions effectively throughout close contacts with tragedy. For particularly heart rending experiences, the consultants sometimes became one another’s debriefing agents, since outsiders seldom understood the mix of painful thoughts and emotions. Broemling said, “We did what we could as a team to try to look after each other.” She added, “I think it is important, though, to have a network outside of here... just to keep some perspective and balance. It was important to have other people out there that you could talk to – not in detail, and in confidence.” As trust developed with officers, stressful calls might elicit mutual support. Using whatever techniques they had, consultants coped with stress and maintained a positive attitude toward their work, individually, and as members of the Family Consultant unit. Broemling summarized their outlook, “It was challenging, it was frustrating, it was rewarding. It was a really important piece of my life and I’m glad of it.”

Additionally, the consultants felt the necessity to maintain a constant sensitivity to the expectations and opinions of those officers and social workers with whom they interacted. Officers used their own discretion about requesting consultants to join them on a call; the unit would disappear if ignored. Chief Johnson’s initial decision that the civilian consultants would have office space within police headquarters was critically important. It was also unusual.

Johnson explained,

The one thing I insisted on ... was that they not be removed from the force. Now, there is a number of reasons, I thought, for that. I don't think it occurred to them at the time because social workers had social agencies and offices all over the country and they never seemed to be too close to each other. I wanted it for communication reasons.... When police leave after they settle down and these [consultants] take over, then they can get together in the lunch room in the headquarters and talk about that. I guess they found out after that that was a good idea.

Between shifts, the regular brief exchanges with police officers and other consultants enabled all to recognize the work others were doing. Broemling explained, “It is difficult to maintain the balance of the enforcement

component as opposed to the softer side [social support].” If mutual understanding grew, the consultants’ could maintaining good relationships and avoid stressful divergences.

In a similar way, social workers could take the consultants’ referrals seriously – or not. It was difficult and occasionally treacherous to keep a good balance among the three other participants in family calls: the officer’s intent to maintain law and order, and the client’s needs or desires during a crisis, and each social worker’s expectation that consultants would make professionally informed decisions and follow up with appropriate referrals. Broemling said, “It was years and years of sort of trying to find the happy medium of various needs and wishes.”

Running throughout the foundational years was a concern over the unit’s financial viability. Rosemary Broemling as co-ordinator from 1975 did her work with an awareness that funding depended on demonstrating achievement. Striving to document progress increased the workload as she assisted Judy Thompson, researcher with Jaffe, and others to compile various reports. Broemling administered data collection by means of surveys and questionnaires. She saw the daily incidence reports, referrals and feedback sheets. These were ever-present reminders that the consultants under close scrutiny.

Occasionally Broemling as co-ordinator and the consultants in the field had to work through difficult adjustments necessitated by policy changes or major structural changes. For example, in May, 1981, the police force implemented a “charging policy.” This required that charges be laid if violence had occurred in a domestic setting. The family consultants endorsed this change, but the consultants subsequently were called upon more and had to deal with clients’ intense reactions to being charged, with officers’ new stricter approach and sometimes the removal of the offender from the home, and with social work referrals made more complex by court involvement.

In another matter, Broemling recalled that there was some stress surrounding the dissolution of the Management Committee in the 1980's. It had received regular reports, assessed operations and overseen professional development. Jaffe, like Broemling, was concerned by this change: “At the time, I thought it was a loss. I thought [it] served a real function.” Thereafter, the coordinator’s responsibilities increased, while the strong Advisory Council offered professional input and the police department superintendent played an active role in management.

Successful coping mechanisms and constructive attitudes were the personal qualities which enabled the consultants to persevere. These were rooted in a street-wise competence, such as Rae's background with WOTCH hostels and earlier mental hospital work. Rae's crisis intervention skills appear in this recollection:

I was here 27 years and I had up into the hundreds of people that were suicidal. Had a guy one time with a baby on his lap and a knife to the baby's throat, gonna kill the baby and kill himself. Never lost anybody. Part of that is understanding. We didn't deal with the behavior. For instance, suicide is: anger, hopelessness and guilt. If I can tap into how you feel, then you're in my realm, that's my expertise. It's not the behavior. ... [Sometimes] you have to wait til the alcohol wears down so you're talking, you're talking, you're talking....

Broemling, too, brought skills born of experience as a nurse. Recalling a particular case, her narration showed her empathy and suggested her trials. Sometimes there was "so very little to be offering them. Those kind of things were really hard. Kids traumatized was really hard. Women assaulted was really hard. People who were suicidal were really hard.... It's important to be there with them, but it isn't easy." These founding consultants all had a professional understanding of crisis situations and a repertoire of strategies to assist in managing the crisis, then channeling the ensuing need for longer term help toward social agencies, professional counselors, community service agencies, health units, and the like.

Conclusion

The six founders of the Family Consultants unit, five of whom were interviewed for this oral history, brought varied backgrounds with unique experience profiles, knowledge and expertise. These enabled them to discern both police and community needs and to develop methods of meeting those needs. They were able to enlist sources of support and develop a variety of methods of overcoming obstacles. Among them, the founders had the qualities needed to create a community institution that has assisted thousands of citizens over thirty years and stands today as a widely respected model. Project Director Jaffe offered this summary. Remembering his wide travels to describe the family consultant service, he recalled that "people would be in awe.... We always had to explain [that] it was a lot of hard work to get here. It didn't happen overnight." It grew from solid foundations.

References

Oral History Interviews

Tapes and full indexes, along with project notes and partial transcriptions, are archived at Brescia College, 1285 Western Rd., London, Ontario. Interviews conducted by Jaclyn Hamilton with:

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Larry Costello, early family consultant, on 13 January, 2000, at Family Consultant office, 601 Dundas St., London, Ont.

Peter Jaffe, Project Director, on 24 March, 2000, at his office, Family Court Clinic, 254 Pall Mall St., London, Ont.

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